

# **A SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM GUIDE: WHAT CAN THE HIGH LINE TEACH US ABOUT COMMUNITY ACTIVISM?**

Grades 2 and 3

## **Materials:**

### **Period 1:**

- PowerPoint presentation
- Copy of each slide image (you may just print out from the PowerPoint presentation)
- Brainstorming worksheet

### **Period 2:**

- No special materials

## **LESSON GOALS**

Students will:

- Learn that the High Line was built to carry freight
- Learn that the High Line is now open as a public park
- Learn that before the High Line, freight lines ran at grade along certain avenues
- Learn that the sections of avenues where the freight train ran was known as “Death Avenue”
- Learn that citizens rallied and fought against Death Avenue for nearly 70 years
- Learn that trains running along “Death Avenue” were preceded by a flag-waving “West Side Cowboy” riding on horseback to alert pedestrians
- Learn that it was citizen activism and participation that eventually led to the elimination of Death Avenue
- Learn that once the High Line was built, it did help mitigate traffic
- Learn that the High Line eventually fell into disuse and was abandoned in 1981.
- Learn that property owners underneath the High Line lobbied for its demolition
- Learn that community members came together to preserve the High Line
  - These members came together as Friends of the High Line
  - FHL was successful in fighting the city’s plan to demolish the High Line
  - FHL will manage and operate the new High Line

**Duration:** 2 periods

**Period 1**—PowerPoint presentation/brainstorming

**Period 2**—students perform several little skits that depict the history of the High Line

## **PERIOD 1:**

Ask students, ‘What is a community?’ (Answers include a place where people live, work, shop, go to school, etc.) Ask what is a synonym for community? (A neighborhood.) Ask if everybody lives in a neighborhood? (Yes.) Ask students what city we live in. (NYC.)

Explain that even though NYC is a very large city, it has many smaller neighborhoods. No matter where you live in NYC—whether it's the Bronx, or Queens, or Manhattan, or Staten Island, or Brooklyn—you live in a neighborhood. Ask if people want their neighborhoods to be nice? (Yes.) What are some things people can do to help make their neighborhood nice or improve it? (Answers might include participating in a clean-up, painting over graffiti, planting trees or flowers, etc.) Ask if the students have ever been involved in any effort to improve or help their neighborhood. If so, encourage the students to share their experiences. Explain that many people try to make their communities better. They do this by being *involved*.

Tell students that right here in New York City, there is a train line that inspired people to get involved in their community to make it better. Tell the students that this train line is called the High Line. Some may be familiar with it, and others may not.

**Slide 1: 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue, c. 1920.**

Ask students to describe the scene. It is a crowded, congested nightmare! Trains, horse-drawn carriages, trucks, cars, people and even trains all try to make their way. Ask if students know where this is. Explain that it is the west side of Manhattan about 90 years ago. Make sure students see the freight train in the upper right of the photo. Explain that all of this traffic is carrying things like food, or raw materials, or manufactured goods to get them to different markets. That's what all this traffic is. Trains and trucks and horse-drawn carriages are taking goods from ships and bringing them to factories or warehouses. (Make sure students understand what a warehouse is.) Ask students if they think the traffic in this picture is moving. (It is not!) Ask if they think it would be safe for a person to try to cross the street with the giant train, and all the traffic?

**Slide 2: The West Side Cowboy.**

Ask, "What is this man doing?" (He is riding a horse in front of a train.) Ask why? Elicit that he is there to alert pedestrians about the oncoming train. Tell the class that he was called a "West Side Cowboy." Why might the street have been called 'Death Avenue?' Explain that wherever the train ran on the street level, people called that street Death Avenue. Elicit why. Ask, "If you had lived in NYC at that time, would you have liked the idea of big, heavy freight trains traveling so close to people?" Elicit that it was very dangerous, and explain that many New Yorkers fought hard to get rid of Death Avenue.

**Slide 3: Construction of the High Line, 1933.**

The solution to ending Death Avenue was getting the trains off of street level. That meant building the High Line. Building the High Line was a good idea, but the people who owned the railroad did not really like it. They fought the idea. Explain that both sides fought for many years until eventually, the High Line became a reality.

**Slide 4: National Refrigerator Company and High Line, 1933.**

Ask students to describe the traffic. (It is light, orderly.) Where is the train? (Up above.) Ask if the High Line solved the problem of ending Death Avenue? (Yes.) Did the High Line end the problem of all that heavy traffic congestion? (Yes.) Explain that when the High Line was built, they also built platforms for the train to go directly into the warehouses. Have the students identify this on the image. In this image, students can see that the High Line is still under construction; there are many workers on the line. But

it has already had a positive impact. Ask the students if the public was successful in forcing the railroad to eliminate Death Avenue. (Yes.) Was building the High Line a good idea? (Yes.)

**Slide 5: The High Line, c. 1998.**

Tell the students that the High Line did its job for many years. But then things changed, and people stopped using trains so much to deliver goods. Ask what forms of transportation might have become more common. (Answers include planes and trucks.) Explain that since trains weren't so popular anymore, what might have happened to the High Line? (It shut down and sat idle, beginning in 1981.) Ask if the High Line looks like it has been used a lot in this picture? (It hasn't.) Explain that after the High Line sat around for so long, many people thought it would be a good idea to tear it down. But many other people thought it would make a good park. These two sides argued for many years. Ask students if they know what happened to the High Line? (The people who thought it would make a good park prevailed, and the High Line is now a park.) Ask, "Do you think it's a nice park?" (Answers will vary.) Did the people who fought for turning the High Line into a park do a good thing for New York City? (It is hoped that the students will answer yes!)

Divide class into five groups. Give each group a copy of one of the images from the PowerPoint presentation along with the brainstorming worksheet. Tell the students that they will work with their group to answer the questions about their picture. They are going to work together to act out what is happening in their picture. Tomorrow, they will present a little play about their picture and the story of the High Line. As the students are working, circulate to make sure that they are talking about the particular chapter in the High Line's history. Encourage them to act out people protesting for the end of Death Avenue, or people fighting to save the High Line, etc.

## **SKITS**

**PERIOD 2:**

Remind the students that they have learned about the history of the High Line and also that it came into being because of the involvement of New Yorkers. Explore the idea that many years later, it was turned into a park because of the involvement of another group of New Yorkers. Reiterate the idea that when people care about where they live, they can make a difference.

Tell the class that using the images they looked at yesterday to act out what is happening in that particular picture. When the entire class is done with their small skit, they will tell the story of the history of the High Line.

**EXTENSION OR HOMEWORK:**

Students write a "review" of the skits that they saw performed in class.

# BRAINSTORMING WORKSHEET

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** With your group members, answer these questions about your picture.

1. What does your picture show? List the things you see in the picture.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. Do you see the High Line in your picture? If not, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What do you think is happening in your picture? What story does it tell? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Who do you think the people in your picture might be? (If there are no people, skip this question.)

_____	_____
_____	_____

5. Brainstorm some titles for this photo. This will be the name of the skit you will act out.

_____	_____
_____	_____