



## The Birmingham Campaign

### Learning Targets/Objectives:

- Discuss the purpose of the Birmingham Campaign.
- Understand the role of the Birmingham Campaign during the Civil Rights Movement.

### Success Criteria:

- Create marching signs about the change you want to see in the world today.
- Write a letter to a 1960s Birmingham Student (Pen Pal Letter).

### Lesson Content Overview:

Birmingham, also known as “Bombingham” during the civil rights era, was called by many Black leaders the “worst big city in the U.S.A.” Black residents of the city called their community “Dynamite Hill,” as the city had been led by three city commissioners leading up to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s arrival there in 1963 – Eugene “Bull” Connor, J.T. “Jabbo” Wagoner, and Art Haines. There were 18 unsolved bombings in Black neighborhoods from 1957 to 1962. In 1963, Birmingham became a focus for the civil rights movement as the SCLC launched Project “C” (Confrontation). “Our goal in Birmingham was larger than ending segregation in one Southern city,” said SNCC chairman John Lewis. “It was our hope that our efforts in Birmingham would dramatize the fight and determination of African American citizens in the Southern states and that we would force the Kennedy administration to draft and push through Congress a comprehensive Civil Rights Act – outlawing segregation and racial discrimination in public accommodations, employment and education.”

The campaign’s strategy was to put economic pressure on Birmingham merchants. Acting accordingly, organizers scheduled the protests to begin around the Easter season – the second biggest shopping period of the year. However, a mayoral election was to be held in Birmingham on March 5. All of the leading candidates were segregationists; however, candidate “Bull” Connor, Birmingham’s Commission on Public Safety, was considered much more militant than the other candidates. Since the civil rights organizers did not want to alienate potential sympathetic or moderate white voters or to be used as a political tool to drive white voters to cast ballots for Connor, they postponed the boycott until two weeks after the election. Project C began on April 3, 1963.

The campaign began with a series of mass meetings and direct actions. King spoke on the philosophy of nonviolence and its methods. At the end of the meetings, he extended an appeal to volunteers to serve in the nonviolent resistance occurring in Birmingham. The SCLC’s actions began with lunch counter sit-ins, marches on City Hall, and a boycott of downtown merchants.

On April 10, the city government obtained a court injunction directing an end to all protests. King and members of the SCLC decided that the time had come to counter the city’s legal maneuvering with action – to test an unjust law. After two days of heavy debate, activists decided to disobey the court order. King declared, “We cannot in all good conscience obey such an injunction which is an unjust, undemocratic and unconstitutional misuse of the legal process.”

On Good Friday, April 13, King, along with Revs. Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth, led several hundred protesters toward Birmingham’s main business district and city hall. “Bull” Connor led the arresting officers, who stood in the middle of the street shouting directions. Dressed in blue jeans and gray shirts, King,



along with more than 50 other freedom marchers, was arrested in defiance of the state writ, or injunction, banning all forms of racial demonstration. Authorities kept him in solitary confinement and refused him the right to see a lawyer. While in prison, Black protesters continued the project by leading voter registration drives and sitting in on city lunch counters. More were arrested, including King's brother, A.D. King. Only the intervention of President John F. Kennedy secured King and Abernathy's release on April 20 as long as the SCLC paid a \$300 bond. It was while he was in prison that King penned the now famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" on April 16, 1963. King wrote, "Justice too long delayed is justice denied." Upon his release, King said the protests would continue. "I am sure it will continue as long as we have the people who are aroused and conscious of our problems."<sup>1</sup>

One of the greatest events occurring during the Civil Rights Movement was the Children's Crusade. SCLC organized hundreds of youth in the Birmingham area to participate in the crusade for equality and justice. On May 2, 700 Black children marched from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church through town.

It is important to note that during this time, Blacks in the United States were unprotected citizens as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were not yet in place. Thus, the inclusion of youth was viewed as risky by those attacking the movement, yet it was a brilliant move on the part of the civil rights leaders and staff members who recognized the power of their untapped resources. King writes the following in his memoir:

*SCLC staff members James Bevel, Andy Young, Bernard Lee, and Dorothy Cotton began visiting colleges and high schools in the area. They invited students to attend after-school meetings at churches. The word spread fast, and the response from Birmingham's youngsters exceeded our fondest dreams. By the fifties and by the hundreds, these youngsters attended mass meetings and training sessions. They listened eagerly as we talked of bringing freedom to Birmingham, not in some distant time, but right now. We taught them the philosophy of nonviolence. We challenged them to bring their exuberance, their youthful creativity, into the disciplined dedication to the movement. We found them eager to belong, hungry for participation in a significant social effort. Looking back, it is clear that the introduction of Birmingham's children into the campaign was one of the wisest moves we made. It brought a new impact to the crusade, and the impetus that we needed to win the struggle.*

After police wagons were filled, authorities used school buses to cart the children to jail. When 2500 more young protesters marched the next day, the police turned fire hoses and police dogs on them. "Bull" Connor defended his decision to use force as "more humane than bullets."<sup>2</sup> Such images captured the international press. The passion of the youth, coupled with the advent of television, which captured young children attacked with fire hoses and dogs by the Birmingham police, gave the movement both a national and international platform.

The world saw pictures of black children knocked down by a force of water so powerful that it tore the bark off nearby trees. Now under international pressure and the growing threat of a riot, Birmingham's officials returned to the bargaining table more willing to deal with the SCLC. "Creative tension" was another method used to cause the oppressor to respond to a situation that he might otherwise ignore or disregard.

On Friday, May 10, an agreement between the Senior Citizens Council and the SCLC leadership was announced. It contained promises to desegregate public accommodations, a committee to ensure

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King quoted in *Oakland Tribune*. "Rev. Martin Luther King Freed From Alabama Jail." April 21, 1963, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene "Bull" Connor quoted in *Stockton Evening and Sunday Record*. "Great Civil Rights Strides in Birmingham Since 1963. April 5, 1967. 20.



nondiscriminatory hiring practices in Birmingham, cooperation in releasing jailed protesters, and public communications between Black and white leaders to prevent further demonstrations. As a result of the Birmingham protest, the SCLC won a desegregation settlement. More importantly, the protest laid the early groundwork for the nation's 1964 Civil Rights Act. After its Birmingham triumph, the SCLC organized other desegregation campaigns in Savannah, Georgia and St. Augustine, Florida, and played a pivotal role in the 1963 March on Washington.

### SEL Opener:

- **OPTION 1:** Show a map of Alabama with Birmingham highlighted/starred.
- **OPTION 2:** Provide each student with the "FAIR" and "UNFAIR" signs. Have them raise on a sign based on the following statements:
  - 1) You can sit next to any of your friends in school.
  - 2) You have to go to a different school than your friends.
  - 3) Your family and you have to go to a different restaurant than your neighbors.
  - 4) You can play in the same playground as your friends.
  - 5) You have to use a different water fountain in school than your classmates.

### Instructional Activities:

- Activity 1: Watch the [Children's Crusade of 1963 Video](#)
  - **Small Group/Individual Work:** Write a [diary entry](#) as if you were one of the students joining the Children's Crusade of 1963.  
- **Topics:** *Left school, gathered at the church, marched, hosed/dogs, arrested, etc.*
  - **Large Group Discussion:** Read the diary entries aloud.
    - Acknowledge the themes among students' answers.
- Activity 2: Watch the [Birmingham Campaign Video](#)
  - **Small Group/Individual Work:** Complete the [Guided Notes](#) / [Answer Key](#)
  - **Large Group Discussion:** Review the guided notes.
    - Discussion Questions: *What was the Birmingham Campaign and what year did it start?*  
*What was the goal of the Birmingham Campaign?*
    - Highlight the themes.
- Activity 3: Read *Let the Children March* by Monica Clark-Robinson
  - Discuss the characters, plot, feelings, vocabulary, summary, and themes.



- Activity 4: Watch the [Children Who Marched for Equal Rights](#)
  - **Small Group/Individual Work:** Complete the [Reflection Worksheet](#) based on the questions asked in the video.
  - **Large Group Discussion:** Share the reflection responses.
    - Acknowledge the themes.
- Activity 5: Read **Epic Books:** [The Children's Crusade of 1963 Boosts Civil Rights](#) by Heather Adamson.
  - Discuss the characters, plot, feelings, vocabulary, summary, and themes.

### Assessments:

- **OPTION 1: *Children's Crusade Marching Signs:*** Create [two marching signs](#) about the change you want to see in the world today.
- **OPTION 2:** Complete the [Letter to a Birmingham Student Pen Pal Worksheet](#).

### Adaptations for Student Needs

#### IEP/504:

- Sizes of student groups range
- Students team up with a peer partner, while others would prefer to work individually.
- There is a variety of small-group work
- Chunking information
- Visual cues and wait time
- Visual supports (maps, images, PowerPoint slides, handouts)
- Assessments will be modified, and students given extra time

#### ELD/ELL/ESL:

- Modified/simplified reading material
- Content-related lists/handouts of key terms
- Text is supported by visuals and connected to real-life experiences