



## How Alabama Can Earn a Straight "A" in Civil Rights Education

Tondra L Loder-Jackson, University of Alabama at Birmingham

In America's perpetual struggle for civil rights, new battlegrounds appear every few years. Recently, Sanford, Florida, Ferguson, Missouri, and Charlottesville, Virginia were on the front lines of this struggle – and notably, they are geographically distant from bastions of the mid-twentieth-century civil rights movement as Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery, Alabama. Yet the histories of Alabama's keystone civil rights cities are essential for understanding struggles for freedom, past and present. Alabama's past as both a hallowed and harrowing place in the battle for civil rights ironically positions the state to lead the way in educating students across America about the civil rights movement. To live up to this important responsibility, the state's policymakers and educators must invest more in the state's curriculum on these issues.

### Where Alabama Stands in Teaching the Movement

The Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery started in 1991 with the aim of "reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children." It periodically publishes [an assessment](#) about *Teaching the Movement: The State of Civil Rights Education in the United States*. *Teaching the Movement* offers the most extensive review and evaluation of state civil rights curriculum standards. The most recent 2014 report gave Alabama a grade of "B" and ranked the state sixth among all 50 states plus Washington D. C.; and the report acknowledged that Alabama's curricular standards "contain an exceptionally high amount of required detail." Attention to detail also made Alabama one of the highest-ranking states in another assessment, the Fordham Institute's *The State of State U. S. History Standards 2011*.

Alabama's teachers can offer powerful insights into U.S. history because they have access to well-organized curricula featuring extraordinary primary source documents. Specifically, *Teaching the Movement* analyzed a 2004 Alabama *Social Studies Course of Study*, even though the Alabama State Department of Education released a new version in 2010. Nevertheless, even the outdated Alabama curriculum covered 100% of measured elements about civil rights leaders and groups, and 75% of the elements about events. Alabama's course of study received its lowest scores on addressing historical causes (29%) and opposition to the civil rights movement (25%). And, notably, Alabama scored less than satisfactory (43%) on teaching about the tactics of the civil rights movement, because the state's course of study could address in more depth tactics such as Black Power, sit-ins, and voter registration.

### How to Achieve an Unequivocal "A"

What can Alabama's educators do to earn an "A" across the board? More importantly, how can they insure that their students are receiving a deep, enriching education about the state's pivotal civil rights history? What follow are some recommendations from my research and experiences.

**Require civil rights content in all grades, kindergarten through high school.** Alabama's current *Course of Study* requires the heaviest emphasis on the civil rights movement in fourth, sixth, tenth, and eleventh grades, with special emphasis on voting rights in the twelfth grade. Although there are some standards that briefly address civil rights in other grades, this content could be stressed at all grade levels. For example, first graders who are required to learn about "historical events and celebrations in the local community and throughout

Alabama” should be exposed to civil rights content appropriate for their developmental level. Paula Young Shelton’s award-winning book, *Child of the Civil Rights Movement*, is a notable possibility, appropriate for children in preschool through third grade.

**Address shortfalls in current standards about history, opposition, and tactics.** *Teaching the Movement* noted “a lack of clarity on the causes of the movement and the nature and extent of white resistance.” One example points to discussion of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing without express discussion of the notorious police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor or the Ku Klux Klan. Notably, Alabama’s updated 2010 course of study does include information about the Klan. However, more could be done to teach students more about opposition to civil rights equality. Furthermore, state standards should include more on the tactics used by civil rights leaders, organizations, and activists. There is little acknowledgment, for example, of the important contributions to the Birmingham protests made by African American educators through their teaching and organizing.

**Update and expand noteworthy state resource guides.** *Teaching the Movement* lists the Alabama Learning Exchange as one among “Nine Notable State Resource Guides.” To maintain this important resource, Alabama’s educational leaders must update and expand the State Department of Education website to include new lesson plans, preferably developed by teachers throughout the state and across the country. The National Endowment for the Humanities sponsored three civil rights-focused **Summer Teacher Institutes** in 2018, one of which focused on the Alabama Civil Rights Movement. In each of these programs, some two to three dozen teachers from across the country convened to learn about civil rights history and design new curricula to improve instruction in their states. Teachers remain a largely untapped resource for developing innovative civil rights curricula and pedagogy, and these Summer Teacher Institutes are a site where teacher expertise could be tapped.

**Engage Alabama’s treasure trove of scholars, archivists, and librarians.** The 2010 *Alabama Social Studies* guide lists an impressive number of educators, state leaders, and scholars who contributed to the current standards. However, many more can offer ideas and ongoing support, especially for ways to use primary sources and teach historical methods. Alabama is home to a treasure trove of friendly, resourceful, and experienced scholars, archivists, and librarians – experts located in its colleges and universities, public libraries, and civil rights organizations and more than willing to visit schools and host field trips to their workplaces. Examples include staff people at the Alabama Department of Archives and History in Montgomery, the Birmingham Public Library, and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

Overall, with just a few more curricular steps, Alabama is on its way to becoming the state that sets the national bar high for teaching about the civil rights movement. The state has an opportunity to become first in a quest for racial justice where for too long in the past it was last.

**Read more in Tondra L. Loder-Jackson, *Schoolhouse Activists: African American Educators and the Long Birmingham Civil Rights Movement* (State University of New York Press, 2015).**