

# The Montgomery Bus Boycott: Utilizing Primary Sources and Identifying Multiple Perspectives

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Each February, elementary students are engaged in social studies lessons related to Black History Month. Often, these lessons center on famous individuals or events surrounding the civil rights movement, specifically Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks. Planning and teaching meaningful, in-depth lessons about this history can be challenging. Lessons may fail to address the complex and difficult contexts surrounding individuals and events.<sup>1</sup> There are also more generalized challenges that teachers may have to overcome: the marginalization of social studies in many elementary schools;<sup>2</sup> insufficient background knowledge,<sup>3</sup> and racial differences between teachers and students in the classroom.<sup>4</sup> Although the diversity of American elementary school students continues to increase, teachers remain predominantly white, female, and middle class.<sup>5</sup>

As these trends are projected to continue, it will become increasingly important for teachers to meaningfully engage students who are different from them, to discuss difficult topics such as race relations and civil rights from a variety of perspectives. NCSS,<sup>6</sup> the Common Core State Standards Initiative,<sup>7</sup> and the National Center for History in the Schools<sup>8</sup> all advocate engaging students in historical thinking through the construction and interpretation of historical events. One means of accomplishing this is through the use of primary sources, which exposes students to multiple perspectives and requires them to interpret and think critically about historical events.<sup>9</sup>

## Laying the Groundwork for the Lesson

Megan Speaker, a pre-service teacher, worked with a class of fifth grade students in a rural central-Alabama school in a primary source-based lesson about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The essential question that guided Megan's lesson was: How did the perspectives of Montgomery's citizens affect the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott? Her lesson was designed to meet NCSS Standard ● **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**<sup>10</sup> and the Historical Thinking Standards 3 (Historical Analysis and Interpretation)<sup>11</sup> and 4 (Historical Research) as well as the Common Core Standards<sup>12</sup> (Reading Standards for Informational Texts), and College, Career, and Civic Life Standards.<sup>13</sup> These sets of standards emphasize the consideration of multiple perspectives and utilization of primary sources.

Megan's fifth grade class was racially diverse and had nearly



Political Cartoon by Laura Gray, in *The Militant*, 1956 (Courtesy Holt Labor Library)

equal numbers of boys and girls. Almost half received free or reduced lunches.<sup>14</sup> They had varied reading abilities, and little prior experience working with primary sources.

To guide her students in considering multiple perspectives surrounding the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Megan utilized the picture book, *Boycott Blues*,<sup>15</sup> as well as a variety of primary sources such as political cartoons, newspaper articles, and an oral history interview. She selected age-appropriate sources from the Alabama Department of Archives and History, the Encyclopedia of Alabama, the National Archives, and Library of Congress



Arrest photo of JoAnn Robinson during the Bus Boycott, 1955–56  
(Courtesy Montgomery Advertiser)

as listed in Teacher Resources below. Megan selected primary sources to represent the differing views of white residents of Montgomery, Alabama, as well as multiple perspectives of African Americans at that time.

### A Taste of Discrimination

To begin the lesson, Megan discussed primary and secondary sources and defined “boycott.” During the discussion, she handed each student a red or green card. Students who had received green cards were given a prize (a small eraser). Students with red cards began to complain about not receiving a prize. One student said, “It’s not fair that only people with green cards got a prize.” Megan guided the discussion asking, “How did it feel when you learned that the students with a green card were going to be given an eraser?” A boy in the class said that he felt that Megan liked the students with green cards better. Then Megan asked, “Do you feel you were treated differently because of your card?” Most students who held red cards said they felt it was unfair. Why do you or don’t you feel it was fair for only some students to receive the prize?” A girl responded, “It was like we were being discriminated against just because we had these red cards.”<sup>16</sup>

### Evidence from the Era

After probing students’ feelings and thoughts on discrimination, Megan explained to the class, that they were going to examine

an example of discrimination that occurred in their state, the Jim Crow Laws in Alabama during the 1950s. (See the Teaching Resources section at the end of the paper for citations to these resources.) Students were introduced to the Montgomery City Codes regarding bus segregation. Students discussed specific items in the City Code such as Section 10 which states “Every person operating a bus line in the city shall provide equal but separate accommodations for white people and negroes on his buses...”<sup>17</sup> After reading the codes as a class, students examined primary source documents surrounding the arrest of Rosa Parks. The class examined Rosa Parks’ arrest photo, as well as a schematic of the bus, noting where Rosa Parks was sitting. Students discussed similarities and differences between the City Codes, the arrest records, and the bus schematic. Interestingly, several students indicated that they thought that Mrs. Parks was sitting in the front of the bus and were unaware that she was actually in the section designated for African Americans, and had been asked to yield her seat for a white passenger. To dispel the often held “myth” that Rosa Parks was just a quiet seamstress, the teacher can inform students that Rosa Parks was one of the first women in Montgomery to join the NAACP, that she served as the organization’s secretary for many years, and that she was well known in the African American community for her opposition to segregation. This information presents a more historically accurate account (see Note 1). Adding a book such as *Rosa Parks* by Maryann Weidt along with *Boycott Blues* would also provide students with a more balanced view.<sup>18</sup>

Megan presented a slide show that introduced key leaders of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The slide show included information on E. D. Nixon and his role with the NAACP, as well as on Jo Ann Robinson, and the president of the Women’s Political Council. Students read a copy of an original leaflet, “Don’t Ride the Buses,” announcing the bus boycott. Megan presented historical photographs and challenged students to consider the perspectives of those participating in the boycott. She asked, “What is happening in this photo? What are the emotions of the faces on the people in the pictures?” One student said that some people didn’t look happy to be walking. Another commented, “Yeah, especially in the rain.” Students talked about whether they would be willing to walk to school for a year, considering the distance to be traveled, the weather, as well as how they might cope if asked to participate in a boycott.

As Megan continued with the slide show, students learned of the Montgomery Improvement Association and its newly elected leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One student commented, “Wow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sure looks young.” Through the slide show, Megan highlighted the results of *Browder v. Gayle*, a federal court case challenging bus segregation. The U.S. District Court ruled on June 5, 1956 that segregation was unconstitutional on Alabama’s buses, and, five months later, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the decision. The slide show concluded with students watching original video footage of people participating in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.



The bus upon which Rosa Parks was arrested in 1955 (Courtesy Henry Ford Museum)

## Teaching Resources

A paid advertisement, “To the Montgomery Public,” signed by “The Negro Ministers of Montgomery and Their Congregations,” appeared in the *Sunday Advertiser and Alabama Journal* (December 25, 1955). Search on the ad’s title at the website of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, [kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/about-papers-project](http://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/about-papers-project).

Historical photographs and documents can be found by searching on “Montgomery Bus Boycott” at the Encyclopedia of Alabama at [www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Home.jsp](http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Home.jsp) and at the Alabama Department of Archives and History (which also has lesson plans) at [www.archives.alabama.gov/teacher/rights.html](http://www.archives.alabama.gov/teacher/rights.html).

Historical photograph of Rev. Robert Graetz (a white minister of a black congregation in Montgomery, Alabama) with black civil rights leaders, [www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/lewo-012](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/photocredit/achievers/lewo-012).

An “American Freedom Stories” interview with the elderly Rev. Graetz can be found at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX8qYu7GdU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX8qYu7GdU). See also biographies and videos at [www.montgomeryboycott.com](http://www.montgomeryboycott.com).

A political cartoon, “Uh Uh, I’m Not Going Your Way?” by Laura Gray (1956), can be found (scroll down) at the Holt Labor Library at [www.holtlaborlibrary.org/BusBoycott.htm](http://www.holtlaborlibrary.org/BusBoycott.htm).

A political cartoon, “Tote dat barge! Lift dat boycott! Ride dat bus!” by Herbert Block can be found at the Library of Congress at [www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hlb/item/00652205](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/hlb/item/00652205). We enlarged it for classroom use, but a high-resolution image is available only at the Library of Congress in Washington DC.



## Examining in Depth

After students had worked with primary sources as a class, Megan divided the students into six heterogeneous groups to examine several additional primary sources that represented different perspectives on the boycott. Each group was given one primary source and an accompanying task card with questions suggested by the Library of Congress for primary source analysis. As students worked in their small groups, Megan circulated among the groups, asking probing questions to help students think more deeply about their primary source.

Two groups examined political cartoons: one depicting an African American unwilling to get on a bus with a destination of “Segregation” and a second cartoon by Herblock (Herbert Block), showing a white man who appears very frustrated when an African American walks past a bus stop. Students were asked to observe and analyze the pieces, utilizing the task card questions. Students described the objects and people that were shown, how any words related to the cartoon, and any other details that they noticed. After making these initial observations, students tried to determine what was happening in the cartoon, as well as its intended audience. They grappled with the issues portrayed in the cartoon and were asked to determine the artist’s opinion.

Students who examined the bus cartoon immediately commented on the word, “Segregation,” as the destination for the bus. After a few minutes of discussion, they verbalized that the man not getting on the bus meant that he was against segregation. Megan asked the group if this cartoon showed that the man was standing up against segregation. The students felt that it did. The students were asked to consider if and what role the boycott played in the struggle to end segregation. Students also noted that the intended audience of the cartoon was African Americans and that supporters of segregation would probably not agree with the cartoon’s message.

Students who examined the Herblock cartoon indicated that they felt that the white man in the cartoon seemed frustrated that the African American man was not riding the bus. Megan asked students to consider why the man might be frustrated. One student said that he thought that the white owners of the bus companies were losing money due to the boycott. A girl in the group said that maybe the white man was frustrated because he couldn’t tell the African American man that he had to ride the bus. Megan asked why this might be important. The students thought for a few minutes and articulated that maybe the whites

were afraid that the African Americans would get equal rights or take over things that had been controlled by whites. They talked about how that might make some people mad, but that other white people might think that was fair.

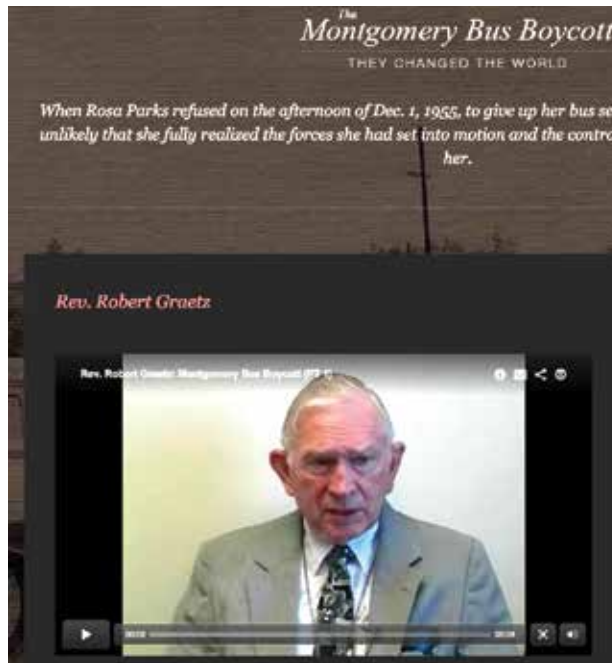
## Grappling with Complexities

By facilitating a conversation within the group, Megan helped students consider the nuances of the political cartoons and develop a deeper understanding of the ways that the Montgomery Bus Boycott affected the whole population of Montgomery. The students extended the discussion by commenting on how

different things are today from the 1950s and that some people are still prejudiced even though there is legal equality. Although Megan ended her discussion with the group at this time, in a subsequent lesson, students could be introduced to the idea that there are structural barriers to equality that continue to exist today (e.g., discrimination in housing patterns, banking practices, criminal penalties, etc.), disproportionately affecting the African American community.

In their work with a written document, Megan asked students to determine when a piece was published, the purpose of the text, the intended audience, what evidence in the document helped determine why it was written, and

what students could learn by examining the piece. Students examined three newspaper articles that were published in the Montgomery Advertiser during December 1955 and January 1956. These articles described the bombing of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s home, a letter by the Negro Ministries of Montgomery to the citizens of the city describing the grievances of African Americans that led to the boycott against the Montgomery City Lines, and a meeting of 5,000 African Americans who decided to continue the boycott and the reasons behind their decision. In their discussion of the article that discussed the bombing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s home, students commented that the person who threw the bomb might be angry at Dr. King and thought to scare him enough to stop the boycott. Students discussed the letter to the Montgomery public, concluding that its African American authors were trying to explain why they were upset with the bus line. One student said, “I think they might have been trying to get white people to join them.” Another said, “Yeah, or maybe they just want them to not be mad and see that segregation is unfair.” Students expressed similar views about the article describing the mass meeting; it seemed important to African Americans in Montgomery that



Video at [www.montgomeryboycott.com](http://www.montgomeryboycott.com)

whites understood why they were boycotting the bus lines. Students were unsure if the news articles convinced whites to support the boycott, or made them angrier.

A final group viewed a video clip of an interview with Robert Graetz, a white pastor of an African American church in Montgomery who supported the boycott (See p. 29). The group was tasked with determining who was being interviewed, his occupation, and why they thought he did or did not play a significant role in the civil rights movement. Students were stunned that an African American congregation had a white minister. One student commented, “I didn’t think any white people would support the boycott.” One student said, “I didn’t think whites would support the boycott because their buses would lose money.” Clearly, there was a range of opinion among whites in Montgomery, even if a majority opposed the boycott.

### To Evaluating Student Learning

After students completed the group work with their primary document, Megan asked them to share what they had learned with the class. Other students asked questions and related the information to their own primary source. Returning to the essential question, Megan asked the class (based on the slide show, the primary sources they examined, and their conversations), What perspectives African Americans in Montgomery might have had about the boycott. Several students said that the African Americans supported it. One student said, “I think some might not have supported it because they got tired of walking.” When asked how the whites in Montgomery viewed the boycott, students related that most whites were against it, and some were angry. Having viewed the video about Robert Graetz, one student countered this, stating, “Some whites supported it and helped the African Americans.” The class agreed that the Montgomery Bus Boycott was effective in helping to end segregation on buses and they all would have supported it. Megan asked students to create a “historical poster” supporting the Montgomery Bus Boycott using facts as their source of material in the ad. The resulting posters showed that most of the students were able to identify at least one reason why African Americans supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott. More important, students were able to articulate that individuals within the different racial groups had varying opinions regarding segregation and the boycott. They realized that not all African Americans supported the boycott, as well as that some whites were allies in the struggle for civil rights, actively supporting the boycott and an end to segregation. Most importantly, solidarity within the black community was strong enough to sustain the boycott for nearly 13 months, until success was achieved and Montgomery city busses were desegregated.

### Conclusion

Megan’s lesson reminds us that topics such as the civil rights movement are complex issues with stakeholders having multiple perspectives on the same event. She provided students with in-depth background information and challenged them to

analyze primary sources to interpret the multiple perspectives that Montgomery residents held about the bus boycott. If we are to engage students in historical thinking, we must not be afraid to address the complex and difficult topics that comprise American history. To reduce history to a simple narrative is to do our students an injustice. ●

### Notes

1. Herbert Kohl, “The Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott Revisited,” *Paths to Learning* no. 21 (Summer 2004): 11-23.
2. Tina Heafner and Paul Fitchett, “Tipping the Scales: National Trends of Declining Social Studies Instructional Time in Elementary Schools,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 36, no.2 (2012) 190-215; Philip VanFossen, “Reading and Math Take So Much of the Time...: An Overview of Social Studies Instruction in Elementary Classrooms in Indiana,” *Social Education* 91, no. 6 (2005) 244-253.
3. Gary Stager, “The Truth Shall Set You Free,” *District Administration* 43 no. 2 (2007) 62-63.
4. Beverly Tatum, “It’s Not So Black and White,” *Instructor-Primary* 28 no. 5 (1999) 29.
5. National Center for Educational Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics* (2013), [nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13\\_209.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_209.20.asp).
6. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2010).
7. Common Core State Standards Initiative, *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects* (2012), [www.corestandards.org/the-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards).
8. National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles, CA: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996).
9. Stuart Foster and Charles Padgett, “Authentic Historical Inquiry in the Social Studies Classroom,” *Clearing House* 72, no. 6 (1990) 357-363; Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).
10. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
11. National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History* (Los Angeles, CA: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996).
12. Common Core State Standards Initiative, *Common Core Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects* (2012), Items 6 and 7 are particularly relevant, [www.corestandards.org/the-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards).
13. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013). Items in Dimension 2 for History (Perspectives and Historical Sources and Evidence) are particularly relevant.
14. State of Alabama Department of Education, *Free Reduced Percentages School Year 2013-2014* (Montgomery, AL: State of Alabama Department of Education, 2014).
15. Andrea Pinkney, *Boycott Blues: How Rosa Parks Inspired a Nation* (New York, NY: Greenwillow, 2008).
16. Elliott, Jane. *The Eye of the Storm* (film, 1970) as excerpted in the Emmy winning 1985 documentary *A Class Divided*, free at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/etc/view.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/etc/view.html).
17. Montgomery City Codes, [www.archives.state.al.us/teacher/rights/lesson1/doc1.html](http://www.archives.state.al.us/teacher/rights/lesson1/doc1.html)
18. Maryann N. Weidt, *Rose Parks* (Minneapolis, MN: Lerner, 2003).

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