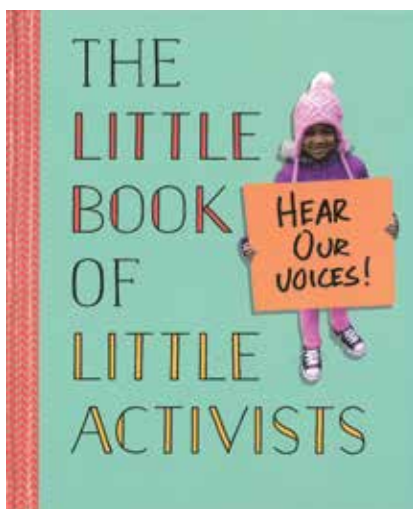


# And the Children Shall Lead: Using the 2018 Notable Books to Nurture Young Citizen-Activists

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*The Little Book of Little Activists*, by Penguin Young Readers (Penguin Young Readers/Viking Books for Young Readers)

*The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist*, by Cynthia Levinson;  
Vanessa Brantley-Newton, illustrator (Simon & Schuster/Atheneum Books for Young Readers)



Picture books about children exercising their power as activist citizens could not be timelier.

The National School Walkout to protest gun violence, planned and carried out by students (including some at the elementary level), is but the latest example of young people speaking out and taking action about peace and justice issues. Examining historical examples of young people engaging in civic action can have a powerful impact on children. Indeed, after studying young civil rights activists in the Birmingham Children's Crusade, fifth graders from Craig Sampsell's class at Case Elementary School in Akron,

Ohio, were inspired to participate in the March 14, 2018, Walkout to protest gun violence.<sup>1</sup>

The annual NCSS *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People* list often contains picture books that profile citizen role models—people who worked to change society for the better. This year is no exception. The list includes beautiful, thoughtful biographies of people who chose “doing good” over “doing well.” Books highlight Jane Addams's social work at Hull House in Chicago, Arturo Schomburg's creation of the Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, Pete Seeger's legacy of

singing for social justice, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg's fights for equality under the law.<sup>2</sup>

Books about children engaging in activism are harder to come by. This is a shame because, long before the advent of the C3 Framework,<sup>3</sup> some of the most memorable and teachable moments in my own school career have involved activism.

## Activism as Peak Experience

To raise awareness for the first Earth Day in 1970, my sixth grade classmates and I performed puppet shows with environmental themes for the younger grades; our skit had puppets holding protest signs. In junior high, I was one of many students who, following the lead of our older siblings in high school, participated in a walkout to protest the Vietnam War. Years later, I discovered that a long-time friend and colleague had, like Mary Beth Tinker of Supreme Court case fame, worn a black armband to her elementary school to protest the Vietnam War, and, when she refused to take it off, was sent home.

In 1986, as a teacher, I served as an unofficial adviser to an ad hoc group of high school students who organized a protest against America's resumption of nuclear testing. They planned their lunch-

time rally to coincide with Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and passed out their own literature, connecting King's views on militarism with the issue at hand; they also gave interviews to several radio stations and newspapers.

One doesn't have to be in high school to wage a media campaign. Covering the 2018 Walkout, reporter Lois Beckett tweeted about much younger students creating informational materials as part of their protest strategy: "... the 11-year-old organizers had a press packet ready for me."<sup>4</sup> In Washington State, elementary students tried to organize a walkout, only to find that administrators had changed the event to a "safety assembly." As Scott Leadingham reported, one 10-year-old, who had wanted to talk about gun control, would not be thwarted, telling the assembly: "Come talk to me at recess since I've been silenced."<sup>5</sup>

It is a good bet that these protests, whether about Vietnam, nuclear weapons, or gun violence, and whether sanctioned or not by school administrators, have been marker events in the lives of the students who participated in them. Thus, two new picture books that chronicle children's participation in marches for rights, as well as the activities that they can engender, are welcome additions to elementary classrooms.

### Young Marchers and Teachable Moments

At about 5 × 7 inches, *The Little Book of Little Activists* is, indeed, little. Still, while aimed at the primary grades, it contains important ideas about protest for both the primary and intermediate grades. In the foreword, Bob Bland, one of the co-chairs of the 2017 Women's March on Washington, describes the book as "a tribute to children exercising their right to protest." Accordingly, *Little Activists* contains pictures of children of different ages, genders, races, and ethnicities, holding homemade signs that talk of "Love" and "Hope" (one of the youngest children endearingly holds a sign with scribbles). A few of the pictures are of children too young to have

made the signs that they hold, such as the toddler sporting the sign that states "I [heart] naps but I stay woke."

The language accompanying the photographs includes child-friendly definitions of relevant terms: *activism, democracy, feminism, First Amendment rights, protest, freedom, and equality*, as well as the inspirational idea that anyone can be an activist. Sprinkled among the photographs are quotations from children, identified by first name and age; e.g., "If you want to make a change in the world, go ahead. Nobody can stop you," Eden, age 9.

The afterword is moving. Lynda Blackmon Lowery writes that, at age 13, she heard Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver a speech about voting rights, in which he spoke of the importance of "steady, loving confrontation." Lowery exhorts, "Those three words shaped my life, and now I want to give them to you. Don't stop when you get tired or discouraged—that's the steady part. Don't give in to hate—that's the loving part. And stand up to the bullying with the power of your people—that's confrontation."

By the time she was 15, Lowery had been in jail nine times from her protesting activities. In 1965, she attended the famous voting rights march, where she was the youngest person to walk from Selma to Montgomery. Recalling the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, she writes, "It was an awesome feeling to know I had been a part of that change." She drives home her message regarding the power that young people have: "The Selma Movement was a kids' movement. We didn't know it at the time, but we were making history. You have a voice too, and with determination, you could be a history maker just like me. You are never too young to fight nonviolently for what you believe in."

There are many activities that can deepen students' understanding of protest. Prior to reading the book, students can work together to try to define and draw pictures of the terms supplied by the teacher that appear in the book, then compare their defi-

nitions and images with those in the book. Students can display their final definitions and illustrations on posters around the classroom and school; they will be ready, if and when the next march comes along...

Questions can encourage students to think critically about the societal ideals suggested by the children's signs:

- *Based on the photographs of the march, what are the different freedoms that you can identify?*
- *For what different kinds of equality are these children marching?*
- *Are there issues not present on the children's signs and in their quotes that you would add?*
- *Would adults include any other issues?*
- *What situations might call for different kinds of protest?*
- *Besides a march, what are other methods of protest?*
- *Are there any issues about which you feel strongly enough to protest?*

### What Will You Undertake?

A march is but one example of activism for a cause. Have students brainstorm actions that might be undertaken in the service of an issue about which they feel strongly (e.g., sign a petition, donate money, tell friends and family, write a letter to the editor, speak with someone in government, make a sign, commit civil disobedience, etc.). The issues can be placed on a continuum, such as the figure on this page.

While *Little Activists* chronicles a present-day, low-stakes march, where children are lawfully exercising their rights alongside their parents/guardians and are in no danger, *The Youngest*

*Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist* tells the story of a nine-year-old girl who goes to jail for the cause of integration in the 1963 Birmingham Children's March (the very march that inspired the Ohio fifth graders to participate in the 2018 Walkout against gun violence).

Audrey's household is where King and other iconic ministers of the civil rights movement, Fred Shuttlesworth and Jim Bevel, plan actions over her mother's "hot rolls baptized in butter" at the dinner table. Audrey, who is supposed to keep quiet when she hears grown-ups talking about fighting segregation, cannot help but speak up. The interaction makes clear how

segregation affects the young girl, as Audrey expresses why she will be marching: "I want to eat my ice cream inside Newberry's! I want to sit downstairs at the Alabama! I don't want hand-me-down schoolbooks!" Illustrations show Audrey paying for a bus ride at the front of the bus, and then stepping off to walk to the back door for entry; in another scene, we see Audrey using the freight elevator at downtown department stores.

At church, Audrey hears adult testimonies about unjust treatment, as well as King's argument for civil disobedience: "an unjust law is no law at all." Because there are ordinances in Birmingham against marching, the adults are leery of getting arrested: "Boss man will fire me! Landlord will evict me! Policemen will beat me!" In a brilliant public relations move, the plan is hatched to have the children protest and go to jail. Audrey dresses for the event: "Protesters got to look nice."

Audrey and her fellow marchers are, as anticipated, arrested and jailed. In jail, Audrey feels scared and lonely, as the youngest marcher. Meals were "soupy, oily, tasteless grits." At night, she's miserable on a bare mattress with jabbing wire springs and only a thin

sheet as cover. However, as the days go by, more and more protesters are jailed, and Audrey is proud of being a part of the action.

At the end of the week, she and the other protesters are released. To celebrate Audrey's homecoming, her mother makes hot rolls baptized in butter (the author provides a recipe). The book ends triumphantly: "Two months later, the city of Birmingham wiped segregation laws clean off the books. Audrey licked her spoon clean at Newberry's

movement, as well as with more recent movements such as Act Up, Black Lives Matter, and the Dreamers.

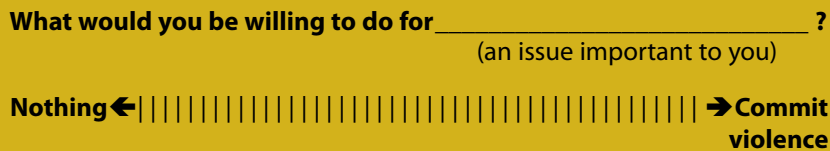
Because the last few decades have produced many more materials on children's roles in the civil rights movement, it makes sense to put Hendricks's story into a larger context. Primary source accounts can be found in picture, chapter, and coffee table books, and in videos.<sup>6</sup> Students can create a detailed timeline with primary source quotes from, and photographs of, the young participants in the march. Having an illustrated timeline up in a classroom can remind students that young people are, indeed, capable of making societal change. To bring the timeline up to present-

day, quotes and pictures of students who participated in the 2018 Walkout can be added.

Many of the educational materials created for the teachable moment of the 2018 Walkout spotlight movements led by young people, allowing students who have already studied The Children's March to extend their learning by researching: The Greensboro sit-ins, 1960; university uprisings, 1968, apartheid divestment, 1970s-80s; Tiananmen Square, 1989; the Velvet Revolution, 1989; Iran, 1999; and Black Lives Matter, 2013-present.<sup>7</sup>

There are, of course, many lesser known young activists. Millicent Brown was a 15-year-old who helped desegregate the South Carolina schools and, as an adult, has been gathering the stories of those who participated in the struggle to integrate public schools following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Her compelling narrative is worth sharing with students.<sup>8</sup> Students can create picture books about the young activists they read about and have these books placed in their school library. Students can also check to see if these activists get their due in any history textbooks their class might use.

Figure: *Continuum*



counter, like everybody else. Black and white together, like we belong."

An Author's Note provides additional details about the march—more than 3,000 children were arrested in Birmingham, in May 1963—as well as information about Audrey's continued activism. She volunteered to integrate a high school, enrolling as one of the first black students; led Head Start programs; and spoke of her experiences at schools around the country. A 20-year timeline begins in 1944, with the Birmingham racial segregation ordinances (including one making it unlawful "for a negro and white person to play together") and ends with the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

*The Youngest Marcher* presents an argument for, and a successful example of, *civil disobedience*, without ever using the term. Because even high school students are often unfamiliar with civil disobedience, this book presents an opportunity to clarify the term and explore students' feelings about whether it is ever justified to break the law and, if so, under what circumstances. Examples of breaking the law to show that the law is morally wrong may be explored much earlier in the curriculum, with the American Revolution and the women's suffrage

If insufficient or no information is conveyed, students can insert information in the textbook with a post-it note, so the next reader might learn about these lesser-known activists.

Questions can encourage intermediate students to think deeply about the activities of responsible citizens and societies:<sup>9</sup>

- *Who has the power to make—and change—rules and laws in society?*
- *What are citizens' responsibilities to their community?*
- *What are government's responsibilities to its citizens?*
- *What if government becomes unresponsive to citizens' needs?*
- *How important is voting as a civic practice?*
- *Is civil disobedience a civic practice?*
- *What obstacles do people face in their struggles for change?*
- *How important are organizations in making societal change?*
- *How do you measure the success of a movement?*
- *What are the most important characteristics of active citizens?*

### **Real Kids, Real Activism**

Teachers may wonder whether their own young students are ready to read about challenging issues or contemplate protesting them. Paula Rogovin, a New York City elementary teacher for 45 years, has found that her first graders are capable of both researching and taking action to address challenging issues. Her students researched where

their stuffed animals were made and discovered, through a Pacifica radio interview by Amy Goodman with Charles Kernaghan from the National Labor Committee, that people in China worked 16 or more hours a day, six or seven days a week for 53 cents per hour, making BarbieDoctor Pet Shop stuffed animals.<sup>10</sup>

**Primary source accounts can be found in picture, chapter, and coffee table books, and in videos. Students can create a detailed timeline with primary source quotes from, and photographs of, the young participants in the march.**

Rogovin noted that social action nearly always evolves from her students' social studies research, "Trying to find ways to help alleviate a problem empowers children and gives them hope," she said. Rogovin's young students have engaged in multiple forms of social action, including: talking to family and friends about an issue; learning or writing a song or poem about the topic; writing letters to a company or public official; making a mural; posting informational signs at school; going to a meeting or hearing; having a fund-raiser with an educational component; putting an article about the topic in a school newspaper or website; attending a demonstration with their families; or participating in a boycott or Fair Trade activity. In the case of their stuffed animals, with so few Fair Trade toys available, Rogovin's first graders elected to write a play and perform it for families and other classes, teaching them about the unjust conditions under which stuffed animals are made.<sup>11</sup> All of these forms

of social action can be added to the continuum presented above.

In intermediate classrooms, teachers have had success giving their students the agency to select and research their own issues, lay out the problems, and develop action plans, drawing on the nonviolent resisters who have been researched. Local rights activists can be invited to enhance students' understanding of issues and strategies. In Lauren Brown's fifth grade New York City class, students spearheaded myriad activities, including: making informational flyers about climate change, organizing a boycott of factory farms, creating an organization [SMDGN - Stop Mom and Dad Gender Norms] to combat sexism in parenting, and fundraising to purchase more transgender books for the school library.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever issues students elect to research and, perhaps, protest, it is important that thoughtful discussion precede action. The questions that sprang up online to help teachers foster discussion about guns can provide a model for critical thinking about any student activism:

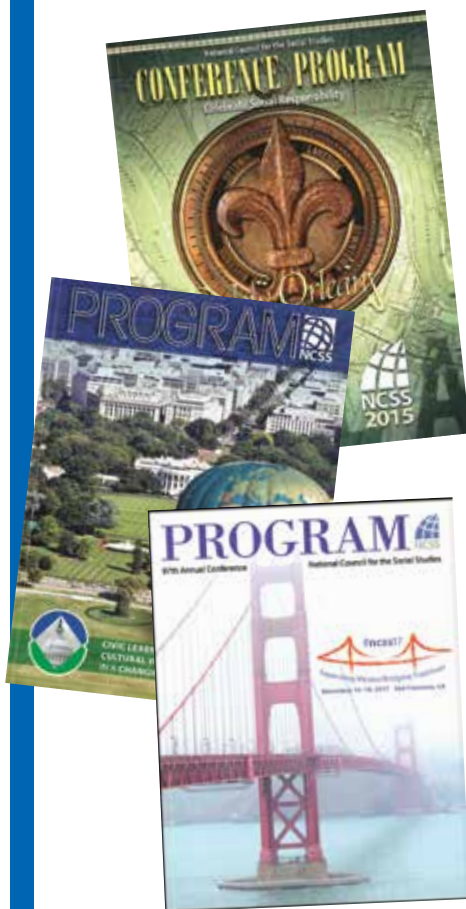
- *Why are you interested in joining the walkout?*
- *What do you know about what's happening, and what do you have questions about?*
- *How are you educating yourself and others?*
- *Where can you find friends and allies?*
- *What might be some consequences of your participation?*
- *What impact are you hoping to have?*
- *Beyond the walkout, how can you stay engaged to push for the change you seek?*<sup>13</sup>

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## An Elementary Social Studies Resurgence?

In the 15 years since the enactment of No Child Left Behind, time devoted to elementary social studies has decreased in favor of the tested subjects of literacy and math.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps 2018 can be a turning point in this de-valuing of social studies. As community members see their youngest citizens on the protest line, they may begin to recognize the importance of social studies in a democracy. Armed with the C3 Framework, and models of young activists, provided by both the Notable Books and the Walkout movement, elementary teachers and administrators can re-order their priorities and help nurture the next generation of citizen-activists. 🌍

### Notes

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