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Guidelines for Developing a Place-Based Unit

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Guidelines for developing a place-based ed unit. Here are some preliminary ideas I was able to brainstorm responses to how some of the place-based unit development guidelines could be addressed while creating curriculum about La Sal del Rey.

(1) Overview and expectations: What are some possible issues you could explore with regard to La Sal del Rey as well as the other salt lakes in this region. As you do so, consider which topics might be of most interest to your students.

- Changing definitions of what constitutes a valuable resource
- Land use history
- Movement from resource available to anyone (commons) to resource restricted to property owner (Texas mineral rights law)
- History of salt in human cultures
- Trading relationship between local tribes and Aztecs, local population and colonial Mexico, between local residents and Confederate and Union armies
- Building of border wall through on the of the salt lake refuges
- Role of La Sal del Rey in the Civil War
- Impact of non-native species on the lake
- Impact of widespread irrigation in the lower Rio Grande Valley on water table levels and natural features like La Sal del Rey

For each of these topics, determine what you hope students will retain from this historical and conceptual exploration. For example, an expectation with regard to the unit about Graham Oaks could be that students would feel a deeper sense of responsibility for the protection and preservation of open lands in their community—something students at the school were actually enjoined to do by the mayor during the park dedication.

(2) Intermediate or culminating projects that would address your educational goals and address school or community needs.

- Film a la Ken Burns that depict the story of La Sal del Rey using publically available paintings, photographs, and historical documents coupled with footage of the lake as it exists today.
- Investigative report about how La Sal del Rey came to be a US Fish and Wildlife Refuge. What factors contributed to its protection?
- Report on relationship between La Sal del Rey and Texas' mineral rights clause in constitution
- Report on use of La Sal del Rey during the American Civil War
- Compare and contrast history of La Sal del Rey and other salt lakes in other parts of the world
- Report on impact of La Sal del Rey on species protection and health—laying out data regarding species most impacted by its existence and protection
- Report about tourism and La Sal del Rey—number of visitors, how it is publicized, any economic impact

- Provide more public education about La Sal del Rey
- Create a regional website on which student reports about La Sal del Rey could be posted and shared
- Wildlife surveys
- Photographic exhibit with explanatory captions
- Exhibit of historical information about La Sal del Rey
- Brochure about La Sal del Rey
- Podcasts about La Sal del Rey

(3) Given your goals and the projects you could imagine incorporating in the unit, what essential question or target question would help keep both you and your students focused throughout the unit? These questions would need to be topic specific, but here are some possibilities given topics share so far:

- What has salt been such an important commodity for human beings?
- What factors can lead a resource to be highly valued in one era and then lose value in another?
- What is the difference between a resource that is available in what is known as the common and resources that are available in markets?
- How are mineral rights administered differently from one state to another? Why is this important?
- Why is it important to preserve and protect natural areas like La Sal del Rey and other salt lakes in South Texas?
- What does the land use history of La Sal del Rey tell us about the cultures that have existed in this region for the past five centuries? How would you compare and contrast these cultures?

(4) What skills will students need to be able to complete the project?

Depends on project by some that could be applicable:

- Interview skills
- Research skills (finding data, evaluating it, synthesizing findings)
- Close reading
- Writing
- Speaking
- Critical thinking
- Filmmaking
- Computer skills
- Photography
- Skills associated with effective teamwork
- Communicating with adults
- Making cold calls
- Developing and assessing alternatives
- Evaluative skills
- Revision skills

(5) Which partners in the community or region would you be able to tap to provide information, experiences, or resources to your student to help them successfully complete their project? Discuss for five minutes and share.

- US Fish and Wildlife (Lower Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge)
- Brownsville Historical Association, McAllen Heritage Center
- Most recent owners of land
- Audubon Society
- Texas State Tourism Office
- Texas Parks and Wildlife Foundation
- Local Chambers of Commerce

(6) Taking what you have designed so far, list a half dozen of the state or district standards you're most familiar with that could be incorporated in this unit?

(7) Challenges and opportunities you'd be likely to encounter when implementing such a unit? Ways you could imagine overcoming the challenges?

Challenges:

- Transportation
- Scheduling issues
- Fitting learning experiences like La Sal del Rey into the regular curriculum
- Developing student independence/responsibility
- Persuading students that learning about La Sal del Rey is meaningful and worth their energy and commitment
- Teaching students how to work effectively in small works
- Working with partners—developing and sustaining long-term relationships
- Managing complex activities that depend on student initiation and responsibility
- Relinquishing some degree of control
- Making yours and students' work public

Opportunities:

- Learning new things
- Keeping the experience of teaching fresh
- Collaborating with other adults
- More collaborative relationship with students
- Public acknowledgement of your work
- Opportunities to pursue topics or activities you are passionate about
- Being of serviced to your community and making it a better place to live