



# Demystifying Pennhurst State School



# Lesson title: PA History: Demystifying Pennhurst State School

## Subject and topic:

Social Studies, Civics, Civil rights, PA History

## Grade level:

10, 11, 12

## Duration:

1 hour

## Lesson summary:

In this lesson students will compare and contrast 3 videos on Pennhurst State School. Students will delve into two narratives, The “horror” and “historical”. In a class discussion, students will discuss the implications of each narrative on how society views mental illness and intellectual disability. Students will learn about Pennhurst and the historic self-advocacy of the residents and the eventual closing of the PA institution.

## Standards:

- CC.1.5.9-10.A :Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.
- , CC.1.5.11-12.A,: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions on grade-level topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- 8.2.9.A, 8.2.12.A Contrast the role groups and individuals from Pennsylvania played in the social, political, cultural, and economic development of the U.S..

## Objectives:

### SWBAT

- analyze and evaluate the ideas mentioned in the video through a lens of history (or current events depending on your class).



- explore their own bias on disability and how they can change them to better their communities.
- analyze how society perceives disability and how people with disabilities are affected by that.
- connect how people with disabilities were treated in the past to current legislation
- learn about the perspective of somebody living with a disability.
- distinguish between the horror story narrative of Pennhurst and the historically accurate narrative of Pennhurst.
- describe the history of mental health care in Pennsylvania.
- accurately describe how Pennhurst eventually closed and became a Halloween attraction.

### Essential Questions:

- EQ1: What was the evolution of Pennhurst?
- EQ2: What are there similarities and differences to institutions today?

### Vocabulary:

- Disability
- Pennhurst
- Institutionalization
- Social Darwinism

### Materials:

- Projector and sound
- Flipchart paper
- [Pennhurst Haunted House Trailer](#): 1 minute
- [The Horrors of Pennhurst](#): Watch until 5:24
  - **Note:** The BuzzFeed Horrors of Pennhurst contains cursing and lewd humor may not be suitable for all audiences. This may not be suitable for your school. Please consult with your school policy. You may opt to skip this video and have a longer discussion or group time. Please let DEE know how you use this resource by emailing us at [info@disabilityequalityeducation.org](mailto:info@disabilityequalityeducation.org)



- [A Call of Conscience](#): 11 minutes

## Lesson Preparation

Please read [Pennhurst History](#) as this will give you some background knowledge on Pennhurst in order to better facilitate discussion. Watch the videos to familiarize yourself with the narratives presented.

## Lesson procedures

1. Begin the class by welcoming students and reviewing the group agreements .  
**“Today’s lesson is on Pennhurst State School. Have any of you heard of it? Does this name sound familiar?”**
2. Students may talk about how they go to the haunted house every Halloween, or they may talk about the ghosts and creepiness of the abandoned grounds. Some students may have no experience with Pennhurst at all.
3. **“So it sounds like many of you know Pennhurst as a creepy place, for halloween, Do you know what actually happened there historically? Do you know why it was built or who lived there?”**
4. Allow students to share what they know about Pennhurst with Disability Equality in Education [info@disabilityequalityeducation.org](mailto:info@disabilityequalityeducation.org) using the subject: “Pennhurst pre-lesson”

## **5. Group Activity**

- a. Split students into groups of 3-4 (1 minute)
- b. Ask them to sit with their groups and give each group one sheet of flipchart paper and some markers.
- c. Draw a line through the center top to bottom. One half will be notes for the first two videos and second half will be for the 3rd video.
- d. First, we are going to watch two short videos. Please think about these videos critically (who is the audience? Who made the video? How was it shot?). What are these videos teaching you about mental illness? What do they teach you about Pennhurst? What narratives are in these videos? Think about how the tone of the speakers and the sound of the music attempts to persuade you. Keep all of this in mind as you watch.
- e. Show the first two videos (6 minutes)



- i. [Pennhurst Trailer 2017](#) (Haunted House): 1 minute
- ii. [The Horrors of Pennhurst Asylum](#): Watch until 5:24

**Note:** The BuzzFeed Horrors of Pennhurst contains cursing and lewd humor may not be suitable for all audiences. This may not be suitable for your school. Please consult with your school policy. You may opt to skip this video and have a longer discussion or group time.

- f. Ask each group to write down at the top of one piece of flipchart paper “Horror”. Then ask the groups to work together and write down their observations from the videos underneath. Remind them to think about the narratives about mental illness and institutions. You can prompt them by talking about ghosts. Why is Pennhurst thought of as a haunted place?
  - g. Give them about **5 minutes** to record their answers.
  - h. **Now we are going to watch another video on Pennhurst. Think about as you watch what are the narratives about Pennhurst? What does this video teach you about Pennhurst? How did Pennhurst eventually close?**
  - i. Show [A Call of Conscience](#) Video (**11 minutes**)
6. After the video Instruct each group to write at the top of the right half of their flipchart paper “Historical” and underneath they will record their observations and answers to the questions. (**5 minutes**)
  7. After the groups have completed their flipchart paper, ask each group (one at a time) to share their answers with the class. Write down these answers on a chalkboard or whiteboard. (**10 minutes**)
  8. After all groups have finished presenting. Supplement in anything they may have forgotten. Thank them for sharing.
  9. Ask all students to sit in a circle. **Processing Questions** (10 minutes):
    - a. What was it like to watch these videos?
    - b. Did anything surprise you?
    - c. What were some commonalities between each of your horror sheets?
    - d. Why do you think this idea of fear has been so pervasive over the years?



Answer: Perpetuation of negative stereotypes surrounding mental illness and intellectual disability. When stigma is perpetuated, people often won't learn and will show avoidance and fear.

e. What does this fear end up doing?

Fear = avoidance and misunderstanding= stigma

f. What was different between the call to conscience video and the two other videos?

g. How did the closing of Pennhurst affect other similar institutions?

h. What negative stereotypes did a place like Pennhurst create?

i. How did it's closing have a positive perspective on how we perceive persons with mental or physical disabilities?

j. What are some negative perspectives toward persons with disabilities that still exist today that society needs to work on

10. Self-Reflection Activity (7 minutes)

a. Pass out sheets of paper and ask students to write down a paragraph on their takeaway message from the lesson. This could be anything from understanding that haunted houses perpetuate the negative stereotypes of mental illness to seeing how awful humans can treat each other and the triumph of self-advocacy.

### Related materials:

- Documents below

### Evaluation:

Ask your students this question related to this lesson to gauge how much they learned.

**QUESTION: Did this lesson explain why institutions are not solutions?**

Thank you for bringing the conversation about disability into your classroom. Help us evaluate this lesson plan by visiting [our evaluation page to assess this lesson.](#)

