Should school be a place for debate?

GETTING ORIENTED

The weekly passage mentions the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Here is some information that might be helpful to students less familiar with this history.

Civil Rights Movement (1955-1965)
In the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans still faced great legal discrimination—or unjust treatment—for no reason other than their skin color. For example, they were forced to use “black-only” bathrooms and sit at the back of the bus. Tired of being mistreated, African Americans worked together to fight for the same social and political rights as other Americans. These rights included the right to vote, the right to own property in a neighborhood of their choosing, and the right to be treated equally regardless of their skin color. They organized meetings, rallies, marches, and boycotts in an effort to fight against discrimination. As a result of their hard work, the government passed laws to protect the freedoms and political rights of African Americans.

Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956)
In the 1950s, African Americans were still forced to sit at the back of the bus because of their skin color, even when there were empty seats in the front. In those days, if the front seats were full, and a white passenger needed a seat, the law required African Americans to give their seats to white passengers.

In December 1955, a civil rights activist from Montgomery, Alabama, named Rosa Parks insisted on staying in her seat instead of giving it to a white passenger. Ms. Parks was arrested and forced to pay a fine because she refused to follow the bus driver’s orders. This arrest outraged other African Americans, who then decided that they would boycott—or deliberately choose not to ride—the bus until the laws were changed. They walked, biked, or carpoled instead.

The boycott was effective. It got the government’s attention and caused the Supreme Court to rule in November 1956 that segregation on a bus was unconstitutional, or against the law. The law went into effect in December and ended the boycott.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968)
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a preacher and leader from the African American community. He was passionate about civil rights and inspired many people—blacks, whites, and others—to fight for equality through nonviolent means such as boycotts, marches, and rallies. He was one of the most prominent leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his work. Dr. King was a gifted speaker and used his speaking ability to unite people and paint a vision for peace and equality among all people. His most famous speech is “I Have a Dream” (August 28, 1963), which Dr. King gave in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., in front of thousands of people. This speech described a nation in which people would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character,” a nation where “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

Dr. King was tragically shot and killed on April 4, 1968, by an escaped prison convict named James Earl Ray. In spite of his death, Dr. King’s activism continues to influence and inspire many people today.