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"We Are All Birmingham": Fourth Graders' Inquiry into an Oft-Racialized City and Its Suburbs

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One of the major contemporary topics in education is teaching issues of race in K–12 social studies classrooms. Over the last several years, at least 35 states have passed or proposed legislation to prohibit or restrict conversations about race in K–12 schools. Most supporters of this legislation argue that teachers are indoctrinating students and making white students feel shame about America's racist past.[1] The aims of these lawmakers do not align with the charge of social studies teachers for several reasons. First, the most obvious reason is that social studies teachers are tasked with teaching issues of race that appear in many of their state standards. More importantly, though, preparing students to be future democratic citizens has been a central purpose of the social studies movement over the last century.[2] One of the central components of being a democratic citizen is the ability to work within a racially diverse country like the United States.[3] It is also important to help students grasp how specific threads of U.S. history are connected to issues of race. This can be seen with the creation of many suburban school systems in cities across the United States.

American suburban school systems over the last half century have allowed segregation to persist. Not all white citizens positively heralded the changes to U.S. society caused by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Many suburban schools were often created under the auspices of local control. The affluence required to live in these communities has acted as a barrier to keep minorities and poor whites out and to perpetuate the existing status quo. Therefore, the suburban school system is an ideal topic to explore the intersection of issues of race and public policies in U.S. society. The construction of many suburban school systems is an example of how white legislatures and citizens on the local level employed the levers of government power in the 1960s and 1970s to preserve separate schools for white and Black children.

Many educators know that many suburban school systems were created to preserve segregation. This is an uncomfortable truth, and like many issues of race, it is deemed by some too controversial to discuss. Elementary social studies teachers need to prepare their students to be future democratic citizens by discussing the vestiges of America's racist past. The creation of suburban school systems to perpetuate segregation can be especially seen in Birmingham, Alabama, which earned the dubious designation of "Most Segregated City in America."[4] In this article, we discuss a seven-day project in a suburban school system within the Birmingham metropolitan area where fourth graders researched the creation of local suburban school systems in a civil rights context.

Birmingham Children's March

The Birmingham Children's March is central to our project. This non-violent protest by African American children was designed to draw attention to the injustices of Jim Crow segregation laws in Birmingham. It occurred on May 2–3, 1963.[5]

Under Bull Connor's leadership, police officers arrested hundreds of children on May 2, 1963, and the protest continued on May 3, 1963. Violence occurred on May 3 that changed everything. Police officers turned dogs loose to attack these children, sprayed them with extreme water pressure from fire hydrants, and shot tear gas canisters to disperse them. Still and moving images of innocent children assaulted in such ways evoked attention and outrage. Birmingham slowly eliminated segregation laws. President Kennedy started a bill that President Johnson would later sign into law as the 1964 Civil Rights Act. All these sweeping changes were set in

motion in part by the courage of adolescents who participated in the Birmingham Children's March.[6]

Impetus for the Seven-Day Project

Dr. Clabough was contacted by Emily Blackstock, who teaches at a suburban school in the Birmingham metropolitan area, to help design this project. She was bothered by how her students did not know the prominence of Birmingham in the civil rights movement and how their city's history connected to the national movement. The project was designed to help address these gaps in students' knowledge.

Drs. Clabough and Bickford pulled primary sources from several digital depositories such as the Library of Congress, National Archives, and Alabama Department of Archives and History. Additionally, Dr. Clabough used newspapers.com to find stories about the two-school merger attempts from local newspapers, *The Birmingham Post-Herald* and *The Birmingham News*. Drs. Clabough and Bickford designed a rough draft of the seven-day project, which was revised based on Emily Blackstock's feedback.

Teaching Difficult History and Connecting Our Project to the C3 Framework

Our project connects to best teaching practices advocated for by social studies education scholars for teaching difficult history. Difficult history refers to traumatic, sensitive, and/or violent topics within a nation that cause it to question its identity.[7] For example, slavery and Jim Crow segregation laws are an affront to the democratic principles and individual freedoms enshrined in the U.S. Constitution; however, these topics are still a part of race relations in U.S. history. Studying difficult histories helps students to contextualize issues within a historical epoch.[8] Students may experience cognitive dissonance by researching topics where their country has fallen short. However, with meaningful classroom activities, the cognitive dissonance that students experience has the potential to help prepare them as future democratic citizens to address lingering issues from the past.[9]

With an emphasis on difficult history and a focus on place and home, our project took into account the social and cultural values of students' community. Their understanding of place and home contributes to their identity development.[10] We designed a seven-day project for fourth graders to research civil rights issues in their city's history. This unit connects curriculum content to the children's personal histories. The compelling question that drove our project was, *How can students commemorate the civil rights history of their city?* Our project connects to fourth-grade Alabama standard 14 about understanding Alabama's role in the civil rights movement of the 1960s.[11] Our project also connects to the civics, geography, and history indicators from the C3 Framework (see Figure 1). Our hope was for these fourth graders to grasp civil rights issues that occurred in their own backyard.

Day One: Building Students' Analysis Skills with Primary Sources

This seven-day project occurred at a fourth-grade class in the Birmingham metropolitan area. Emily Blackstock coupled Reading and Writing classes (45 minutes each) around this inquiry. On the first day of the project, students worked to interpret primary sources and answer analysis prompts. To gain background about major state and national civil rights events of the 1950s and 1960s, students examined historical documents about the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington during the first 45-minute block and the Birmingham Children's March during the second 45-minute block. (See this issue's pullout for some example primary sources and analysis prompts used on day one.) By including primary sources of these three events, students grasped how their city's and state's histories connect to the nation's.[12] As accessible sources enable students to make sense of the past, all teachers can look locally for guided inquiry topics.

Day Two: Building Students' Background Knowledge about the Children's March

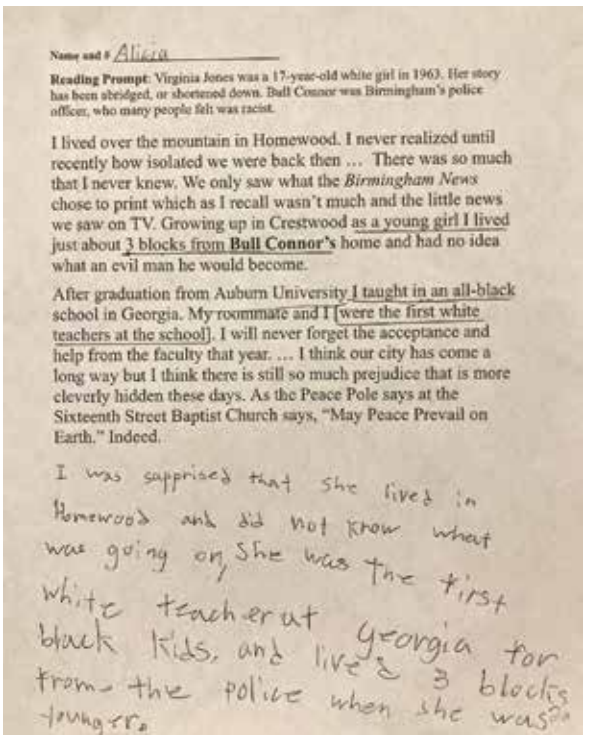
On day two, students built background knowledge about the Birmingham Children's March. Students read short excerpts from Virginia Jones's oral history about Birmingham and civil

Figure 1. **Indicators from the C3 Framework Connected to Our Project**

D2.Civ.13.3-5.	Explain how policies are developed to address public problems.
D2.Civ.14.3-5.	Illustrate historical and contemporary means of changing society.
D2.Geo.5.3-5.	Explain how the cultural and environmental characteristics of places change over time.
D2.Geo.7.3-5.	Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution and movement of people, goods, and ideas.
D2.His.1.3-5.	Create and use a chronological sequence of related events to compare developments that happened at the same time.
D2.His.12.3-5.	Generate questions about multiple historical sources and their relationships to particular historical events and developments.

rights issues, which helped contextualize life in the 1950s and 1960s.[13] Students read and annotated main ideas from this source (see Figure 2). During the first half of day two, the teacher read to the class from the trade book *The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist*, which discusses the experiences of Hendricks and other Children's March youth.[14] Pairing primary sources with trade books creates powerful learning opportunities for students to explore historical issues, events, and figures in depth.[15] The read-aloud completed the first 45-minute block on day two.

Figure 2. **Sample Student Work of Annotated Oral History Excerpt**



Name and # Alicia

Reading Prompt: Virginia Jones was a 17-year-old white girl in 1963. Her story has been abridged, or shortened down. Bull Connor was Birmingham's police officer, who many people felt was racist.

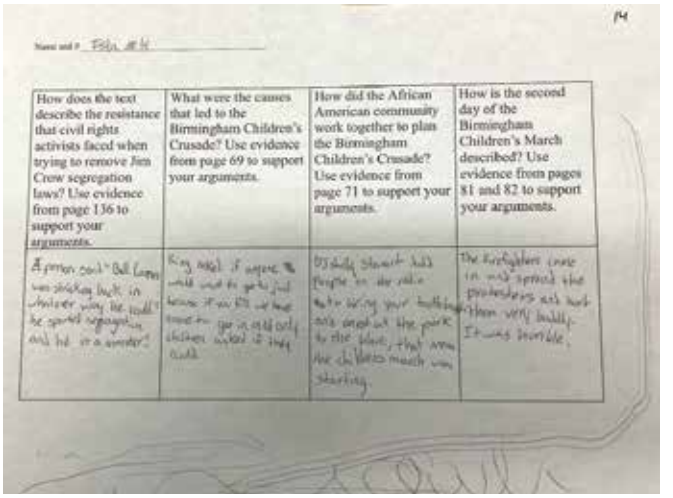
I lived over the mountain in Homewood. I never realized until recently how isolated we were back then … There was so much that I never knew. We only saw what the *Birmingham News* chose to print which as I recall wasn't much and the little news we saw on TV. Growing up in Crestwood as a young girl I lived just about 3 blocks from **Bull Connor's** home and had no idea what an evil man he would become.

After graduation from Auburn University I taught in an all-black school in Georgia. My roommate and I [were the first white teachers at the school]. I will never forget the acceptance and help from the faculty that year. … I think our city has come a long way but I think there is still so much prejudice that is more cleverly hidden these days. As the Peace Pole says at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church says, "May Peace Prevail on Earth." Indeed.

I was sapprised that she lived in Homewood and did not know what was going on. She was the first white teacher at Georgia for black kids, and lived 3 blocks from the police when she was younger.

In the second 45-minute block on day two, students examined excerpts from the trade book *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March*.[16] This trade book provides visual and text-based primary sources about the Children's March. Students gave evidence-based responses to analysis prompts for each excerpt.[17] Children consistently paraphrased or, in a few cases, quoted passages from *We've Got a Job* (see Figure 3). Participants in the Birmingham Children's March engaged in acts of resistance by occupying what most white Southerners deemed to be white spaces; they articulated a clear message to protest discrimination in Birmingham.[18] While determining helpful sources, students sensed activists' agency. The fourth graders started to realize that all citizens—even children—can impact history.[19] The class began to grasp how a democracy relies on responsible, informed participation.

Figure 3. **Sample Student Work of Graphic Organizer for *We've Got a Job***



How does the text describe the resistance that civil rights activists faced when trying to remove Jim Crow segregation laws? Use evidence from page 136 to support your arguments.	What were the causes that led to the Birmingham Children's Crusade? Use evidence from page 69 to support your arguments.	How did the African American community work together to plan the Birmingham Children's Crusade? Use evidence from page 71 to support your arguments.	How is the second day of the Birmingham Children's March described? Use evidence from pages 81 and 82 to support your arguments.
A person said "Bull Connor was sticking built in whatever way he could be spared segregation and he is a monster"	King asked if anyone would want to go to jail because if we fill up the jail then we can get in and only children would be there	[illegible] people to the rally to bring your children and meet at the park to the place, that was the children's march was starting	The firefighters came in and turned the protesters and hurt them very badly. It was terrible.

Day Three: Analyzing Birmingham's Trouble History with Civil Rights Issues

On day three, students examined more civil rights aspects of Birmingham's history, specifically, the attempt in 1959 to merge two local suburbs, Mountain Brook and Homewood, back into Birmingham's government. Students analyzed newspaper excerpts about the 1959 merger found in the *Birmingham Post-Herald* and *Birmingham News*. The learners ably unpacked different information from different historical sources. Newspapers.com and a local librarian are helpful resources for locating relevant articles about a city's history. The creation of new schools garners media attention, which ensures their preservation for educators' archival searches.

It took all of day three for students to read newspaper excerpts and answer analysis prompts about the 1959 merger attempt. The analysis prompts were designed to help students summarize the main ideas about each story while corroborating parallel arguments across the sources, which are important skills.[20] Learners struggled to some degree with reading these newspaper excerpts. Analyzing both a text and its subtext positions learners to scrutinize how people's perspectives shaped the historical sources they created.

Day Four: Discussing the 1964 Merger Attempt and Creation of Homewood City Schools

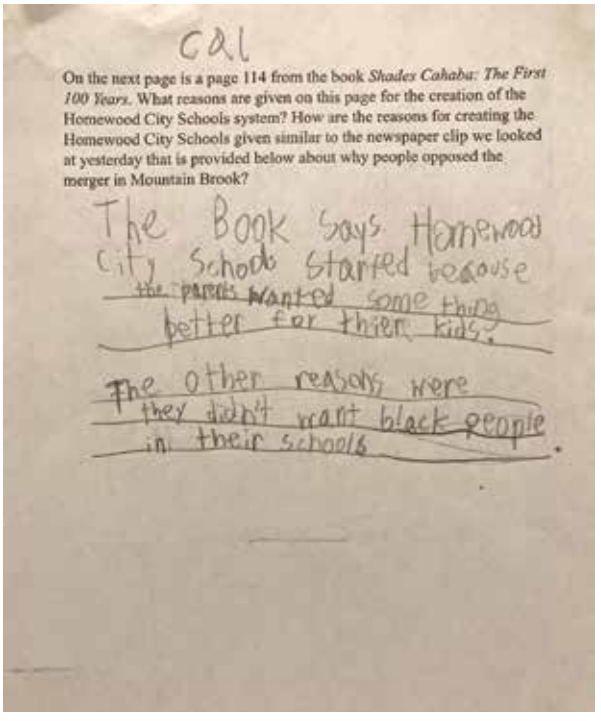
Responding constructively to students' struggles the previous day, Emily Blackstock led a class discussion during the first half of day four. She modeled analysis of newspaper excerpts about the 1964 merger attempt to bring Homewood and Mountain Brook back into Birmingham. She presented the students with similar analysis prompts about the newspapers from the 1964 merger attempt as on the previous day about the 1959 merger attempt. With extra teacher support, students analyzed newspaper excerpts about the 1964 merger attempt. The language of 1959 primary sources directly resisted inte-

gration in blocking the two suburbs from merging back into Birmingham while the 1964 primary sources contained more subtle, coded rhetoric reflective of conservative language in Nixon's Southern Strategy.[21] Students ably inferred the purpose of each initiative.

In day four's second 45-minute block, students researched the creation of the Homewood City Schools. The passage of legislation by cities to circumnavigate integration laws contributed to 1960s white flight from cities.[22] Scholars of Black history report that victories for social justice often led to conservative, white politicians crafting new public policies stifling African Americans' social, political, and legal gains.[23] The fourth graders soon recognized how radical changes of integration evoked reactionary responses of suburban schools. Students, in doing so, articulated how and why individuals and groups differed so strongly in opinion, in calls for continuity or change, and in opposition of or support for integration.

Students then read and answered some analysis prompts from *Shades Cahaba: The First 100 Years*, which addresses the creation of Homewood City Schools. Students returned to a newspaper clip previously read on day three about the 1964 merger attempt.[24] These two sources were paired to highlight the subtle language white citizens used to discuss the role that school integration played in the formation of these two suburban school systems. The analysis prompts helped students unpack subtle language revealing resistance to integration and the ways local policies perpetuated privilege and discrimination.[25] Students, in doing so, traced how public policies were developed to address what white citizens deemed a public problem (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. **Student Response to Analysis Prompt for Primary Source Packet**


CAL

On the next page is a page 114 from the book *Shades Cahaba: The First 100 Years*. What reasons are given on this page for the creation of the Homewood City Schools system? How are the reasons for creating the Homewood City Schools given similar to the newspaper clip we looked at yesterday that is provided below about why people opposed the merger in Mountain Brook?

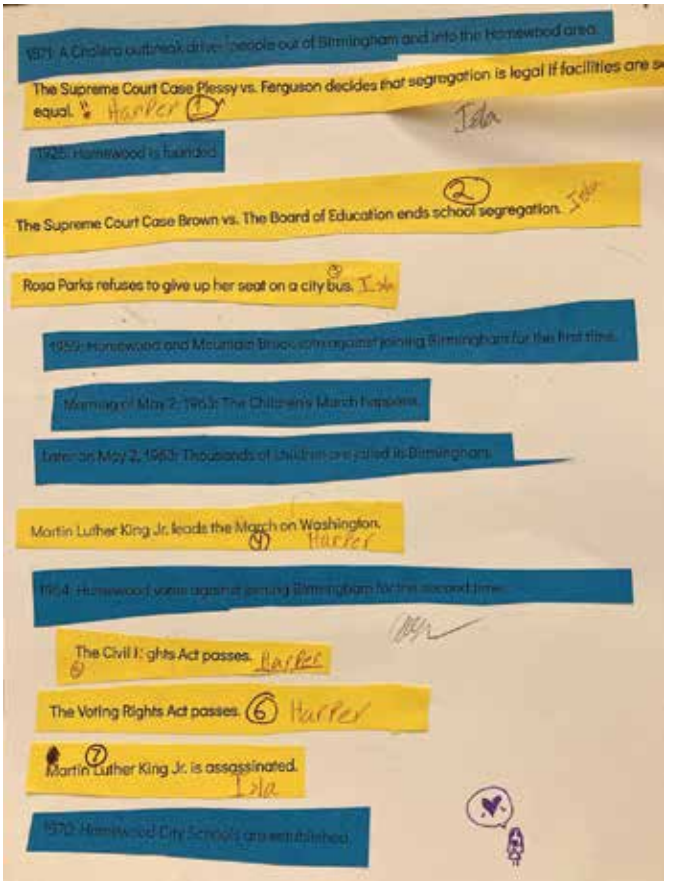
The Book says Homewood City Schools started because the parents wanted some thing better for thier kids.

The other reasons were they didn't want black people in their schools

Day Five: Creating a Timeline

On day five, students created individual timelines of civil rights events covered in the unit. First, the teacher gave sentence statements on slips of yellow paper, each listing a different national event connected to the civil rights movement, which students accurately reordered. The same process was repeated with slips of blue paper, each with civil rights issues in Birmingham. In doing so, students correctly sequenced historical events and labeled city, state, and national developments (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. **Student Timeline**



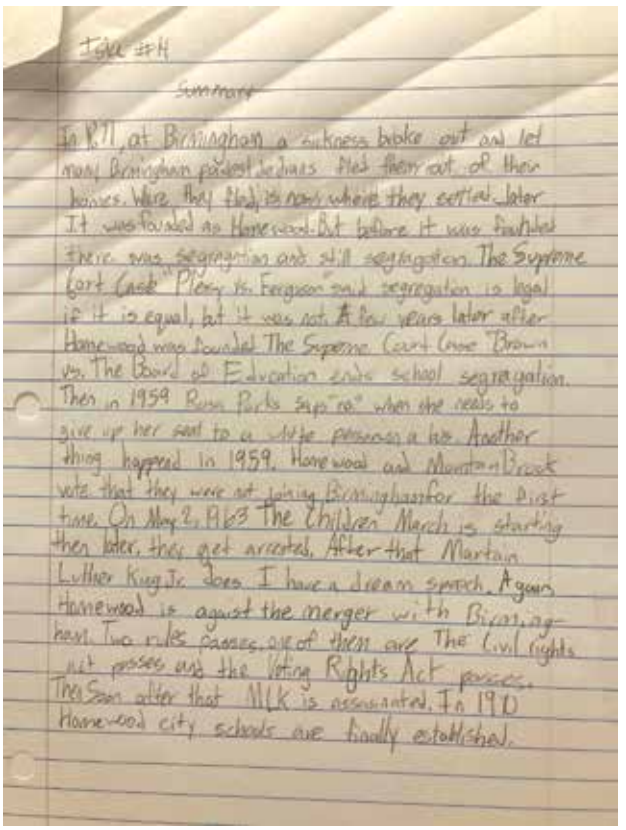
The timeline activity strengthened students' sequencing skills. They could glean how certain civil rights issues led to public policies. For example, white citizens in Mountain Brook and Homewood voted in 1964 to stifle school integration efforts just one year after the Birmingham Children's March drew unwanted, negative national attention to Birmingham and the March on Washington drew unwanted, negative global attention to the U.S.[26]

In the second 45-minute block, Emily Blackstock led a class discussion reusing images from days one through three to represent each topic on the timeline. For example, students connected an image of children protesting to the Birmingham Children's March. This step helped students associate an actual image to each timeline event.[27]

Day Six: Summary Writing Activity

After analyzing multiple sources, it was appropriate for students to synthesize their understandings and develop claims from diverse texts. On day six, students individually summarized their timeline's events (see Figure 6). Students drafted and edited their summaries throughout the day. They checked the accuracy and chronology of listed events. Most students' summaries were between a half-page and one page. Through writing, fourth graders consistently grasped how one policy to address racial discrimination led to policies to stifle African Americans' progress.

Figure 6. **Student Summary of the Timeline in Figure 5**


Name #14

Summary

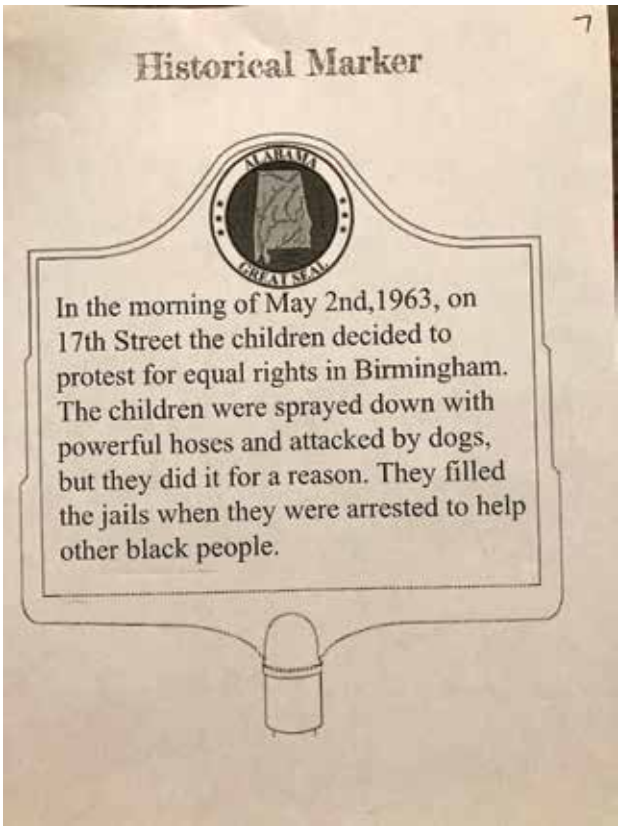
In 1911, at Birmingham a sickness broke out an let many Birmingham people's homes that them out of their homes. Where they stay is now where they settled later It was founded as Homewood. But before it was founded there was segregation and still segregation. The Supreme Court case "Plessy vs. Ferguson" said segregation is legal if it is equal, but it was not. A few years later after Homewood was founded. The Supreme Court case "Brown vs. The Board of Education" ends school segregation. Then in 1959 Rosa Parks says "no" when she refuses to give up her seat to a white person on a bus. Another thing happened in 1959. Homewood and Mountain Brook vote that they were not joining Birmingham for the first time. On May 2, 1963 The Children March is starting then later, they get arrested. After that Martain Luther King Jr. does I have a dream speech. Again Homewood is against the merger with Birmingham. Two rules passes, one of them are The Civil rights act passes and the Voting Rights Act passes. Then Soon after that MLK is assassinated. In 1970 Homewood city schools are finally established.

Day Seven: Marking Civil Rights Issues in U.S. History

On day seven, students created a historical marker to establish the significance of one topic covered. Emily Blackstock briefly discussed how historical markers across the country bring awareness to major events in a local community. She also stressed that students needed to describe the 5Ws: *who, what, where, when*, and *why*. A fifty-word limit ensured that students worked succinctly and attended to the marker's audience and purpose.[28]

The students started by selecting their historical marker's singular focus. Then, they drafted their marker. The majority of the students referenced primary sources and trade books. Some did independent research that were not the primary focus of our project, such as Dr. King's assassination. Emily Blackstock moved around the classroom as students worked to self-edit their historical marker. A sample marker appears in Figure 7. This was the first time most students constructed claims and communicated conclusions using multiple sources of evidence.

Figure 7. **Sample of Student's Historical Marker on the Children's March**


7

Historical Marker

ALABAMA GREAT SEAL

In the morning of May 2nd,1963, on 17th Street the children decided to protest for equal rights in Birmingham. The children were sprayed down with powerful hoses and attacked by dogs, but they did it for a reason. They filled the jails when they were arrested to help other black people.

Conclusion

These fourth graders consistently demonstrated an awareness of how public issues in the Birmingham metropolitan area were impacted by racist sentiments. They made arguments about how the 1959 and 1964 merger failures and the creation of the Homewood City School system were steps taken to preserve segregation. The fourth-grade teacher never directly made statements that suburban school systems were created to perpetuate segregation. Many students constructed this argument themselves using evidence from sources examined.

All American cities have stories similar to the story of Birmingham discussed in this article. We recognize that not all elementary teachers and scholars reading this article reside in Birmingham. However, the approaches in our article can be adapted and applied to explore other cities' racist pasts. We encourage elementary teachers to look for primary and secondary sources for local racist housing covenants, segregation laws, Ku Klux Klan activities, area sundown towns, local lynchings, and policies connected to local school systems. These sources can help students shine the light on local

history with topics connected to race that are still impacting a city. Students can apply evidence from their research to take civic action about local issues in their communities. It is through powerful social studies activities looking at a city's history that students can take meaningful steps to help address the vestiges of racism and work toward constructing cities, states, and a nation that are truly inclusive for all.[29]

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