

**A More
Beautiful
and Terrible
History**

**THE USES AND MISUSES OF
CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY**

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CHAPTER SIX

The Great Man View of History, Part I

Where Are the Young People?

We waited a long time for those folks to do something to improve our schools, but they let us down and so we have decided to do the job ourselves.

—Jefferson High School student, March 1968¹

The most important learning I do at this age in my life is learning from young people.

—Angela Davis, 2017²

EVEN THOUGH MANY civil rights memorials are aimed at “uplifting youth,” the central role young people played in the Black freedom struggle, from *Brown* to Birmingham to the Los Angeles blowouts, is often omitted. Indeed, the civil rights movement is often misused to tell young people today that they are not living up to its legacy. At the same time, contemporary inequities are blamed partly on Black and Latinx youth who are cast as having lost their way from the civil rights generation. But high school students blazed the trail in many crucial battles of the Black freedom struggle, often against the wishes and “better judgment” of their parents and other adults in the community. Their vision and resolve proved crucial at key moments in breaking through stasis and fear and moving the community to bolder action. And their willingness to push the envelope and be more confrontational than their elders is all but absent in understandings of the movement’s successes. The activism of young people sixty years ago—like the activism of young people today—inspired many but also provoked much consternation from parents, teachers, and older activists, who saw them as too reckless or confrontational. But they pressed forth anyway, and the country is better for it.

In 1951, sixteen-year-old high school junior Barbara Johns organized a strike with her classmates at the all-Black Robert Russa Moton High School in Prince Edward County, Virginia. Students refused to go to class to protest the school’s unwillingness to respond to Black demands that the school’s poor conditions and overcrowding be addressed. “We had talents and abilities here that weren’t really being realized,” Johns explained.³ Twice the number of students were attending Moton High School than the school was built for, and classes were being held in school buses, the auditorium, and hastily constructed tar-paper shacks, which often were very cold. The school lacked a cafeteria and a gym, had limited science labs, and did not offer physics, world history, or Latin. Teachers were underpaid and had to do jobs reserved for janitors in other schools.

Johns decided to organize the student strike in 1951 after some of her male classmates, who worked at the white high school after school, told Johns and her friends how nice the white school was. “I remember thinking how unfair it was.” Students assembled to hear Johns speak. She told her classmates that “it was time that Negroes were treated equally with whites, time that they had a decent high school, time for the students themselves to do something about it.”⁴

A classmate recalled Johns saying, “Our parents ask us to follow them but in some instances . . . a little child shall lead them.”⁵ Johns and her classmates also called the NAACP to ask for their assistance. The national office sent lawyers Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson to Virginia to caution the students against their action, seeing it as too dangerous and foolhardy given white resistance in the area. But Johns and her band of 114 striking students persisted and eventually won the lawyers over. Hill recalled: “Their morale was so high that we didn’t have the heart to say no.”⁶ Hill and Robinson agreed to represent them as long as their parents agreed to support a legal case that attacked segregation head-on. These students had blazed the way and ultimately brought the adults along with them. Their initial case was lost in federal district court in 1952, but the NAACP appealed to the US Supreme Court, making it one of the five cases that formed the basis of the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Worried for her safety, Johns’s parents sent her to live in Montgomery with her uncle Vernon Johns, the activist pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, who preceded Martin Luther King Jr. But as historian Taylor Branch notes, “The case remained muffled in white consciousness, and the

schoolchild origins of the lawsuit were lost as well on nearly all Negroes outside Prince Edward County. . . . The idea that non-adults of any race might play a leading role in political events had simply failed to register on anyone—except perhaps the Klansmen who burned a cross in the Johns' yard one night, and even then people thought their target might not have been Barbara but her notorious firebrand uncle.⁷

The *Brown* decision is one of the most well-known moments of the civil rights movement, but the driving role a group of high school students played in it is much less recognized. Prince Edward County teenagers weren't the only courageous ones. Indeed, in 1955, months before Rosa Parks made her stand, two teenagers—Claudette Colvin and Mary Louise Smith—refused to give up their seats on the bus and were arrested. The Black community was outraged, particularly following Colvin's arrest, but a mass movement did not develop, in part because Colvin and Smith were young and adults did not fully trust them. But both cases, particularly Colvin's, caused rising indignation within Montgomery's Black community and contributed to the decision, when Rosa Parks was arrested, to call for a boycott. If these young women had not done what they did, it is unlikely people would have taken the action they did after Parks's arrest.

Both Colvin and Smith became plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle*, the federal case that Montgomery activists, with lawyer Fred Gray, proactively filed three months into the boycott. These two young women agreed to take part in the case when most adults did not have the courage to do so. Gray could not find a minister or other male leader to serve as one of the plaintiffs—and one of the original plaintiffs, Jeanetta Reese, pulled out a day later when she and her husband were threatened. These two teenagers paved the way for the movement that emerged after Rosa Parks's bus stand, and then went the distance in signing on to the federal case. In May 1956, three judges of the Middle District of Alabama heard the case. Both Colvin and Smith testified. "Our leaders is just we, ourselves," Colvin explained.⁸ Colvin and Smith met for the first time at the hearing. "I was proud" Colvin recalled, "that two teenaged girls had stood up."⁹ The case ultimately went to the US Supreme Court and led to the desegregation of Montgomery's buses. Again, teenagers played a decisive role in that victory.

In the late 1960s, students walked out of high schools across the North, Midwest, and West. Schools in most cities in those regions were still segregated (despite movements challenging them for years). They had biased and often racist curricula, few Black and Latino teachers and administrators, and often criminalized young people through suspensions and

expulsions. Black and Latino high school students had had enough and decided more militant action was needed.

Yet while high school students provided crucial vision and action, in the history books and in our public conversation, they often function as walk-on players, visible in the pictures but not treated as serious political players. The brief glimpses of high school activism in the Black Power era that do appear often focus on angry slogans, dashikis, and fists in the air—in short, on the appearance of Black Power. But that appearance was undergirded by these students' demands for educational equity and respect (which included changes in dress codes, curriculum, facilities, and teaching staff, and increased access to college). They walked out to demand resource equality and teacher and administrator hiring, an increase in the number of guidance counselors, and Black and Latino studies. An examination of these student walkouts challenges the prevalent picture of urban Black teenagers, particularly those living in large Northern cities, as angry, antithetical to the spirit of the civil rights movement, and at fault for their own educational failures.

Looking carefully at these protests reveals that many young people were thoughtful and organized in their politics and saw their demonstrations picking up from earlier civil rights activism that had produced little change in their schools. While some of these protests devolved into disarray, or their participants engaged in unplanned acts of sabotage, most of these walkouts were not simply spontaneous eruptions but actions that were months in the making. Aware of the kind of schooling they were receiving, many students objected to the ways they were characterized as anti-intellectual, "problem students" or criminalized in school. Attempting to voice their grievances, they were ignored or treated like troublemakers (as their parents had been), and then moved to more confrontational action.

Fears of juvenile delinquency and the rise of more extreme forms of school discipline drastically escalated in the mid- to late-1950s in many school districts across the United States.¹³ That shift took place in the decade after *Brown*, often alongside protests for comprehensive desegregation in cities. Many districts, from New York to Los Angeles, cast Black and Latino students as "problem students," invested in new modes of punishment, and poured large amounts of money into new rehabilitation programs to address juvenile delinquency, in part to deflect calls for

desegregation. At the same time, many Northern and Western cities were seeing a great deal of Black migration from the South, Mexican migration to the Southwest, and Puerto Rican migration to the Northeast. The children of migrants were channeled into increasingly overcrowded, segregated, punitive schools. Resources were limited and buildings were often decrepit. Even working bathrooms were in short supply. Parents were treated as part of the problem—and weren't taken seriously when they tried to intervene on behalf of their children's educations and protested repeatedly, as earlier chapters demonstrate, about the state of their children's schools. By the late 1960s, young people took up the fight.

During the first week of March 1968, high school students staged a five-day walkout at six Los Angeles high schools—Garfield, Roosevelt, Lincoln, Wilson, and Belmont, all predominantly Chicano schools in East Los Angeles, and at Jefferson High School, a Black school in South Los Angeles. These dramatic school walkouts drew attention to curriculum and dress code issues and dramatized the lack of resources and inferior schooling conditions where Black and Chicano children were educated. Students pressed for college-prep courses, more Black and Chicano teachers and administrators, and community control of schools. The LA walkouts show commonalities in the types of discrimination Black and Chicano students faced in city schools, and in the ways Black and Chicano young people together took the lead, highlighting their willingness to take dramatic action and engage in the planning to make it happen.¹⁴ In doing so, they forced their parents and other adults in the community to action as well.

In 1966, young people, including a number of Chicano college students who would play an important role assisting the East LA walkouts, organized the reform-oriented Young Citizens for Community Action; by 1968, inspired in part by the Black Panther Party, the YCCA reformulated to call itself the Brown Berets. With the help of a local priest, YCCA opened La Piranya in 1966, an East LA coffeehouse where young people could meet, discuss, and hang out. Many Chicano high school students congregated there; some Black young people came as well. Prominent radicals such as Cesar Chavez, Reies Lopez Tijerina, H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, and Ron Karenga all visited La Piranya. According to historian Ernesto Chavez, "The coffeehouse remained, however, a gathering place for young people run by young people, with little and only nominal supervision."¹⁵ Police would often harass the young patrons of La Piranya,

claiming that it was a hangout for hoodlums. La Piranya was forced to close in March 1968, just days before students walked out.

By early spring 1968, according to legal historian Ian Haney Lopez, plans for mass walkouts in the Chicano high schools in East LA were in place. Strike committees were organized at each high school and a central committee formulated a list of demands, which included “reduced class size, more teachers and counselors, expanded library facilities, and an end of the requirement that students contribute janitorial services. By and large, however, the demands focused on community control of the schools: the students called for bilingual education, more Mexican teachers, the implementation of a citizen review board and the establishment of a Parents’ Council.”¹⁶ Part of the issue was the high dropout rate, as students were being suspended or forced out of school, as well as the tracking of Black and Latino young people into vocational classes.

As was the case with Barbara Johns, rising student anger was driven in part by having seen how their schools differed from those educating white students in the city. “Our schools on the Eastside,” Chicana student Paula Crisostomo explained,

were in such poor condition as compared to others schools. We had taken this [trip] to . . . Paley High. And just the physical appearance was appalling to all of us. And I know for myself, never having ventured very far from my own neighborhood . . . just traveling out and seeing how other people lived and how other kinds went to school . . . The building of the new high school, Wilson [in East Los Angeles] was taking an awfully long time. . . . And again schools in the Valley and West LA, brand-new schools were being put up right away with swimming pools.”¹⁷

On Friday, March 1, to protest the cancellation of the school play, students staged an impromptu walkout at Wilson High School in East Los Angeles. The Wilson students had jumped the gun on the strike plans students were making, but once they had walked out, students at the other schools were committed to following. On Tuesday, March 5, thousands of students at Garfield High School (in predominantly Chicano East LA) and Jefferson High School (in predominantly Black South LA) stayed out of their afternoon classes “in orderly fashion.”¹⁸ The next day, thousands of

students at Lincoln and Roosevelt High Schools walked out as well. Simultaneously, four hundred Jefferson students congregated on the bleachers instead of going to classes. Jefferson students initially walked out to draw attention to conditions in the cafeteria, but their grievances included dress code and hairstyle restrictions, lack of Black history in the curriculum, teacher insensitivity, poor guidance counseling, lack of college preparation, and the need for more Black administrators. (Black students were required to wear their natural hair no longer than two inches. Homeroom and physical education teachers would measure students’ hair with a ruler, and students were sent home if their hair was too long. The physical inspection and monitoring were deeply violating to students.)

Two student leaders at Jefferson, Brenda Holcomb and Larry Bible, told the *LA Sentinel* that dissatisfaction about conditions at the school had been building for a while but students’ grievances hadn’t been taken seriously. Students were frustrated with the ways their concerns had been brushed aside and decided to take measures into their own hands. Issues of class size, curriculum, hiring, and college preparation had been long-standing grievances that community activists had been pressing for years. Bible explained: “We picked up on what was already started.” Students had formed a Black Student Union in 1966 and looked to Malcolm X as an inspiration. At four Black high schools—Fremont, Jordan, Washington, and Jefferson—students boycotted school in May 1967 to honor Malcolm X’s birthday.

Moreover, like their Chicano peers across town, students at Jefferson noted that LAUSD’s curriculum almost completely ignored the literatures, histories, and experiences of Blacks and Latinos. According to Bible, those Blacks who did appear in the curriculum were “yes sir, no sir” types, rather than rebels. Students had taken steps to educate themselves, drawing on the resources of the public library and the advice of a handful of sympathetic teachers, and had organized in study groups the previous year. “We were coming with action,” Bible explained, referring to the walkouts as the “accumulation of a year and a half” of growing frustration and unanswered Black grievances around the kind of education Black students were receiving.¹⁹ The criminalization of Black and Chicano youth in the city’s schools was staggering. Over 50 percent of Chicano high school students were forced to drop out, according to historian Ernesto Chavez, “either because of expulsion and transfers to other schools or because they had not

been taught to read and thus failed their classes.”²⁰ A star track athlete at Jefferson, Bible believed he was made an example of because of his activism, suspended from school and followed home by the police.²¹

The walkouts also stemmed from the lack of guidance counselors and college-prep classes at Black and Chicano high schools. Many students getting As were not being properly prepared for college and were unable to pass college entrance exams, while others were tracked out of college courses altogether. Jefferson had only one counselor for every five hundred students. Most of the student organizers at Jefferson were student leaders in the academic tracks. As they prepared to go to college, these students felt the inadequacies of the education they were receiving at Jefferson—and objected to the ways they were not expected to be college material and how a diploma from a school like Jefferson was looked down upon in the city.²² Thus, contrary to the popular notion of Black Power appealing to troublemakers turned off on school, the protests at Jefferson reveal the ways successful students—indeed student leaders—turned to militancy as a way of demanding a quality education. According to Larry Bible, Black Power movements in Los Angeles—and the walkout at Jefferson in particular—were, in part, intended to show “the intellectual side of Black people.”²³

One reason they turned to walkouts was that they had had little success getting their concerns addressed by other means. Holcomb explained: “Too often teachers and administrators shrugged off student complaints or branded students who differed with them as ‘troublemakers.’”²⁴ As Floyd Benton, a sixteen-year old Jefferson High School student, explained: “The news media, instead of dealing with the causes, jumped on our backs. We were very orderly.”²⁵

School protests would continue over the following years in South and East Los Angeles. In December 1968, students, along with a number of Black teachers, walked out of Fremont High School (which was 95 percent Black), demanding the removal of (white) principal Robert Malcolm, the hiring of more Black teachers and administrators, and the creation of Black studies courses. While the protests succeeded in prompting changes in teaching and administrative personnel, the BOE capitulated to the demands of teachers for more security personnel on campus. Increased security measures and police presence were the targets of student protests the following spring. In March 1969, eleven Black junior high schools and seven Black high schools walked out to demand the police leave campus.³² And again in the fall of 1969, students walked out of Jefferson to protest overpolicing at school. Policing—and the disproportionate security forces at schools serving students of color—would continue to be a significant grievance of Black and Latino community activists and young people in years to come. Many of the high school student organizers went on to be leading educators, artists, politicians, journalists, and scholars in the city.

Similar walkouts occurred across the country. As in Los Angeles, students picked up the struggle for educational equity, hiring, and desegrega-

tion they had seen parents or community members engage in for years and injected it with new militancy. Thousands of students in Boston walked out of school and organized protests calling for more Black studies—“culturally relevant education”—and desegregation. Growing frustration about the lack of change in Boston had led them to form a Black Student Union and, in January and February 1971, to call for a citywide boycott. The organization of Black teachers endorsed the student strikes. Student leader Anthony Banks, speaking to Boston school officials in 1971, explained: “We are fighting for the same things our parents fought for over 10 years ago right here in Boston but we will not bow down to the threats from the mayor or the School Committee. . . . We intend to fight on until schools change to meet the needs of the students they are supposed to educate.”³³ Similar to their LA counterparts, these young people challenged the ways they were often cast as the problem and blamed for the inadequacies of their own educations. As one young woman said, “Juvenile delinquent youth they called us. But we were simply trying to make a statement.” They had five demands: recruit Black teachers, recruit Black guidance counselors, end harassment of Black students, grant amnesty to all striking students, and commission an independent study of racial patterns in the city’s schools. Many of their demands were similar to those that the NAACP had presented to the School Committee eight years earlier.

Foregrounding the history of high school activism shows the powerful organizing and leadership roles young people played. Directly challenging the idea that they were at fault for their educations, these young people put forth a vision of the kind of education they deserved but weren’t getting. A record of their actions provides, as LA walkout organizer Moctezuma Esparza explained decades later, a “manual on how to organize, you know, what the risks are, what has to be thought of, and what could happen, and what needs to be done.”³⁴ The power of this history lies in what high school students accomplished and envisioned, often over the objections of many adults. But that may be what leads to the backgrounding of this history as well. These young people demonstrated that they and their families were committed to educational excellence, but city leadership continued to provide them with a separate and unequal education and treat them as “problem students.” Students fought back to show that they were not the problem but that the education they were being provided was—a lesson this country still wants to ignore.