



# MEMO

To: The Gerald R. Ford Foundation

From: Maia Coker, Grand Valley State University

CC: Gleaves Whitney and Lauren Mohr

Date: February 22, 2021

Re: The Emphasis on Historical Education

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## The Gerald R. Ford's Position on Historical Education

Education and its purpose is still to teach the upcoming generations. Emphasis has been placed on the importance of President Ford's legacy in order to continue the conversation about presidential and American history. Although many may still argue that history is an unnecessary topic to be taught in schools, the position has been made clear: we need history to learn from previous mistakes, learn about and learn from languages and cultures, and discover new information through personal research.

West Michigan, where the Ford Foundation is located, is host to many colleges, universities, and K-12 schools. As well as that, Gerald R. Ford is a "hometown hero" which might make students interested in his legacy and history in general. There are no presidents that have been born in Michigan and this paper highlights the fact that students may be inspired to create their own goals and think of endless possibilities for themselves because of the information they can receive through the Ford Foundaion and the DeVos Learning Center.



*Gerald R. Ford* PRESIDENTIAL FOUNDATION

## **Gerald R. Ford Foundation**

The Emphasis on Historical Education

February 2021

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## **Why is education important for students?**

Education is just one of the many foundations that America is built on. The Ford Foundation is committed to increasing the awareness of the legacy of America's 38<sup>th</sup> President, Gerald R. Ford. In doing so, the Foundation provides numerous educational opportunities through the DeVos Learning Center. While the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly changed how the majority of Americans receive their education, the Gerald R. Ford Foundation remains committed to educating not only students, but community members and those with an interest in history, both presidential and American. Before the pandemic, past events had been done in-person, either on school campuses or at the Museum or the Library. Most recently, these events have been virtual through Zoom or YouTube.

West Michigan contains many colleges, universities, and public and charter schools. The DeVos Learning Center has been the central education hub of the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum. It was built in 2016 with the support of the Ford Foundation, and it provides a state-of-the-art learning space for students that are visiting the Museum.<sup>3</sup> The sources that provide historical information include artifacts, documents, and videos. There are a variety of programs that the DeVos Learning Center offers such as classroom and virtual visits, field trips, and day camps. Each program has been carefully designed with the needs of students in mind as well as the values of President and Mrs. Ford. These values are character, integrity, public service, and civic education.

President Ford's legacy is important to the West Michigan community. The Ford Foundation serves as a reminder of his life and work. A collection of Presidential papers between President Ford and his White House staff is located at the Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan,

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<sup>3 3</sup> <https://devoslearningcenter.org/about-devos-learning-center/>

as well as other government official papers.<sup>4</sup> At the Museum on the other side of the state, exhibits and highlights of President and Mrs. Ford's lives are on display; some are available for virtual viewing.<sup>5</sup> Both facilities are aimed at teaching new generations of people about the past. The question is, why is this education important?

### **Presidential History: Showing both sides of the question**

Presidents throughout history have never been born in Michigan. Of course, there are several notable politicians that have come from Michigan. For example, those in the Midwest may be familiar with the supermarket chain Meijer. The grandson of the Meijer founder, Peter Meijer, recently became a House of Representative for the Republican Party. Out of the fifty states, Michigan is one of thirty-nine states that have yet to be the birthplace of a president. Although Gerald R. Ford was not born in Grand Rapids, he is still considered to be a "hometown hero." The significance of having a president from Michigan should not be understated. Grand Rapids, though still a large city, is almost 100 square miles smaller than Ann Arbor, Michigan. A smaller city allows children to think about being part of something much bigger than themselves. The Ford Foundation can give them access to do so.

Education is largely rooted in American history, and past and current presidents have always been a part of that history. Starting from George Washington in the 1780s to Joe Biden in the 2020s, there has been a president every step of the way, all helping to build America into what we know now. However, many people still argue that history is not important.

Why do people need to learn about history anyway?

- Kids aren't interested

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/visit-library.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/visit-museum.aspx>

- Students have better things to learn
- History books tell history wrong

Children start to develop a longer attention span between three and a half to five years old. They might ask questions about topics they may be interested in and start to play with friends.<sup>6</sup> They may become interested in certain subjects in school and ask teachers about specific interests. Throughout elementary and middle school learning, students are often asked the question, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” A question posed like this begins a thought process for children and allows them to think of endless possibilities. Common answers for this question, especially in younger students, may include “an astronaut,” “a princess,” and of course, “president.” Learning about history allows people to better understand the world in which they live. It also allows for a deeper appreciation of current events and objects of today. For example, technology has become a staple in the modern world. Scientists, researchers, and creators have been able to study historical items and previous research to develop mobile phones, computers, and tablet devices. History is essential for learning from the past and allowing for growth in the future.

Another statement posed may be that students have better things to learn. Perhaps that time is better spent learning a new language, practicing an art or instrument, or learning more critical thinking skills? Because of history, language is known. Cultures could not be present without history. A specific language allows people to understand the reasoning behind why a group of people may have had certain traditions or activities. Latin as a core language, for example, began to die out after the fall of Rome. It slowly evolved into other languages that people

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ccrcca.org/parents/your-childs-growth-and-development>

speak today: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian.<sup>7</sup> Without previous knowledge of the Latin language, it would surely have died out and the above-mentioned languages may not have even existed.

Lastly, the argument of whether or not history books tell the truth remains. There are other arguments that may say, “history books tell the perspective of the winners.” While this may be the case in some books, it is not misinformation, just simply a one-sided view. There are books that will give the perspective of the opposition, but people should be encouraged to fact check things they may question. This opens up a new window of conversation and allows both parties to grow in knowledge. Scientists even say that motivated reasoning—a process in which audiences choose to accept or ignore evidence depending on what conclusion they want to take from it—is largely a challenge for people that want to check facts.<sup>8</sup> One of the more famous examples of this is Charles Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and its debate with Christianity. Scientists and archaeologists have been digging up fossils and fitting theories to patterns due to evidence. Christians have beliefs rooted in the Old and New Testaments that fit to their knowledge. That is to say, neither group is wrong, but historical evidence and theories, like the existence dinosaurs, have certainly become more popular throughout time.

Historical events allow for a clearer understanding of a certain time period or a specific individual. Students are encouraged to perform their own research when unsure of something, as well as asking parents and teachers questions. Education creates a place of conversation and knowledge is received from both the student and teacher. A facility may be able to provide more information, through books or a device, that may not accessible in a home environment.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thegreatcoursesdaily.com/language-evolution-one-language-became-five-languages/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/is-fact-checking-effective-a-critical-review-of-what-works-and-what-doesnt/a-55248257>

## **Position on Education**

Technology has made education even more accessible, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools around the globe have transferred to an online or socially-distanced environment while still allowing for a continuous flow of stimulating information. The Ford Foundation, Museum, and Library have created a similar environment. Due to the pandemic, many events have been cancelled or switched to an online format. At the DeVos Learning Center, classroom and virtual visits have been created to make it even easier for students to learn about President Ford's legacy. In-person and virtual classroom visits, as well as field trips to the Museum, are free of cost to schools. The presidential history taught encourages students to not only think of the possibilities for themselves but to start a conversation on interest and facts. The Ford Foundation is not trying to dissuade beliefs, but rather, teach the historical importance of a former United States president. Doing outside research on a topic that interests the student is always encouraged and new information not previously known to the student may bring new discussions, whether it be at a school or at home. The Foundation encourages learning and also supports excellence in journalism through awards and scholarships.<sup>11</sup>

## **Recommendations**

With the information you now have, it is time for you to make your own decision. What is your truth? Do you believe that education is important or that history is unnecessary for students to learn? If you believe that the education Ford Foundation promotes is a worthy topic, show them your support. Donations are always welcome and can be sent online through the giving portal.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://geraldrfordfoundation.org/mission-statement/>