



WHY TEACHING 9/11 MATTERS

A TEACHER TIP SHEET

Remembering September 11: Helping Students Understand Courage, Service, and Citizenship

September 11, 2001, was the deadliest terrorist attack ever carried out on American soil. It was also the deadliest attack on the United States since Pearl Harbor sixty years earlier. For many Americans, it became a defining moment in our nation's history, much as Pearl Harbor had been for an earlier generation. Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and aboard Flight 93.

For today's students, September 11 is history, but it is history that continues to shape the world in which they live. As the number of Americans who personally remember September 11 continues to decline, schools increasingly become stewards of its history. Through age-appropriate and thoughtful instruction, educators can help students understand not only the tragic events of that day, but also the enduring lessons of courage, service, sacrifice, unity, and hope that followed. Many of today's students were born years after the attacks, and for some, even their parents have little or no memory of the day. Teachers play an essential role in helping students understand not only what happened on September 11, but why it continues to matter for our nation and our communities.

Key Teaching Points

Remembering a Day That Changed America

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four commercial airplanes and carried out attacks at three locations in the United States:

- The World Trade Center in New York City
- The Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia
- A field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where passengers aboard United Flight 93 fought back against the hijackers.



Many students are familiar with the Twin Towers but may not realize that Americans were also attacked at the Pentagon and that the passengers of Flight 93 demonstrated remarkable courage in resisting the terrorists. (See below for more on Flight 93)

A Nation United

One of the most significant lessons of September 11 is how Americans came together in response to tragedy. People across the country donated blood, volunteered in their communities, supported first responders, displayed American flags, attended memorial services, prayed for our country together no matter religion, and looked for ways to help their neighbors. In a difficult moment, Americans united around common values and shared responsibilities as citizens.



Service Before Self

Among the most powerful examples from September 11 were the firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel, military members, and other first responders who rushed toward danger while others were fleeing. All knew the risks they faced, yet they chose to fulfill their duty and help save lives. Their actions demonstrated extraordinary courage, selflessness, and commitment to serving others. Their example provides an opportunity to discuss character, responsibility, and what it means to place the needs of others before your own.

Citizenship and Leadership

September 11 provides opportunities for teachers to discuss:

Citizenship **Leadership** **Community Responsibility** **Patriotism** **Service to Others** **Courage Under Pressure**

Students can learn that leadership is not limited to famous people. Ordinary Americans demonstrated leadership through acts of kindness, sacrifice, and service during one of the nation's most challenging moments.

Keeping History Alive

For today's students, September 11 may seem as distant as Pearl Harbor was to previous generations. Teachers help transform 9/11 from simply a date in a textbook into a meaningful learning experience that preserves an important chapter of American history for future generations.

Age-Appropriate Classroom Approaches

Guiding question: What can September 11 teach us about courage, service, citizenship, and how Americans respond during difficult times?

Grades K-2 (Ages 5-8)

Focus: Helpers and heroes

Key Message: "When something bad happened, many people worked together to help others."

Activities:

- Read books about community helpers.
- Discuss firefighters, police officers, EMTs, and military service members.
- Have students write thank-you notes to local first responders.
- Discuss ways students can help others in their own communities.

Grades 3-5

Focus: Courage and service

Key Message: "People showed bravery by helping others during a difficult time."

Activities:

- Learn about the three attack sites.
- Study stories of first responders and Flight 93 passengers.
- Discuss what courage means.
- Create a classroom "Acts of Service" project.



Grades 6–8

Focus: Citizenship, leadership, and national unity

Key Message: "Americans responded to tragedy through service, resilience, and unity."

Activities:

- Examine primary sources, photographs, and eyewitness accounts.
- Discuss how communities responded after the attacks.
- Compare acts of heroism across American history.
- Reflect on the civic responsibilities of citizens during challenging times.

Suggested Discussion Questions

- What does courage look like in everyday life?
- Why do communities need people who are willing to serve others?
- How did Americans respond to the attacks?
- What qualities did first responders demonstrate?
- Why is it important to remember significant events in our nation's history?
- What lessons from September 11 can help us be better citizens today?

Service Before Self: The Example of Flight 93

One of the most inspiring stories from September 11 comes from United Airlines Flight 93. After learning through phone calls that other hijacked airplanes had already struck the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, passengers realized that their own aircraft was being used as a weapon.

Rather than accept their fate, a group of ordinary American citizens chose to act. Among them was **Todd Beamer**, a 32-year-old husband and father. Working together with other passengers, Beamer and his fellow Americans made the courageous decision to confront the hijackers and attempt to retake control of the airplane.

Before taking action, Beamer reportedly ended a phone call to tell his wife "goodbye" with the now famous words: "Are you guys ready? Let's roll."

The passengers' actions prevented the terrorists from reaching their intended target. Flight 93 crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, but those on board are remembered for their extraordinary courage and sacrifice.

Todd Beamer's story reminds students that heroes are often ordinary people who choose to do the right thing in extraordinary circumstances. His example demonstrates leadership, courage, and a willingness to put the safety of others before himself.



Discussion Questions

- What qualities did Todd Beamer and the passengers of Flight 93 demonstrate?
- Why do we remember acts of courage even during tragic events?
- What does it mean to put service before self?
- How can ordinary citizens show leadership when facing challenges?

Teaching Takeaway

When teaching about September 11, it is important for students to understand that history is not only about the tragedy of the attacks, but also about the character, courage, and sacrifice of the people who responded to them. Many of those heroes, including first responders, are still with us today and continue to serve their communities.

The story of Todd Beamer and the passengers of Flight 93 reminds us that courage is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to do what is right despite it. Their actions, along with those of firefighters climbing the stairs of the Twin Towers, police officers rushing toward danger, and countless ordinary Americans helping others in a time of crisis, represent some of the finest examples of citizenship, duty, service, and love of country.

September 11 should be remembered not only for what happened, but for how Americans responded, demonstrating resilience, unity, and a commitment to putting others before themselves.

The story of American courage did not end on September 11. In the months and years that followed, thousands of young men and women chose to enlist in the Armed Forces, ready and willing to serve our country in a time of war. Their commitment to duty and sacrifice reflected the resilience, patriotism, and love of country that emerged in the aftermath of the attacks.

