

## **The European Union and Smith Middle School (NC)**

Why is the European Union “giving” my program, Smith Middle School, and our district so much money? This year’s grant is worth 67,000 euros (about \$86,000 given the current conversion rate). We were also given this award in 2007, thus becoming the first U.S. public secondary educational institution to receive such a grant from the European Union. Why this program?

The fundamental responses can be found in the pages of Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers* and William Hitchcock’s *The Struggle for Europe*. As I see it, the European Union funds programs that fit Gladwell’s “blueprint for making the most of human potential” by creating enrichment experiences that plant the seed of innovation and motivation for all participants regardless of financial circumstances. Moreover, what is really known about Europe, the EU, and its goals and how they fit into our global community? Middle school textbooks offer little more than short paragraphs on an institution, created in response to the ravages of two world wars, that has cultivated peace and prosperity for its family of twenty-seven democratic nations. Hitchcock asserts that in the past sixty-five years, one of the major successes for Europe has been its leaders “speaking the language of power sharing rather than power seizing.” As an educator I’ve learned that a culture of openness leads to a willingness for knowledge-sharing, which in turn leads to power sharing...and that is why I work to bring these learning experiences to not only my students but also to my school, district, and community.

In the summer of 2006, the Delegation of the European Commission of Washington released their first “call for proposals” for the “Getting to Know Europe” grant. While attending an EU workshop hosted by the University of North Carolina’s WorldView and the International Center for Global Initiatives, I investigated this opportunity—a dream of sorts—to write a plan of how I would spend \$70,000 while meeting the EU’s objectives of helping our school and local communities learn more about the EU. We would cover the EU’s policies, institutions, and how they affect everyday life in Europe, as well as raise awareness about the EU’s role on the international economic and political stages. We would also seek to understand the EU/U.S. multi-faceted relationships and what perspectives we could learn from studying these relationships. The task seemed daunting at first, but from a teacher’s perspective it was an opportunity for education at its best—how was I going to make this learning authentic and applicable for our students while also being acceptable to the European Union? With the help of my principal and colleagues, I wrote a plan and it was accepted. On a list of grant recipients, Smith Middle School ranked beside Cornell, Duquesne, and Boston University. That award funded a large part of our 2007 program.

The summer and fall of 2008 found me once again working furiously on the computer to write a new EU grant for 2009. What motivated me were the eyes of the students in my classroom, those children who saw their cousins, friends, or older classmates travel to Europe in 2007 fully or partially funded through the grant. This incredible enrichment opportunity would only happen for them if this grant were awarded. Since 2007, resignation (“that trip is only for rich kids”) has changed to hope and a vision of the

future. Thirty-six students, six teachers, and one UNC TV filmmaker will be traveling to France and Belgium March 18-29. All will benefit from the grant funds in some way; however, twenty-three of those travelers will be partially or fully funded for an experience they otherwise could not afford. The middle school group will be spending three days in Paris, visiting famous museums and monuments, traveling to Normandy to visit the American cemetery and then on to Belgium, to learn about the EU in Brussels, while staying with their pen pal families in Liege. All of us will change our dollars to euros, cross from France to Belgium without having to show our passports and feel the everyday advantages of “open borders” initiated by the European Union. We will also visit the EU Parliament and EU Commission in Brussels and celebrate the tenth anniversary of the euro as well as the 52<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the EU. We will share this learning via a video conference back to Smith Middle School.

Another curriculum focus that will be documented by UNC TV is North Carolina connections in Europe as we learn about World War II. Students have already researched, created projects, and even enacted scenes about the D-Day Invasion, the Liberation of Paris, The Battle of the Bulge, as well as the French and Belgian Resistance Movements. Of particular interest has been the role of the African-American soldier in General Patton’s 761<sup>st</sup> all-black Tank Battalion. Students are learning how to describe these events in French so that they can have discussions about WWII with their Belgian pen pals while visiting their school in Liege.

The grant funding will also cover school, district, and community events such as a Europe Day celebration in May, Euro Zone for Smith’s Global Connections events, and on-going professional development for teachers.

Knowledge sharing leads to power sharing. There is much we, as Americans, can share with our European friends, just as there is a lot we can learn from them. For example, we will witness how small European villages honor the American liberators and thereby gain a deeper appreciation for our own grandfathers who fought so valiantly for freedom and justice on European soil. My students will share their knowledge of the African-American soldier’s experience in WWII, civil rights in America, and the historic election of America’s first black president. As the students walk the peaceful fields of Belgium, gaze at Monet’s masterpieces, laugh at their own *faux pas*, or celebrate new international friendships, perhaps they all will become, in some sense, an “outlier,” a youngster motivated “beyond the norm” to create a world where knowledge and power are shared and peace will reign.

A special thanks to the administration of Smith Middle School and to the Chapel Hill Carrboro City School District for the tremendous support they have shown for this program. To learn more about the EU: <http://www.europa.eu>

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