

# Dear César Chávez:

## Writing Persuasive Letters in the Sixth Grade

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**C**ésar Chávez, who co-founded the United Farm Workers (UFW) with Dolores Huerta in 1962, dedicated his life to grassroots organizing to persuade lawmakers and the public to help improve the working conditions of migrant farm workers. In October 1992, I had been teaching a unit of study on civics to my sixth grade bilingual students in West Sacramento, California, about effects of pesticides on farm workers in the fields and on the environment. Many of my students had family members who were agricultural workers, so the topic was relevant to them. This article describes the writing activity that was part of the civics unit and the events that followed.

### Writing to César Chávez

Earlier that year (1992), Chávez had led vineyard walkouts in the Coachella and San Joaquin valleys. As a result, grape workers won their first industry-wide pay hike in eight years. Workplace safety, however, was an ongoing concern. Chemical pesticides, applied to crops by laborers with hand pumps or “dusted” from airplanes, could poison farm workers and their families if they were not adequately protected.

As we began our unit of study unit, I showed my students news clippings that described how consumers across the state of California had boycotted grapes and lettuce as a way to support the UFW’s efforts. Perhaps because of these news articles, my students expressed an interest in getting actively involved with the cause, *La Causa*. After much deliberation, they decided to write letters directly to Chávez, encouraging him to continue the fight, *la lucha*, and to not give up until conditions had improved. In their letters, they asked Mr. Chávez to write back.

We carried our letters to the local post office and mailed them to the UFW office in Delano, California. This was a powerful civics lesson, as it provided these students with a voice for expressing their emotions and concerns about the rights of oppressed farm workers. It was clear that this issue had a personal meaning for my students.

### Following the News

Months after my students had written their letters, they would ask me if we had received a response from Mr. Chávez. My



answer was always, “No, not yet.” We followed the news, and learned that Chávez was fasting as a way to bring attention to the cause. (About four years earlier, at age 61, Chávez conducted his longest public fast of 36 days in Delano, California, to call attention to farm workers and their children stricken by pesticides.)

Then, on April 23, 1993, César Chávez died (from unspecified natural causes) at the modest home of a retired San Luis, Arizona, farm worker while defending the UFW against a multi-million dollar lawsuit brought against it by a large vegetable grower. My students were saddened by the news, and we assumed that the letters had been misplaced or even discarded. We were wrong.

### Learning Goals

A few years after his death, the César E. Chávez Foundation began to work with the California Department of Education on a César Chávez Model Curriculum, a compilation of resources and standards-based social studies lessons designed for K-12 students.<sup>1</sup> The curriculum was published and, on August 18, 2000, state Senator Richard Polanco was instrumental in passing a law to establish a César Chávez Day of Service and Learning. March 31st of each year would mark César Chávez’s birthday as a holiday in the State of California.

In 2001, as an instructor of preservice teachers, I contacted a local elementary school to inquire whether my pre-service credential students could teach a lesson on the César Chávez Day of Service of Learning. The principal, teachers, and parents

at the school site were open to the suggestion, and, a group of parents volunteered to help in the classroom and to organize an assembly.

In planning for this event, the preservice teachers and I found that each grade-level lesson was supported by the California K-12 History/Social Science Academic Content Standards. For example, the sixth grade lesson “Farming as a Way of Life” called for students to “trace the development of agriculture techniques that permitted the production of economic surplus and the emergence of cities as centers of culture and power.”<sup>2</sup>

### Contributions to a Legacy

Reading the lessons from the website brought back memories of the letters that my sixth grade students had written to Mr. Chávez nine years previously. I told my preservice students about that assignment, and one of them alerted me to one of the resource links at the model curriculum website. To my amazement, the letters that my students had written in 1992 were there. Although Mr. Chávez had not been able to personally reply to these letters, his family and the César E. Chávez Foundation had sent a message—through this website—that these letters were indeed important and valuable for all to read.

### Conclusion

Writing persuasive letters is a powerful tool for getting students engaged in their communities and the world around them. According to the National Assessment Education Program Writing Report Card (2007),<sup>3</sup>

Persuasive writing seeks to influence the reader to take some action or bring about change. It may contain factual information, such as reasons, examples, or comparisons; however, its main purpose is not to inform, but to persuade. The persuasive topics in the writing assessment ask students to write letters to friends, newspaper editors, or prospective employers, as well as to refute arguments or take sides in a debate.

Today I encourage educators and preservice teachers to develop lessons that involve writing letters about civic issues. Writing a letter that carefully states our opinion develops critical thinking and writing skills, informs us about public policy and social change, and empowers us to become active citizens. Plus, as my experience with sixth graders in 1992 showed, the impact of our letter might be felt in ways we never anticipate. 📖

### Notes

1. “César Chávez Model Curriculum” (California Department of Education, 1999), [chavez.cde.ca.gov/ModelCurriculum/Intro.aspx](http://chavez.cde.ca.gov/ModelCurriculum/Intro.aspx). Resources for Teachers includes biographies, essays, audio files, K-12 lesson plans, and documents, including letters written by sixth grade students in 1992 to César Chávez.
2. “National Assessment Education Progress (NAEP) Writing Assessment” (2007), [nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/writing/whatmeasure.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/writing/whatmeasure.asp).
3. “California Department of Education, California English Language Arts K-12 Standards” and “California History/Social Science Academic Content K-12 Standards” (Sacramento, CA, 1998).

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## Children’s Literature about César Chávez and the UFW

Adler, D. A. and Adler, M. S. *A Picture Book of César Chávez*. New York: Holiday House, 2010.

Grades 1–4. This story focuses on Chávez’s life—growing up during the Great Depression, picking produce with his family, and later organizing farm workers into unions for their rights, including fair pay and working conditions. It highlights the posthumous award of the Congressional Medal of Freedom that César Chávez received in 1994. The beautiful illustrations are by Marie Olofsdotter.

Krull, K. *Harvesting Hope: The Story of César Chávez*. New York: Harcourt, 2003.

Grades 1–6. This story emphasizes Chavez’s younger years that inspired him to become an activist for migrant farm workers, organizing the UFW union, while also focusing on the 1965 grape pickers boycott and the 340-mile “La Causa” march that resulted in the first farm workers’ contract. It contains beautiful illustrations by Yuyi Morales.

Cruz, Bárbara. *César Chávez: A Voice for Farmworkers*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow, 2005.

Grades 7–12. This story takes readers from Chávez’s first job as a migrant worker in California at age 10 through his decision to help his fellow workers and subsequent involvement in the UFW until his death in 1993. Black-and-white and full-color photos appear throughout the book.



Bill Gillette/NARA

Young migrant mother with child rests after working in sugar beet field in Fort Collins, Colorado, 1972