

*Picturing America*, Head Start, and the Maine Humanities Council  
by Denise Pendleton, Program Director, Born to Read  
Maine Humanities Council

It was the last Tuesday in May, when temperatures made the day feel like one of Maine's dog days of August. At the Colby College Museum of Art there was a bustle of activity inside and out, amidst grateful exclamations for the air conditioning within. Museum docents were on hand, along with staff from the museum, the Maine Humanities Council, and Maine's Head Start Quality Initiative all of whom came together to create a special Family Day at the Museum for Head Start families. Nearly 135 children, parents and grandparents, and local Head Start Program staff attended. The event was the culmination of several intensive training sessions for Head Start teachers on the *Picturing America* initiative of National Endowment for the Humanities.

Programs similar to this one have been offered statewide through a Maine Humanities Council initiative created to connect teachers with their local museums while providing workshops to foster educational activities with *Picturing America* across the curriculum.

By the end of this October, when the last program is being offered in Bangor, six Maine museums and galleries will have participated since 2009, benefiting close to 250 teachers and thousands of their students. The initiative builds on the *Picturing America* collection of 40 high-quality reproductions of American artistic masterpieces that NEH and Head Start has sent to schools, libraries and other organizations across the country, along with teacher guides which offer a flexible blueprint to guide and enhance student interaction with the art.

According to one teacher: "Having these prints in the classroom gives us an opportunity to interact in new ways and have new conversations. A lot of people didn't like what I put up this week and we had a debate about it." One preschool teacher has been exploring *The County Election* by John Caleb Bingham this week, which served as a prompt for book-reading and discussion about a variety of topics, from hats around the world to the voting process.

Patricia Clark, Director of Early Childhood Services/Instructor of Early Childhood and Special Education at the University of Maine at Augusta, noted, "A Head Start participation in the *Picturing America* program offers preschoolers a chance to experience art and learn about artists in a way appropriate to their age and development. We incorporated children's literature and many active literacy activities to enhance the existing curriculum. Bringing art to children is such a natural concept and it is gratifying to see the program in demand. All preschoolers can benefit from this collaboration because the resources are free and available online."