

TEACHER CURRICULUM GUIDE

Stake Your Claim: The Homestead Act Challenge

Immersive Living History Program for K–12 Students

Program Overview

Stake Your Claim: The Homestead Act Challenge is an interactive, movement-based living history program where students simulate the experiences of homesteaders settling land under the Homestead Act.

Through a structured relay experience, students face real historical challenges including drought, blizzards, prairie fires, crop failure, and survival decision-making on the Great Plains.

Students work in “homestead families” to build shelter, secure water, grow crops, and survive environmental disasters in order to “prove up” and keep their land.

Grade Level

K–12 (multi-age adaptable)

Content and questioning are layered to engage:

- Elementary students through movement and visual learning
 - Middle grades through cause-and-effect and teamwork
 - Secondary students through analysis, decision-making, and historical interpretation
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Program Length

Flexible format:

- 30-minute program
 - 60-minute program
 - Can be adapted for extended enrichment sessions
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Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the purpose and requirements of the Homestead Act
 - Identify key challenges faced by homesteaders on the Great Plains
 - Analyze how geography and climate impacted settlement success
 - Explore decision-making under pressure in historical contexts
 - Demonstrate teamwork and problem-solving skills
 - Connect emotionally and intellectually with real historical experiences
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Key Concepts & Themes

- Westward Expansion
 - Homestead Act & Land Ownership
 - Nebraska & Great Plains History
 - Frontier Survival
 - Climate and Environment
 - Risk and Reward
 - Human Resilience
 - Community vs Isolation
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Curriculum Connections

This program supports:

Social Studies

- U.S. Westward Expansion
- Settlement of the Great Plains
- Government land policy
- Human-environment interaction

Geography

- Climate challenges of the prairie
- Natural resources and survival
- Land use and settlement patterns

History Skills

- Cause and effect
- Historical empathy
- Decision-making analysis
- Interpreting lived experiences

Social-Emotional Learning

- Teamwork
 - Communication
 - Problem-solving
 - Resilience
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Program Structure (Teacher Overview)

Students are divided into small “homestead families” and participate in a series of relay-based challenges representing real-life frontier conditions.

Core Challenges Include:

- Claiming land
- Securing water
- Building shelter (sod house)
- Planting and losing crops
- Surviving a blizzard
- Escaping prairie fire

At the conclusion, students must demonstrate whether they have successfully met the requirements to “prove up” and keep their land.

Pre-Program Classroom Preparation (Optional)

To maximize student engagement, teachers may introduce:

- Basic overview of the Homestead Act
- Map of the Great Plains
- Vocabulary:
 - Homestead
 - Claim
 - Sod house

- Prairie
- Drought
- Settlement

Discussion prompt:

“Would you move to unknown land for a chance at ownership? Why or why not?”

Post-Program Discussion Questions

Elementary (K–3)

- What was the hardest part of being a homesteader?
- What did you need to survive?
- How did your team work together?

Middle School (4–6)

- What challenges surprised you the most?
- What would you have done differently?
- Why was survival so difficult?

Secondary (7–12)

- What risks did homesteaders take?
 - Was the Homestead Act fair or unfair? Why?
 - How did environment impact success or failure?
 - Would you have stayed or left your claim?
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Extension Activities

Writing

- Journal entry: “A Day on My Homestead”
- Letter home from a homesteader
- Argument: Would you take a homestead claim?

Research

- Investigate real homesteader stories
- Study Nebraska settlement patterns

- Compare homesteading to modern land ownership

Creative Projects

- Design a homestead
 - Build a model sod house
 - Create a survival plan for the prairie
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Assessment Opportunities

Teachers may assess students through:

- Participation and engagement
 - Group collaboration
 - Reflection responses
 - Written assignments
 - Class discussion contributions
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Program Benefits for Educators

This program provides:

- Standards-aligned content delivery
 - Multi-grade adaptability
 - Active, hands-on learning
 - Strong student engagement
 - Visual and experiential teaching methods
 - A memorable supplement to classroom instruction
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About the Program Experience

This is not a lecture-based program.

Students experience history through:

- Movement
- Storytelling
- Decision-making

- Emotional engagement

The goal is to help students understand not only what happened—but what it **felt like to live it**.

Final Educational Statement

Stake Your Claim transforms historical learning into lived experience—helping students understand the realities of westward expansion, the risks of frontier life, and the resilience required to survive on the American prairie.