

# Children as Civic Agents during the Civil Rights Movement

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Reviewed in this article:

**Partridge, Elizabeth.** *Marching for Freedom: Walk Together, Children, and Don't You Grow Weary.* New York: Viking Juvenile, 2009.

**Levinson, Cynthia.** *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March.* Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers, 2012.

As we seek to help elementary students see themselves as civic agents, it is valuable to share examples of individuals who have contributed to society over time. Sam Wineburg and his colleagues conducted a survey in which they asked the question

“Starting from Columbus to the present day, jot down the names of the most famous Americans in history. The only ground rule is that they cannot be presidents.”<sup>1</sup>

They surveyed eleventh and twelfth graders from public high schools in each of the 50 states, collecting in total 2,000 responses. “The top three names given by students were all African Americans: Martin Luther King Jr. (far and away the most famous person in American history for today’s teenagers), Rosa Parks (close behind), and Harriet Tubman.”<sup>2</sup> These responses are not surprising, since throughout elementary school, students are often introduced and re-introduced to King and Parks.

It is important, however, for citizens to understand that, in addition to these icons, many thousands of people were involved in the civil rights struggle, including children. As Elizabeth Partridge, author of *Marching for Freedom*, asks, “The movement needed people to take dramatic risks to challenge unjust laws. Were the students willing?” (p. 10) The historical answer to that question is a resounding, “Yes!” The civil rights movement is replete with stories of young adults and even children, civic agents who were integral to the process of change.

Today, there is a growing collection of nonfiction books (see recommended books, p. 10) that focus on the perspectives and efforts of children and young people who were involved in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s—a time in which

the rights and responsibilities of citizens were challenged. The two recent and complimentary books reviewed here would be ideal additions to every elementary classroom library. Both books are rich with black and white photographs illustrating the evolution of the protests.

## Marching from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, 1965

Elizabeth Partridge has written biographies for young readers.<sup>3</sup> In *Marching for Freedom*, a 2010 Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People, Partridge describes the pivotal events in Selma, Alabama, in the spring of 1965 from the perspective of children who participated in the march. The movie *Selma*, which just won an Academy Award for best original song, was based on some of these events.

Partridge’s nonfiction narrative opens (p. 1) with the powerful line, “The first time Joanne Blackmon was arrested, she was just ten years old.” Partridge introduces several key figures, including Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Governor George Wallace, and then relates the narrative chronologically, with the powerful use of captioned photographs, song lyrics, and questions posed to the reader.

The book begins with the chapter, “Voteless, 1963,” which establishes the social and political context for the reader. The next chapter describes Martin Luther King, Jr. arriving in Selma, Alabama, on January 2, 1965. Drawing on the memories of individuals who attended his speech, Partridge re-creates the event in great detail. The narrative fast-forwards two months to the events of Bloody Sunday (March 7, 1965) and Turn Around Tuesday (March 9) at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma.

Partridge then devotes a chapter to each of the five days in which children and adults marched from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery, a journey of 54 miles. Teachers can read these chapters aloud, perhaps covering one chapter each day for a week. These pages are rich with first-hand accounts, carefully selected captioned photographs, excerpted song lyrics,



President Lyndon B. Johnson and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the signing of the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. (Photo by Yoichi R. Okamoto. Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, [www.lbjlibrary.net/collections/photo-archive/photolab-detail.htm](http://www.lbjlibrary.net/collections/photo-archive/photolab-detail.htm))

and questions (e.g. “Should she march again?”) that engage the reader and move the narrative forward.

The book concludes with a discussion of the Voting Rights Act, 1965. Partridge frames this chapter with the iconic image of President Johnson handing Dr. King one of the pens the president used to sign the act.

In the text, Partridge describes the impact of the Voting Rights Act on the United States, the power of nonviolent protest, and the contribution of individuals, especially young people, to this reform.

The book includes valuable back matter for teachers. The author’s note describes the process of researching and writing the book. In addition, there are source notes and a rich bibliography. The recommended reading level for this book is fifth grade and up. However, because of the format, topic, and materials presented, it can be used as a shared text or read-aloud with younger students exploring concepts such as citizenship and how laws can be created and amended in our democracy.<sup>4</sup>

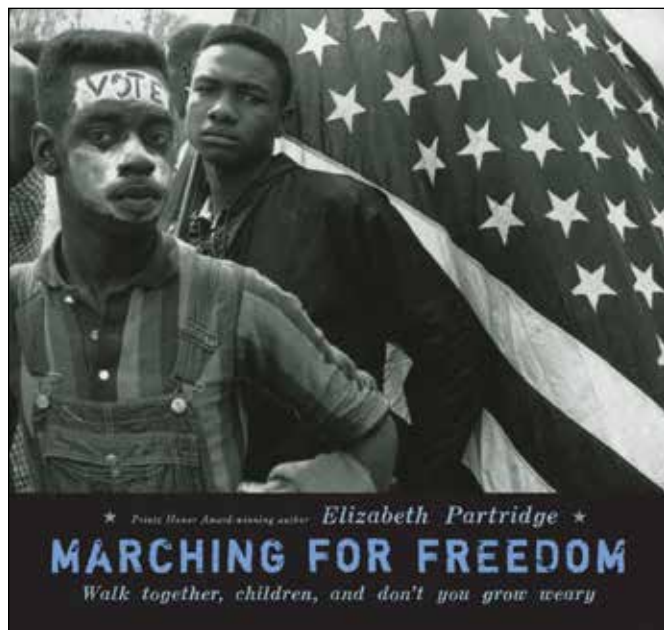
### Understanding a Chronology

The essential question “How do citizens’ actions shape our society?” pushes students to think about causal relationships across time and place. The chronological organization of *Marching for Freedom* lends itself to an exploration of social

studies standards theme ● **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**, and to the creation of timelines as a classroom activity.<sup>5</sup> Prior to reading this book, explain to (or remind) students that authors make choices about what written content, illustrations, or other information to include in their books—as well as how the text will be structured: one clue that the book is organized chronologically is the author’s use of “signals” (words, numbers, and phrases) that draw a reader’s attention to the time and the passing of time.<sup>6</sup> Teachers can display the table of contents in *Marching for Freedom* and ask students to identify “signals” that indicate the importance of time and temporal sequences in the telling of these events (possible examples include “January 4–14” and “Day One: Sunday, March 21”).

Then, teachers can give each student 10 to 15 sticky notes (3 × 3 inches) and invite volunteers to record events (the date and action) as they listen to the story as it’s read aloud. After the reading (in part or whole), ask students to organize their sticky notes around common ideas or categories (e.g. “Actions by Students”). Prompt students to turn and talk to each other about how all of the events in each category might relate to each other. They can also discuss ways in which one event may have led to or affected another event. Finally, students can complete a graphic organizer to illustrate these relationships, placing events in a sequence along a rough timeline. To summarize the

ideas and events associated with this book, teachers might then facilitate a conversation using the essential question, “How do citizens’ actions shape our society?”



The events that happened in the past affect our lives today. However, those actions and events do not simply happen as say, the weather does. There were many brave individuals involved in the civil rights movement—including many children who now, as adults, are eager to tell their stories. In the next book, the author focuses on the actions of children and helps teachers address the following essential question: “How have children been active citizens and resisted injustices in history?”

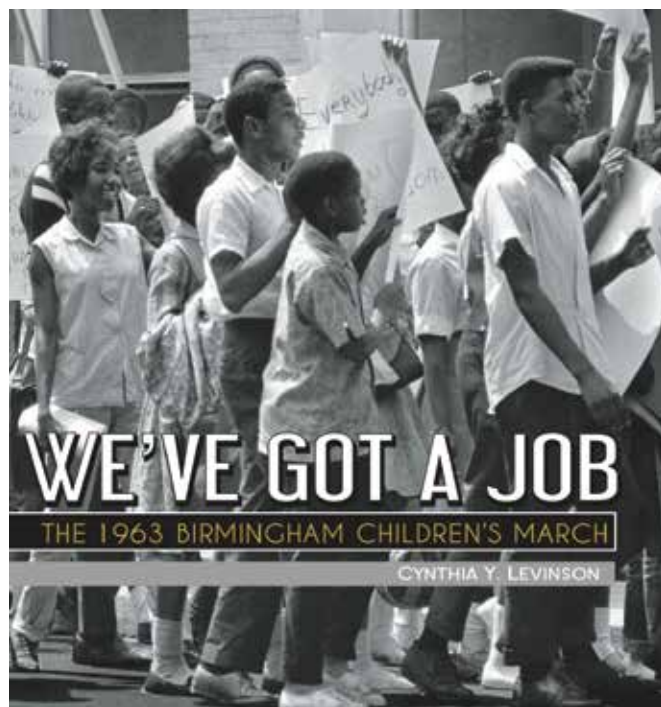
### **A Children’s March in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963**

Cynthia Levinson’s book, *We’ve Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children’s March*, received the Jane Addams’ Children’s Book Award (2013). It chronicles a protest that occurred two years prior to the events in Selma, and it offers particular opportunities to illustrate the civic agency of young citizens in our history. In this unusual protest, children were the main actors.

Levinson uses four young people’s experiences to anchor the larger story of “three to four thousand black children who marched, protested, sang, and prayed their way to jail during the first week of May, 1963, in Birmingham, Alabama.” (pp. 2-3). First, Levinson provides brief profiles of the four children and their families. Then, as events unfold, she relates the point of view of one or more of the children who were there. Powerful, short quotes appearing throughout the book engage the reader and emphasize the importance of personal memory in the telling of national history.

Nine years after the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954, Birmingham was a locus of “massive resistance” to desegregation. Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor ran a police force that terrorized the black community. Deaths by police beatings

were common (p. 15-16). This book’s narrative begins in April 1963, with “Project C” (“C” stood for Confrontation), during which African American adults engaged in direct nonviolent actions (e.g., sitting at segregated lunch counters; attending Sunday services at white churches). Martin Luther King, Jr.



did not feel that Project C was furthering the movement in ways he had hoped, so he mobilized the citizens in Birmingham for a march on Good Friday, April 12. He was jailed during this march and, while in custody, wrote his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” proclaiming why black Americans could not wait quietly for equality to arrive “someday,” in some distant future.<sup>7</sup> King and other civil rights leaders then planned for a children’s march—after long and anguished debates over the possible benefits, risks, and morality of placing children on the front line of civil rights protests.

### **Audrey Faye Hendricks**

Similar to Partridge’s book, Levinson’s book opens with a child’s perspective: nine-year-old Audrey Faye Hendricks tells her mother that she wants to go to jail. Audrey was born into a family of activists who attended mass meetings at her church, and Audrey participated in nonviolence training at a young age. On Thursday, May 2, 1963, Audrey’s parents took her to Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to join the Children’s March. Singing “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round,” the children left the church in a large group and were promptly arrested. Audrey was imprisoned for six days, at which point she was released with approximately 500 other children.

After reading details about Audrey’s reasons for wanting to join in the protest, elementary students will likely relate to her courage and perseverance. With students, the teachers might explore what current civic issues they feel are important.

### Washington (Wash) Booker III

Unlike Audrey Hendricks, Washington Booker III did not attend mass meetings, nor did he participate in nonviolence training. However, his story is also relatable to elementary readers. As a child, Washington (known then as “Wash”) lived with his older sister and his mother. Money was tight, so he delivered milk in order to add to his family’s income. Wash was not a model student; he had been suspended from school, and some days he skipped school altogether. One such day was Monday May 6, 1963. As he made his way to the city park to hang out, he was arrested with many other children and sent to the Jefferson County Jail, where he remained until Friday May 10.

Teachers may ask students to think about Wash’s quote, “We knew that there was something better.” In what ways do students think things will be better in the future? Do young people play a role in things getting better? How?

### James W. Stewart

James’ story exemplifies the life of a middle-class black family in Birmingham. James, like Audrey, attended church meetings, but he was tentative about joining the movement because he thought he’d be tempted to violate the nonviolence pledge (resisting the urge to fight violence with violence). On “D-Day” (May 2), James marched from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and was arrested within a block and a half. (Phrases from World War II, such as “D-Day,” were used as short hand by some of the organizers.) He spent the next four days in jail before his parents provided bail for him and several of his friends. James returned to school, only to find out that he and approximately 1,000 other students were expelled for their participation in the march. Movement lawyers sued the Birmingham Board of Education and won, allowing James and others to return to school.

James’ story is attractive to younger readers because it presents adults and children working together help to facilitate social and political change. In an effort to help students relate to Stewart’s story, teachers might explore whether students have had experience with unjust restrictions. What recourse do young people have today if they think that a rule (in school) or law (in their community) is unjust? What are the steps today that a person can take to persuade others, and to call attention to an apparent injustice? What options are open to a person living in our democracy who wishes to be an agent of change?

### Arnetta Streeter

Arnetta’s story also presents scenes of adults and children working together. She was influenced by two fundamental ideals associated with the movement: direct action and nonviolence. Her parents were active within the movement; when she was just 11 years old, her father suggested that she and her sister integrate the local school. At that time, she was hesitant, but, as she got older, that hesitancy subsided. As a high school student, Arnetta, along with several friends, was a founding

member of the Peace Ponies, a social club inspired by the sermons of King and others. The Peace Ponies participated in nonviolence workshops, and then in several public demonstrations.

Rev. James Bevel, who encouraged children to march, referred to May 3 as “Double D-Day,” the second letter “D” referring to the attack dogs that police sent against some of the marchers. The marchers continued, even under the threat of high-powered water hoses and dogs. On D-Day, Arnetta was in the group marching from the church. She was among the Peace Ponies attacked by police wielding fire hoses. By the end of the day, however, Arnetta had not been arrested.

Arnetta’s actions in the face of adversity may inspire students today. Teachers could ask students about consequences and meaning of these actions (e.g., Was it worth the risks?) and about the qualities of character that were revealed in the marchers (e.g., courage and persistence).

### Motivations and Actions

After students read *We’ve Got a Job*, they can reflect on these four individuals using the strategy, “Somebody / Wanted / But / So” (**Figure 1**). In this activity, students name each of the student activists; then they describe that person’s motivations or goals; next, students explain the conflict or context that made it difficult for that individual to meet those goals; and finally, they identify the personal resolutions and the consequence(s) of his or her actions.<sup>8</sup> The consequences of a person’s actions may be short-term (she was imprisoned for a week) or long-term (the law was changed, and now children of all races go to school together in the United States). Not every protest has the desired result, and large-scale change usually requires persistent efforts by many people. In 1963, there was a national outcry as reports and images from the Birmingham Children’s March began appearing in the newspaper, radio, and television news.

Following the completion of this activity, teachers can lead students in an Idea Circle discussion to develop a better understanding of a concept or concepts.<sup>9</sup> To begin, ask students: “How should we refer to these four people when we speak? By their first or last names?” It seems appropriate to refer to these civil rights activists using their first names—Audrey, Washington, James, and Arnetta—when discussing their actions in 1963 as youth. But if one of these people were to walk into our classroom today, then we would address them as Ms. Hendricks, Mr. Booker, Mr. Stewart, or Ms. Streeter. Letting our thoughts leap across years like this is an interesting exercise. How we refer to people or name them reflects our respect for them and our awareness of the passing of time.

Having settled that prerequisite for the conversation, move on to discussion questions such as: What things do these four individuals have in common? To what extent should we consider Audrey, Wash, James, and Arnetta to be activists—like Dr. King and Ms. Parks? How effective were the actions of these young people? What risks were they taking? What



Figure 1. **A Chart: Somebody / Wanted / But / So**

Somebody	Wanted	But	So
<p><i>Example:</i> Audrey Faye Hendricks was ten years old.</p>	<p>She wanted equal access to education where she lived in Birmingham, Alabama.</p>	<p>She was frustrated by such things as segregated schools, poor community resources, and an adversarial police force.</p>	<p>She joined the Children’s March, was arrested, and spent a week imprisoned in 1963. New civil rights laws were finally passed.</p>

were the consequences of their actions for them personally? For the black community in Birmingham? For the nation as a whole? (Figure 2: Oral History Interviews)

**Teaching about Social Activism**

In both of these books, the authors tell the stories of children who were actively and civically engaged in addressing community problems. The implications of youth’s actions were felt nationally and globally, and still affect our world today. Social activism in the service of justice, undertaken by a variety of community members, even children, is an important topic of study in elementary classrooms. Students are able to identify, explain, and evaluate the actions of others, youth and adults alike, across time and place. As a result, students begin to understand the relationship between past and present and how the actions of committed individuals can have an impact on the larger community (which is a much more expansive conception of “community helpers”).

These books, read independently or in close succession, can enlighten and inspire elementary students as to the power and impact that children, who were not so different from students today, had on the advancement of civil rights in the United States. Elementary students can discover that it was not only Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rose Parks who found and used their power to effect social change, children did, too. And so can we all. 🌍

**Figure 2. Do an Oral History Project**

In the book *We’ve Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children’s March*, four people share their memories of participating in the famous protests in Birmingham, Alabama. Ask your students, “Today, if you were to visit the home of one of those adults who, as a child, participated in a civil rights protest, what question would you ask him or her?” Write down five or six ideas offered by your students.

In fact, we have an opportunity to ask such questions right now, but the opportunity is fading. The civil rights movement occurred in some way in every city and town in America. Even in a community where race relations were quite good, many people were watching the news closely, and some were deciding whether or how to get involved in the larger cause.

Now is the time to interview our elders—who today will be in their sixties or seventies—about how they remember those momentous times, as seen through the eyes of the children they once were. You can contribute to the history of the civil rights era in your community by leading an oral history project with your students. The interview examples in Cynthia Levinson’s book can serve as a model for your efforts. See Kathryn Walbert, “How To Do It: Oral History Projects,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 4 (Pullout: March/April 2004), [www.socialstudies.org/publications/archive](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/archive).

## Youth and the Civil Rights Movement: Recommended Nonfiction Books for Upper Elementary Readers

- Hoose, Phillip M. *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*. New York: Square Fish, 2010.
- Kanefield, Teri. *Tarpaper School: Barbara Rose Johns and the Advent of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Harry N. Abrams 2014.
- Lewis John and Andrew Aydin. *March: Book One*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2013.
- Levine, Ellen S. *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories*. New York: Puffin, 2000.
- Levinson, Cynthia. *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March*. Atlanta, GA: Peachtree Publishers, 2012.
- Partridge, Elizabeth. *Marching for Freedom: Walk Together, Children, and Don't You Grow Weary*. New York: Viking Juvenile, 2009.
- Rochelle, Belinda. *Witnesses to Freedom: Young People Who Fought for Civil Rights*. New York: Puffin, 1993.
- Shelton, Paula Young. *Child of the Civil Rights Movement*. Decorah, IA: Dragonfly Books, 2013.
- Stokes, John A. and Lois Wolfe. *Students on Strike! Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Brown, and Me*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2008.
- Weatherford, Carole Boston. *Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins*. New York: Puffin, 2007.

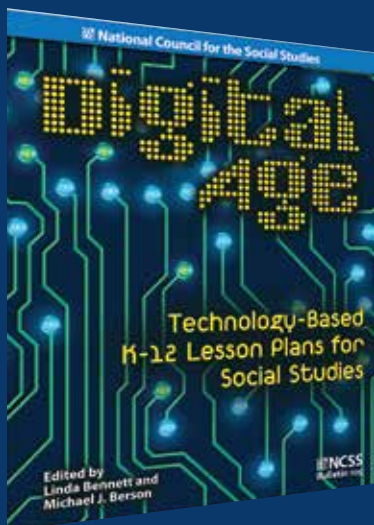
### NOTES

1. Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano, "Famous Americans': The Changing Pantheon of American Heroes," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (March 2008).
2. \_\_\_\_\_, "Who Is a Famous American? Charting Historical Memory across the Generations," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 89, no. 9 (2008): 643-648.
3. Elizabeth Partridge, *Restless Spirit: The Life and Work of Dorothea Lange* (New York: Puffin, 2001); *John Lennon: All I Want is the Truth* (New York: Viking, 2005); *This Land was made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie* (New York: Holt, 2002).
4. Elizabeth Brown and Linda Silvestri, "Grassroots Activists and the Three Branches of Government," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 27, no. 1 (September/October) 2014: 13-18.
5. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
6. Kristy A. Brugar and Kathryn L. Roberts, "Timelines: An Opportunity for Meeting Standards through Textbook Reading," *The Social Studies* 105, no. 5 (2014): 230-236.
7. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963), [www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html).
8. James M Macon, Diane Bewell, and MaryEllen Vogt, *Responses to Literature, Grades K-8* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1991).
9. John T. Guthrie and A. D. McCann, "Idea Circles: Peer Collaborations for Conceptual Learning," in *Lively Discussions! Fostering Engaged Reading*, Linda B. Gambrell and Janice F. Almas, eds. (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1996), 87-105.

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