

“This is Your Moment—Seize It!”: Barbara Johns, Black Agency, and the Empowerment of Youth

Beau Dickenson and Emma Thacker

On April 23, 1951, a sixteen-year-old student named Barbara Johns called forth a student strike in protest of Jim Crow education at Robert Russa Moton High School in the small, rural town of Farmville in Central Virginia. This act of student-led resistance lasted for two weeks while Johns and fellow strike leaders successfully petitioned the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to take their case. The following month, NAACP attorneys, Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson, filed the case of *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* on behalf of 117 student plaintiffs. Three years later, the Davis case was combined with four other school segregation cases that went before the Supreme Court as *Brown v. Board of Education*. Barbara Johns and her Moton classmates not only represented a unique example of Black agency and youth activism, but these Virginia teenagers accounted for over *three-quarters* of the plaintiffs in the 1954 *Brown* decision. Unfortunately, it took more than half a century before any of these pivotal events appeared in the social studies curriculum of Virginia’s public schools.

This article details how a team of fourth-grade teachers in Rockingham County, Virginia used the Inquiry Design Model (IDM)¹ to deepen student understanding of this particular fight for racial justice in Virginia and reframe their overall approach to Black history in general. Although Rockingham County Schools are about a two-hour drive from Farmville, the Student Strike at R. R. Moton High School is a pivotal chapter of Virginia and U.S. History that should be taught in classrooms across the county. It not only counters many traditional narratives of the civil rights movement, but it also serves as a powerful illustration of how young people can impact the world in which they live. As young citizens, every student can look to Barbara Johns as a vital lesson in agency, empowerment, and resilience.

A Thirteen Year Struggle

As the vanguard of a student-led movement, the Black teen-

agers of Prince Edward County may have taken on one of the most protracted and challenging fights of the civil rights movement by confronting the “Massive Resistance” campaign led by U.S. Senator and former Virginia Governor Harry F. Byrd. In response to *Brown*, Virginia passed new legislation enabling the Governor to close schools that attempted to desegregate, and several schools in Charlottesville, Norfolk, and Warren County were forcibly closed during the fall of 1958 in a callous effort to prevent racial integration. Even when these actions were ruled unconstitutional in January 1959, the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors took the extreme measure of voting to close the entire school system by refusing to allocate funds for its operation that coming fall. Tax dollars were even used to open an all-White private school under the guise of the “Prince Edward Academy” while over 3,000 Black students were categorically denied the right to a free and public education for the next five years. Prince Edward County Public Schools finally reopened on an integrated basis in 1964 after the Supreme Court ruling in *Griffin v. Prince Edward County*.

Barbara Johns, the Moton Student Strike, and the subsequent thirteen-year struggle to equalize education centers Black agency, resistance, and perseverance; Black identities;² and youthful activism against the forces of white supremacy, male patriarchy, and 1950s conformity. Unlike many of the sanitized narratives associated with *Brown v. Board*, Barbara Johns demanded an *equal* school in terms of facility and resources, rather than an integrated one that made equality dependent on Whites. She had first-rate teachers at Moton who provided high-quality instruction, but she was fighting the second-class nature of hand-me-down books and tar paper shacks as overflow classrooms. Her story was not dependent on a white savior or a singular national civil rights leader—these were Black teenagers in the Jim Crow South who had the audacity to advocate for themselves. Speaking about her activism and those events years later, Johns described her unalienable determination by stating,

“There wasn’t any fear. I just thought—this is your moment. Seize it!”³

Tragically, for nearly half a century, most Virginians were ignorant of the Moton Student Strike, its pivotal role in *Brown v. Board*, and the subsequent school closures during Massive Resistance. On July 21, 2008, the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial was unveiled at the Virginia General Assembly in Richmond with a central focus on Barbara Johns and the events and people surrounding the Moton Student Strike. The memorial stands opposite the former site of the Harry F. Byrd statue on the very same grounds that once served as the seat of the Confederate government. On the same day of its unveiling in Richmond, Prince Edward County held a solemn ceremony to illuminate the new “Light of Reconciliation” to shine from atop the County Courthouse in recognition of how the 1959 school closures “shuttered opportunities and barricaded the dreams” of a generation.⁴ In 2013, the former Robert Russa Moton High School was reopened as the newly renovated Moton Museum with its first permanent exhibition, *The Moton School Story: Children of Courage*. Two years later, Barbara Johns and the Moton Student Strike was finally included in the 2015 revision of the Virginia Standards of Learning in a fourth-grade course known as Virginia Studies.



Figure 1. The R. R. Moton High School Auditorium stage where Barbara Johns called forth the Student Strike of 1951.

Reframing Virginia Studies Through Inquiry

While long overdue in terms of expanding the narrative of Virginia history, the 2015 revision of the Standards of Learning was also informed by the publication of the *C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards* by the National Council for the Social Studies.⁵ Much like the C3 Framework, the new Virginia Standards emphasized application, understanding, critical thinking, and skill development. Less explicit in the 2015 Virginia Standards was the “Inquiry Arc” at the center of the C3 Framework. However, timely reforms to Virginia’s assessment model were passed by the state legislature to

replace a number of knowledge-based, multiple-choice tests with local alternative performance-based assessments. This partial shift in Virginia’s assessment model generated a great deal of debate around related reforms in curriculum and instruction as well. The C3 Inquiry Arc and the subsequent Inquiry Design Model (IDM) have provided many school divisions with a framework for rethinking all three facets of the social studies classroom.⁶ IDM not only emphasizes summative performance assessment in the form of written student claims in response to a compelling question, but it also provides an overall framework for designing a viable curriculum that promotes instruction scaffolded for deeper understanding. The IDM structure uses questions, tasks, and sources to organize social studies inquiry for both teachers and students. Students build disciplinary skills and content knowledge as they work with a variety of sources to answer compelling and supporting questions in the inquiry.

For the past year, Rockingham County Public Schools in Harrisonburg, Virginia has partnered with C3 Teachers to work with Dr. Kathy Swan, one of the lead authors of the *C3 Framework*, and Dr. Emma Thacker to provide professional development to social studies teachers focused on the principles and structure of the IDM.⁷ Small groups of curriculum leaders at each grade level were hired to work over summer breaks and throughout the school year to design inquiries that serve as the basis of grade-level Professional Learning Communities across the school division. The implementation of inquiries provided teachers with a common performance-based assessment to assess the depth of student understanding and engaged all teachers in the use of questions, tasks, and sources to scaffold their instruction.⁸

The team of fourth-grade teachers used the IDM to reframe their approach to Black history by teaching through the lens of Black agency, resistance, and perseverance.⁹ The story of Barbara Johns and the Moton Student Strike of 1951 presented the perfect opportunity to reframe the narrative of fourth-grade Virginia Studies in a manner that confronted hard history, emphasizing agency as well as Black identities by centering a Black teenage girl and her classmates. Though separated by over 100 miles, Rockingham County Public Schools has been fortunate to partner with the Moton Museum on several projects, and their educational outreach staff provided invaluable guidance in terms of culturally responsive methods that ensure nuance, understanding, and respect. Given the geographic distance, much of the collaboration on this particular project was accomplished through phone calls and email. Through their work, the fourth-grade IDM team applied components of critical IDM to confront systems of oppression and power, center perspectives of marginalized groups, and focus on alleviating injustice.¹⁰

Supported by C3 Teachers, Beau Dickenson, the K–12 Social Studies Supervisor for Rockingham County Schools, partnered with Dr. Emma Thacker from nearby James

Madison University to work with four fourth-grade teachers from multiple elementary schools within the school division. Beginning in September 2021, they introduced the C3 Framework and the IDM, emphasizing key ideas from *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* and the accompanying workbook to support teachers in both learning about and creating IDMs.¹¹ The IDM serves as both an instructional and design scaffold for teachers and students in social studies inquiries, emphasizing the questions, tasks, and sources necessary for learning and applying social studies content and skills in authentic and important ways.

A Critical IDM: How Do the Actions of Barbara Johns Still Inspire Us Today?

After collaborating throughout Fall 2021 to design a fourth-grade IDM, “Starving Time at Jamestown,” the team continued working to develop another IDM in Spring 2022. Critical IDMs are those with questions that “critique systems of oppression and power,” featured sources that center “perspectives of marginalized and oppressed groups,” and formative and summative “tasks and a Taking Informed Action activity that push students to take tangible steps toward alleviating... injustice,” which we used to guide the design of the Barbara Johns IDM described in this article.¹²

The IDM (summarized in Figure 2) used the Compelling Question—“How do the actions of Barbara Johns still inspire us today?”—and incorporates two of LaGarrett J. King’s principles of Black Historical Consciousness, “power, oppression, and racism,” and “Black agency, resistance, and perseverance.”¹³ In Supporting Question 1—“How did segregation impact Virginians?”—fourth graders learned about Jim Crow Laws and segregation and the ways that the white supremacist responses to Reconstruction affected people in Virginia. Supporting Question 2—“Who was Barbara Johns and what motivated her to take action?”—introduced students to Barbara Johns and her role organizing and leading a student strike against school inequality, the culminating impact of Johns’ activism, and the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In Formative Performance Task 2, students reflect by using diary entries written by Johns, focus on Johns’ perspective(s), and show their understanding of the content of the inquiry.

In Supporting Question 3—“What was the impact of Barbara Johns’ actions in Farmville and beyond?”—students were confronted with the White segregationist response to the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools known as “Massive Resistance.” The formative task helped students realize the connections between anti-Black racism and white supremacy and Black agency, resistance, and perseverance in the events leading up to Barbara Johns’ activism and in Black perseverance throughout Massive Resistance up through present day. In the Summative Performance Task,

students engaged with Barbara Johns’ surviving sister, Joan Johns Cobbs, by writing and sending letters to her about the ways they are inspired by Johns. Finally, students connected to current civil rights issues in the taking informed action task in which they create an action plan to alleviate injustice today.

A Glimpse Inside the Classroom

The power of an IDM is that it frames curriculum around a compelling question in which learning activities are backwards-designed in order to scaffold student understanding. A well-crafted compelling question engages learners while also informing the summative assessment where students demonstrate their depth of understanding. This IDM directly connected student lives to historic events by asking, “How do the actions of Barbara Johns still inspire us today?” Teachers felt that this inquiry was particularly authentic because it centered lessons about the fight for racial justice on the real actions taken by a fellow Virginia student and connected those actions to the world in which students live. These benefits were greatly enhanced by the opportunity for students to articulate their feelings in the form of a friendly letter written to Joan Johns Cobbs—a *Brown* plaintiff, a Moton Student Striker, and the younger sister of the late Barbara Johns.

The unique opportunity to write to such an authentic audience made this inquiry come to life for students in a powerful and meaningful way. The letters to Mrs. Johns Cobbs demonstrated a considerable depth of knowledge and understanding regarding these pivotal events, but the student expressions of admiration revealed a deep emotional reaction to racial injustice that conveyed empathy and mindfulness. For example, one student wrote: “[Barbara Johns] was bold because she had the courage to stand up when she felt that her school system was unequal... despite the harm that could’ve been caused to her or her family.” In speaking about the gravity of the Student Strike, another student wrote candidly, “I don’t think I could have done that. It was a very brave thing to do. She influenced me to speak out more because it made a big change in millions of people’s lives.” Another student identified with discrimination and personally testified about her own experiences: “being [H]ispanic has been hard because people treat me different[ly]. Barbara Johns showed me that I matter.” Speaking to the agency and empowerment inherent to the Student Strike, another wrote, “[it] made me feel like I can change things no matter what age. I can try to change things I think [are] not right. It makes me think I have a voice... Barbara Johns was brave, and I want to be just like her” (additional examples in Figure 4).

Most importantly, the letter to Mrs. Johns Cobbs gave students and teachers the opportunity to express their gratitude as Americans and rightfully honor the legacy of Barbara

Johns and her Moton classmates. This sentiment was captured best in one student’s closing salutation: “Thank you for changing the world.”

Conclusions & Connections

Rockingham County Public Schools was fortunate to have had so many valuable partners to support this important endeavor, but it did not happen by accident. School leaders and teachers

interested in building local capacity and inquiries can take lessons from what worked in this example: district support, quality professional development, meaningful partnerships, and a passionate team of fourth-grade teachers. Crucial to the successful design and implementation of this particular inquiry, as well as others throughout the K–12 social studies curriculum, was Beau Dickenson’s vision and leadership. He advocated for district funding and support for social studies

Figure 2. Summary of IDM. Readers can download a copy of the Barbara Johns IDM by visiting <https://tinyurl.com/barbarajohns-IDM>.

Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Blueprint™		
Compelling Question	How do the actions of Barbara Johns still inspire us today?	
Standards and Practices	<p>VA SOL VS.8.b: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the reconstruction of Virginia following the Civil War by (b) identifying the effects of segregation and “Jim Crow” on life in Virginia for American Indians, whites, and African Americans.</p> <p>VA SOL VS.9c: The student will demonstrate an understanding of Virginia during the twentieth century and beyond by (c) describing the social and political events in Virginia linked to desegregation and Massive Resistance and their relationship to national history.</p>	
Staging the Question	Guide students to analyze and infer from a primary source photograph of student plaintiffs in <i>Davis v. Prince Edward County, VA</i>	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3
How did segregation impact Virginians?	Who was Barbara Johns and what motivated her to take action?	What was the impact of Barbara Johns’ actions in Farmville and beyond?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Using sentence frames, students describe evidence of segregation or integration in historical photographs.	Students select an excerpt from Johns’ diary and illustrate it.	Students complete a cause-and-effect organizer to connect progress and regress in civil rights events from Emancipation through eventual school integration.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
<p>Source A: Teacher created slide show including excerpts of 13th–15th amendments, primary source photographs of segregation and Jim Crow laws, and primary source photographs of Black activism in the civil rights movement such as sit-ins, marches, and boycotts.</p> <p>Source B: <i>Granddaddy’s Turn: A Journey to the Ballot Box</i>, by Michael S. Bandy and Eric Stein, illustrated by James E. Ransome (Candlewick Press, 2015)</p>	<p>Source A: Teacher-created slideshow featuring images of segregated school buildings, from the PBS <i>The Supreme Court</i> documentary highlighting <i>Brown v. Board</i>.</p> <p>Source B: Images of student strike posters from Farmville, VA</p> <p>Source C: Excerpts from Barbara Johns’ diary</p>	Teacher-created slideshow including primary source photographs showing both Massive Resistance and Black-led opposition to it as well as an image of a memorial to Barbara Johns at the Virginia Capitol.
Summative Performance Task	Argument	<i>How do the actions of Barbara Johns still inspire us today?</i> Write a friendly letter to Mrs. Johns Cobbs explaining how the actions of her late sister, Barbara Johns, inspire us and impact our decision-making process today. Include relevant evidence from Barbara Johns’ story that supports your argument.
	Extension	Create a video compilation including students reading different portions of their letters to Mrs. Johns Cobbs and edit it together in a video that is five minutes or less.
Taking Informed Action	<p>Understand: Investigate another issue involving civil rights today.</p> <p>Assess: Consider multiple perspectives associated with the issue by exploring how various marginalized people were/are impacted by unequal treatment and injustices in this issue.</p> <p>Act: Use your knowledge of Barbara Johns to create an action plan to address the issue.</p>	

inquiry work and then reached out to C3 Teachers to guide teacher professional learning around the C3 Framework and IDM. As readers likely know, curricular change cannot occur without teacher willingness and readiness, and the district support to engage in this work was instrumental.

Obtaining district funding and time to provide quality professional development led by outside experts was essential to this project. The professional development provided by Dr. Swan and Dr. Thacker enabled the school division to truly rethink social studies curriculum, instruction, and assessment by using the principles and structure of the IDM. These best practices also supported the desire to reframe the narrative of Virginia Studies and the overall approach to teaching Black history through Black voices and lived experiences, challenging the over-simplified narratives of previous curriculum. The partnership with the Moton Museum not only inspired the focus on Barbara Johns and the 1951 Student Strike, but working with museum educators helped the school division approach this pivotal chapter of Virginia history through the principles of Black Historical Consciousness to ensure that lessons were culturally sustaining and liberatory. Together, all of these factors provided needed resources and support for teachers to design and implement the Barbara Johns inquiry with their fourth graders. While they were particularly fortunate to connect with Mrs. Johns Cobbs individually, other implementations could connect students with the mission of the Moton Museum and the Johns' legacy. We encourage readers to seek out these types of institutional and individual partnerships to create meaningful taking informed action for their local historical inquiries.

The student letters may have served as the summative assessment and demonstrated knowledge and understanding, but they also provided powerful evidence to validate the innovative work of teachers in designing an authentic learning experience in Black history. Perhaps the greatest affirmation was the mutual impact that this learning experience had on the respective sides of the writing assignment—students were able to connect their lives to historic events and express their feelings about past and present injustices, and Mrs. Johns Cobbs responded through a personal video message where she described her reaction to what the students had written to her. The students will carry her message into their lives as young citizens, and we find it most fitting to close with an excerpt of her words of wisdom and inspiration as they speak to us all:

Thank you for all of your letters that you sent to me. I read all of them, and as I read your letters, my eyes began to tear up because I felt that you all were so sincere and meant what you said. What I like most about your letters is the fact that you wrote them from your heart. You expressed that because of Barbara's actions, it inspired you all to be brave and to stand up for what you all believe. Many of

you said that you would speak out against bullying which makes me feel so proud since I was a victim of bullying when I was in high school. Some of you said you would treat others the way you would like to be treated, regardless of race—that really made me feel good. Just remember, that one person can make a difference in this world—just as Barbara did. You all are the future of our country, and we are counting on you all to do what you can to make our country better.¹⁴ ■

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Janna Grandle, Carrie Lillard, Miranda Lyle, and Allison Mendenhall of Rockingham County Public Schools for their hard work in designing this inquiry. We are also thankful for our partnership with the Moton Museum through Cameron Patterson, Cainan Townsend, and Leah Brown. We are especially honored to have Moton Student Striker and *Brown* Plaintiff, Mrs. Joan Johns Cobbs, personally involved in this project and engaged with the students who participated in this powerful learning experience.



Courtesy of Beau Dickenson

Figure 3. Joan Johns Cobbs (center) and Joy Cabarrus Speakes (center left) joining a field trip at the Moton Museum and First Baptist Church.

Figure 4.

She was brave because she stood up for what was right for her and her school. She influenced me to be against bullying because she didn't just stand up for herself but for all people of color.

She influenced me to never give up because even when things are going bad you can change them with hard working. Also, to always try to reach my goals no matter how hard is it. I am going to keep going and trying because she teach me that you have to work hard. If you really want to reach your goals and also that nothing in this life is easy.

Notes

1. S. G. Grant, John Lee, and Kathy Swan, *The Inquiry Design Model*, C3 Teachers, 2014, www.c3teachers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/IDM_Assumptions_C3-Brief.pdf.
2. LaGarrett J. King, “Black History Is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness,” *Social Education* 84, no. 6 (2020): 335–341.
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9. King, “Black History Is Not American History.”
10. Ryan M. Crowley and LaGarrett J. King, “Making Inquiry Critical: Examining Power and Inequity in the Classroom,” *Social Education* 82, no. 1 (2018): 14–17.
11. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S. G. Grant, *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies & C3 Teachers, 2018); S. G. Grant, Kathy Swan, and John Lee, *Inquiry Design Model: The Workbook* (C3 Teachers, 2018).
12. Crowley and King “Making Inquiry Critical,” 16.
13. King, “Black History Is Not American History,” 337–338.
14. J. Johns Cobbs, personal communication, June 18, 2022.

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Seizing Her Moment—The Life of Barbara Johns

Barbara Johns was a sixteen-year-old junior when she called forth the Student Strike at R. R. Moton High School. The energy and emotion in that overcrowded high school auditorium captured the feelings of generations, and her words inspired a group of Black students in rural Virginia to stand and be counted. As fellow student Willie Shepperson recalled, “She put into words what I had been feeling. Words that I didn’t know how to say—perhaps afraid to say them...because of the repercussions that might occur.”¹

The repercussions inevitably came, but this generation of young people demonstrated agency and resistance in confronting them. Barbara knew that subsequent action was necessary in order to sustain what she and her classmates had sparked. Indeed, Barbara and her family had been advocating for equitable education in yearly petitions before the Prince Edward County School Board, and she had a keen understanding of the work needed to bring about substantive change. In the immediate wake of the Student Strike, Barbara led a delegation of Student Strikers in taking their demands to the White school superintendent, she sought the counsel of Reverend L. Francis Griffin who also served as the president of the local chapter of the NAACP, and she appealed directly to NAACP attorneys Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson and convinced them to take the Moton case in spite of their initial hesitation. Robinson recalled, “They handled themselves so well and their morale was so high that we didn’t have the heart to say no.”² Exactly one month after the Student Strike, Hill and Robinson filed the case of *Davis v. Prince Edward County* on behalf of 117 Moton students.

The White response was somewhat muted initially, and the *Farmville Herald* dismissed the Student Strike as “mass hookie.”³ However, Whites were shocked when over 1,000 Black citizens attended the NAACP mass meeting held at Griffin’s First Baptist

Church on May 3, 1951. Three days later, a cross was burned on the grounds of R. R. Moton High School and other acts of harassment began circulating. Fearing for Barbara’s safety, her parents sent her to live with her Uncle Vernon in Montgomery, Alabama for her senior year of high school. The Reverend Vernon Johns was the well-known and outspoken pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where he served as the predecessor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Barbara went on to attend Spelman College in Atlanta after graduating from Alabama State Preparatory High School in Montgomery. She met Rowland Powell, who worked in the summers on a nearby farm. They married and moved to Philadelphia, where Rowland followed his father into the Baptist ministry. Barbara later graduated from Drexel University in Philadelphia with her BA in Library Science. A lifelong advocate for education, Mrs. Johns Powell served the Philadelphia public schools as a librarian for the next twenty years before illness forced her to retire. A mother of five children, Barbara Johns Powell tragically succumbed to bone cancer on September 25, 1991, at the age of fifty-six.⁴

Readers are encouraged to explore the full story at the Moton Museum’s companion website: motonschoolstory.org

Notes

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4. Margaret Edds, “Barbara Rose Johns Powell,” in *Encyclopedia Virginia* (January 7, 2022), para. 12, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/barbara-rose-johns-powell>.