



Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-255862-OMS-24
Project Category: Lifelong Learning
Project Type: Large Project (\$25,001-\$75,000)

DC History Center

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$75,000
Amount of cost share:	\$75,000

The DC History Center will develop and install a semi-permanent exhibition exploring the history of Black education in Washington, DC. The exhibition will explore themes that are relevant today: who has access to education and how; the role of activism in creating change; and the Black communities' agency in resisting racist systems and structures. The center will collaborate with the Anacostia Community Museum and the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives on the development of the exhibit. The project will support the purchase of exhibition equipment and materials, and the museum will contract with an evaluation consultant to conduct a post-opening analysis. The goal of the exhibition is to advance knowledge of Black educational history in the District of Columbia and its legacy. Telling this locally and nationally important story will benefit families, teachers, students, and visitors to the nation's capital.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion
- Performance Measurement Plan

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

Proposal Narrative

A. Project Justification

From about 1880 to 1940, Washington, DC boasted the best public education system for Black children in the nation. Despite overcrowding, constrained resources, and overwhelming systemic racism, the city's influential African American community consistently advocated for their children's right to a quality education. Their activism at mid-century famously led to *Bolling v. Sharpe*, the 1954 companion case to *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Supreme Court decision officially integrated DC's public school system, although in practice, racial and socioeconomic segregation has arguably remained in place. This story remains little known, yet it is a remarkable example of how DC's Black communities have led the nation in creating better opportunities for all people of color.

The Historical Society of Washington, DC, dba the DC History Center, proposes a new five-year exhibition, *Class Action: The Fight for Black Education in the Nation's Capital*, which will anchor its public presence in the Carnegie Library, located on Mount Vernon Square in the heart of Downtown DC. Rooted in a relatable topic at all ages, this compelling show will center the long struggle for equal education for children of color, from the founding of the first school for Black children in 1807 to the charter school controversies of the 1990s.

We are requesting a grant in the amount of \$75,000, which will allow us to fabricate and install this multi-layered exhibition that appeals to adult, family, and K-12 audiences in our West Gallery, which is 2,900 square feet. This project falls under IMLS's Goal 1: Champion Lifelong Learning; Objective 1.1: Advance shared knowledge and learning opportunities for all. The exhibition is scheduled to launch in June 2025.

We present this project as part of a three-way partnership with the Anacostia Community Museum, which plans to unveil an exhibition with an arts education focus in 2024, and the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives (see letter of support), which will support content development and programming. This broad-based collaboration would provide a meaningful and substantive treatment of the singular role of education in DC history.

Our three-year strategic plan, completed in the spring of 2022, sets the organization on a course to meet the need for nuanced information as we grapple with, honor, and celebrate our city's history. Coming out of a period of national racial reckoning, our programs provide context for how we have arrived at our current social and political moment and support nuanced insight about how we might build a more just and equitable community. This exhibition is a key goal in our FY22-24 strategic plan.

In June 2023, the DC State Board of Education approved a new slate of social studies standards that call for teaching DC history at every grade, a complete turnaround from the previous standards. DC's public, charter, and independent schools are now developing new curriculum to meet these standards and have enlisted the DC History Center to help. DC's new social studies standards reflect a broad commitment to engaging with Washington's complex African American

history—the effects of racial injustice and Black communities’ persistent commitment to activism and change.

At the same time, we know that student test scores for history and civics education are currently at an all-time low: the *New York Times* reported on the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a national exam administered by the Department of Education. “About 40 percent of eighth graders scored ‘below basic’ in U.S. history last year.” (May 3, 2023)

It is important to note the demographic make-up of DC Public School enrollment. In 2022-2023, this was: 56% Black; 22% Hispanic; 17% White; and 2% Asian. A staggering 47% are considered at risk (these are students who qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, have been identified as homeless during the academic year, who are under the care of the Child and Family Services Agency, and who are high school students at least one year older than the expected age for their grade). Given these figures, it is crucial that history be taught in a way that connects to students’ lives, families, and communities, providing pathways for civic engagement and access to professional careers and social mobility. We believe that *Class Action* does exactly that.

Class Action will consider how Black Washingtonians strove for educational justice in the 19th and 20th centuries amidst racial and socioeconomic oppression. Communities across the District approached equity in different, and sometimes conflicting ways, but they shared a common goal in improving education. To understand Black educational history in the District is to understand contemporary education law and policy—and to want a more equitable future. It is a story that combines important themes that are relevant to us now: who has access to education and how; the role of activism in creating change; and the Black communities’ agency in resisting racist systems and structures. We also envision this exhibition as the perfect introduction to key aspects of DC history, especially the federal government’s oversized role in shaping the city.

Admission to the DC History Center is free. With its convenient location in the heart of the city, easily accessible by public transit, and located near other key attractions, the DC History Center attracts visitors from every ward in the District, including families, teachers, and students as well as individuals from surrounding counties. As a result of our location, we also welcome Apple customers and national and international conference attendees visiting from the Walter E. Washington Convention Center just across the street.

With this new exhibition, we look forward to welcoming roughly 3,500 visitors per month—an estimated 42,000 per year and 210,000 visitors over the five-year project period. Our total audience reach in FY23 was 139,500 (13% growth over FY22), and we anticipate that this number will grow during the exhibition’s preparation. The target audience for this project encompasses all our key visitation groups, but especially educators, students, and families (also the beneficiaries of the project). Information about community engagement follows below.

Project Work Plan

The exhibition’s guiding question is: what does educational justice look like? These interpretive statements provide key themes:

- Black people in the District of Columbia actively fought for educational justice in the 19th and 20th centuries amidst racial and socioeconomic oppression.
- Communities across the District approached equity in different, sometimes conflicting ways, but shared a common goal of educational justice.
- The racial and socioeconomic composition of DC’s neighborhoods and schools are not accidental; they are the result of numerous laws and policies made over time.
- Inequity is not the result of individual decision making. It is the outcome of institutional decision making—laws and policies—that improve or worsen the lives of the most vulnerable.
- To understand Black educational history in the District is to understand contemporary education law and policy—and to want a more equitable future. What does that look like?

Designed to engage a wide range of audiences of all ages, *Class Action* will tell a locally and nationally important story using original objects and artifacts, textual narrative, audio and video content, interactive displays, and mapping, among other interpretive tools in about 2,900 square feet. The design will recognize that audiences bring different levels of existing knowledge to their experience: from local visitors who attended DC schools to international visitors with language barriers. Intentionally creating an age-appropriate and fun experience for young visitors is one of our primary goals, whether they come with their teacher or their guardian. We also see an opportunity to center youth voices and experiences.

Museum exhibits are multimedia storytelling platforms, which, at their best, integrate a wide range of tactics for communicating a layered set of messages. As reflected in best practices laid out by Smithsonian Exhibits, exhibits address the learning styles and needs of multiple audiences: conceptual and abstract thinking, emotional connection, visual engagement and objects, as well as multi-sensory or hands-on experiences. Thus, we envision some of the following exhibition features to enliven and engage these audiences:

- Recreated classroom space
- Ability for student groups to curate a section of the exhibition
- Chalkboard as comment wall
- Timeline of significant local and national dates, potentially interactive
- Multimedia screen and program space in the middle of the exhibition
- School library “reading nook” with access to further reading
- An action-oriented section providing access to more resources and calls to action

Many of the items on display would be instantly recognizable: class photos, yearbooks, report cards, desks, and schoolbooks, for instance. The exhibition could have playful and whimsical elements, while also reflecting the devastating impacts of systemic racism on children and families of color. The narrative will feature familiar institutions that have long served as beloved neighborhood landmarks, including Dunbar, Armstrong, Cardozo, and Spingarn.

We are currently in the process of determining what interpretive techniques and activities are best designed to convey this robust material. We recognize that the time period that serves as our starting point—from Reconstruction to the Charter School Movement—is long and does not lend itself to a strict linear treatment. Prospective audiences, and their level of knowledge, are also widely variable, requiring a careful approach to balancing various needs.

Our project team consists of Executive Director Laura Brower Hagood; Deputy Director Anne McDonough; Curator Erica Sterling (see letter of commitment); Content Advisor Tikia Hamilton (see letter of commitment); Senior Manager of Education Domonique Spear; and Manager of Community Engagement Mariana Barros-Titus (four members of the team are women of color). We are currently in the process of engaging with possible designers. Please reference the workplan and resumes for additional information about each individual's role.

We are seeking \$500,000 in total project funding. While fundraising, the exhibit team meets monthly to monitor progress against goals and to manage the exhibition timeline. If we are unable to meet our fundraising goal, we will scale this effort to match the resources available.

We further envision this exhibition as a capacity-building moment: it is a welcome chance to do this work differently than we have in the past, by including more community engagement in the development process and providing more interactive and engaging ways of learning content and connecting to visitors' lived experiences. The exhibitions that are currently on view at the DC History Center lend themselves to a passive reading and viewing experience that assumes comfort level with reading a large amount of small text. Because we engage a variety of audiences, we must learn to create an experience that is interactive and speaks to a range of learning styles.

Class Action will speak to the direct experience of thousands of Washington parents and grandparents who attended, worked, or taught at public schools. We already know from experience that Washington residents are proud of the schools they graduated from, and with good reason. They will enjoy learning about this history and seeing their family's role in it. The ongoing fight for justice in education will be a particularly resonant theme for this audience.

Too often exhibitions and related programming are brought to the community when they launch, rather than when they are still in development. Embedding our community engagement manager, Mariana Barros-Titus, and community-focused touchstones throughout the process is critical to making sure that this upcoming show is informed by the lived experiences of DC residents and their families, as well as by published scholarship. Mariana will seek community input at several stages of the process, including during concept development and post-opening activities. She will also assist in identifying opportunities to include youth voices and experiences in the exhibition.

Similarly, Senior Manager of Education Domonique Spear will engage with educators who participate in our free membership program, professional development workshops, and other offerings. In the coming months, we will reach out to the Office of the State Superintendent for Education to seek their partnership and support in the project on the front end. This is another welcome moment to build our capacity to center community, as is called for in our strategic plan.

As a next step, we will create a survey mechanism (most likely, a simple Google form) for DC residents, educators, and students to contribute ideas, identify contacts for oral history interviews, and propose family artifacts that could potentially inform the exhibition. Stipends would be provided for oral history narrators and for the completion of certain community engagement activities such as robust audience surveys. This feedback apparatus will allow for

multiple ways for DC residents to engage in the exhibition development and programming process, as well as ensure that this project is meeting community needs.

We announced the project during the 49th DC History Conference, presenting a roundtable with the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives and the Anacostia Community Museum, which yielded actionable feedback. We will also start leveraging other DC History Center programs to support the exhibition development. For instance, we will look to the upcoming DC History Conference, a free community-focused event (rather than a scholarly or professional meeting), in April 2024 to foster relationships and build participation in the project.

In addition, we are exploring a partnership with the Story of Our Schools, a small nonprofit organization that works with DC schools to create permanent, student-researched, history-based exhibitions. These exhibitions make community stories visible by exploring the history and development of the school itself. Story of our Schools has demonstrated that school-focused exhibit experiences inform and excite families, residents, enhance parent and child engagement, and create appealing learning tools for teaching history, research skills, and critical thinking.

Project Results

We envision *Class Action* as a learning experience that will be engaging and accessible to visitors, regardless of their knowledge of Washington, DC. It would be designed to accommodate a short 20-minute visit—for conventioners squeezing in a visit between sessions—as well as a more extended one for leisure tourists and school groups. Additional resources and readings will be available for those interested in deepening their knowledge, as well as complementary information on dchistory.org. This exhibition will be on view for five years. In addition, we will plan a full complement of K-12 resources, to include field trips, teaching resources, and professional development opportunities for educators—all aligning with the new social studies standards. We also collaborate with colleges and universities in the DC region.

Once the exhibition is completed, we expect a full suite of opening events to kick off the exhibition, followed by consistent programming over the next five years. These could include panel discussions, book talks, neighborhood tours, documentary screenings, all incorporating themes and ideas that are not fully explored in the exhibition itself. We would look to a wide array of partners, in addition to the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives and Anacostia Museum, to deliver and publicize this programming. We also envision our community engagement program reengaging those who have contributed to the exhibition development, but also seeking new partnerships at a grassroots level.

As a result of their engagement with the DC History Center, we aim for audiences to better understand that: 1) Black Washingtonians have actively fought for educational justice amidst racial and socioeconomic oppression, and continue to do so today; 2) the racial and socioeconomic composition of DC's neighborhoods and schools are not accidental; they are the result of numerous laws and policies made over time; 3) Educational inequity is the outcome of institutional decision making that improve or worsen the lives of the most vulnerable; 4) The federal government has played an oversized role in shaping DC's education system, often at the expense of Washingtonians' voting rights.

Class Action Schedule of Completion

Phase	Milestone	Expected Completion
Phase I: Content Development		
Prior to Grant Award		
Phase I	Initial survey of in-house collections to support education-related exhibit	Completed
Phase I	Create position descriptions and deliverable expectations for curator and content advisors	Completed
Phase I	Hold 1st community engagement session with draft concept at 49th annual DC History Conference	Completed
Phase I	Engage curator	Completed
Phase I	Hire community engagement manager	Completed
Phase I	Hold community engagement session during On the Square program	Completed
Phase I	Fundraising	Now through December 2024
Phase I	Research, script drafting, object checklist, oral history recording & production	Now through December 2024
Phase I	Confirm content advisor/s	November 2023
Phase I	Create position descriptions and deliverable expectations for exhibition designer and graphic designer (may be the same contractor)	December 2023
Phase I	Select exhibit and graphic designer	February 2024
Phase I	Select family engagement consultant and field trips consultant	February 2024
Phase II: Collections Preparation and Exhibition Development		
Not Grant-funded		
Phase II	Hold community engagement sessions	April - December 2024
Phase II	Exhibit designer starts work, in collaboration with family engagement and field trips consultants	May 2024
Phase II	Graphic designer starts work, in collaboration with family engagement and field trips consultants	May 2024
Phase II: Collections Preparation and Exhibition Development		
IMLS Grant Period		
Phase II	IMLS grant period begins	September 2024
Phase II	First draft design complete	September 2024
Phase II	Engage photographer and videographer	September 2024
Phase II	Selected items out to vendor for digitization	October 2024
Phase II	Engage copyeditor	December 2024-May 2025

Class Action Schedule of Completion

Phase	Milestone	Expected Completion
Phase II	Construction documentation	December 2024-February 2025
Phase II	Script, design, graphics finalized	February 2025
Phase III: Fabrication and Installation		
IMLS Grant Period and Funded Activities		
Phase III	Graphics fabrication	February 2025
Phase III	Last call for current exhibit to empty and prepare gallery for installation.	February 2025
Phase III	Remove existing exhibit apparatus from gallery, return loans	March 2025
Phase III	Benches and other furniture for gallery purchased	March 2025
Phase III	In-house collections prepped	March 2025
Phase III	Incoming loans onsite	April 2025
Phase III	Installation	April 2025
Phase IV: Project Completion		
IMLS Grant Period		
Phase IV	Complete installation	May 2025
Phase IV	Soft launch exhibit	June 2025
Phase IV	Opening events	June 2025
Phase IV	Community engagement session in new exhibit to inform on-going programming	July 2025
Phase IV	IMLS grant period ends	August 2025
Phase V: After the Grant Period		
Activities Take Place After the Grant Period		
Phase V	Family friendly activities	June 2025 - May 2030
Phase V	On the Square program with pop-up exhibit programming and release program plan for October-December	October 2025
Phase V	Field trips	October 2025-May 2030
Phase V	Exhibition programming	October 2025-May 2030
Phase V	De-install exhibit, or extend based on "refresh" opportunities and/or future exhibit schedule	June 2030

Applicant Name: DC History Center

Project Title: Class Action: The Fight for Black Education in the Nation’s Capital

Performance Measure	Data We Will Collect (e.g., counts, costs, weights, volumes, temperatures, percentages, hours, observations, opinions, feelings)	Source of Our Data (e.g., members of the target group, project staff, stakeholders, internal/external documents, recording devices, databases)	Method We Will Use (e.g., survey, questionnaire, interview, focus group, informal discussion, observation, assessment, document analysis)	Schedule (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually, beginning/end)
Effectiveness: The extent to which activities contribute to achieving the intended results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The DC History Center tracks the following metrics on a monthly basis: exhibition visitors; number of schools, teachers, and students reached through K-12 program; number of field trips; number of teacher memberships; distribution of free educator newsletter; registration in professional development programs; relevant program attendees. Staff will determine whether other metrics need to be collected on a monthly basis to reflect engagement with the exhibition. In addition to these programmatic metrics, the DC History Center will track media hits and social media engagement, and other relevant marketing/communications/public relations metrics during the project development and after the opening. These metrics are summarized in a dashboard that is presented to the Board of Directors on a quarterly basis in conjunction with board meetings. 			
Efficiency: How well resources (e.g., funds, expertise, time) are used and costs are minimized while generating maximum value for the target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We will generate and monitor a dedicated monthly report for this project, showing revenue and expenses by account line, including staff time, to ensure that resources are well used. The monthly report will be included in the monthly team meeting mentioned below. As a rule of thumb, and as a small museum with tight cash flow, the DC History Center expends funds that have been received, rather than incurring expenses in advance of having secured funds. The DC History Center’s Executive Committee meets monthly to discuss monthly financial reports, thereby ensuring proper management of revenue and expenses for this large project. Monthly team meetings ensure that community and stakeholder engagement are targeted to exhibition needs. 			
Quality: How well the activities meet the requirements and expectations of the target group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the research and development phase, the DC History Center will develop a simple Google form inviting community members to submit ideas and feedback for the exhibition on an ongoing basis. The form will be monitored continuously and reviewed monthly by the project team. We will promote the Google form through all communications and programmatic channels. This approach also allows us to count, survey, and analyze those who are contributing. We are especially invested in seeking participation from diverse communities across the city, not just those in high-income areas such as upper Northwest. In addition, the DC History Center will deploy a comprehensive community engagement strategy to ensure high-quality stakeholder engagement, leveraging our full programmatic range. We will maintain a detailed spreadsheet tracking the number of community contacts and significant conversations on an ongoing basis made during this phase. The DC History Center will conduct at least two community engagement workshop (one for community members and one for educators) after the exhibit opens to seek input, including suggestions for programming. 			

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In addition, the DC History Center commits to using \$10,000 of IMLS grant funds to retain a consultant to assist with a holistic evaluation of the exhibition after it opens. In addition, we will reach out to George Washington University's Museum Studies program, whose Museum Evaluation class provides pro bono evaluation services. We envision this as an observation-based evaluation program that sets out to assess performance against goals. As a small museum, we will need outside expert assistance to ensure that this criterion is met. <p><i>Note: we have seen declining participation in online surveys in the past two years, across all audiences, including educators, making this an unreliable instrument.</i></p>
<p>Timeliness: The extent to which each task/activity is completed within the proposed timeframe</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Starting October 2023, the project team meets monthly to manage the project timeline. Curator Erica Sterling serves as team lead. Executive Director Laura Hagood, Deputy Director Anne McDonough, and Community Engagement Manager Mariana Barros-Titus, and the exhibition designer will participate in all meetings; other advisors and staff to join on an as needed basis