

# Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

## Engage

You've probably already heard of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., right? You might be familiar with his role in the civil rights movement, or maybe one of his iconic speeches, like "I Have a Dream." But what else did he do—and how were he and other activists able to achieve such significant change across the United States?

## Explore

Born in 1929, Dr. King grew up attending segregated schools in Georgia, where Jim Crow laws were in full effect. These discriminatory laws mandated racial segregation in all public facilities, like schools, restrooms, and transportation. Facilities for Black people were underfunded, and consistently lower quality than those designated for Whites.

Dr. King was a talented student, and he went on to earn not only an undergraduate degree but a doctorate, the highest degree any university grants. While completing his studies in theology, Dr. King learned about the work of Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian activist who had used nonviolent resistance to win freedom for his country. Drawing on Gandhi's work and his own Christian faith, Dr. King believed that Black people could use the same strategies to create change in the United States.

## Explain

Dr. King and many other activists practiced civil disobedience by refusing to comply with racist laws as a form of protest. In December 1955, an activist named Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, when she refused to give up her bus seat to a White passenger. After Parks's arrest, Dr. King helped organize a boycott of the Montgomery bus system. Thousands of Black citizens stopped riding the buses to protest segregation, opting to walk or carpool instead. The boycott lasted 381 days, more than a year! That's a really long time to sustain this type of activism! Dr. King—and others—disrupted the system in place, and it paid off: the Supreme Court later ruled bus segregation unconstitutional.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, Dr. King traveled around the US, delivering speeches and supporting protests. As the chairman of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he was part of the "Big Six"

leaders of the civil rights movement. The others were James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality, John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, and A. Philip Randolph of the Negro American Labor Council.

Dr. King led marches and boycotts and joined sit-ins at restaurants that refused to serve Black customers. In 1963, he helped organize large, nonviolent civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, to draw attention to integration efforts in the city. Police officers attacked the peaceful protesters with dogs and fire hoses. Images of the violence made it to television, shocking people across the nation and bolstering public support for the civil rights movement. Dr. King himself endured threats, harassment, violence, and more than 30 arrests throughout his time as an activist.

Later that year, hundreds of thousands of people gathered for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a rally in the nation's capital to support civil rights and economic justice. It was here that Dr. King delivered his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. In this powerful address, he spoke of his hope for a world that would someday guarantee equal rights for all, regardless of one's appearance or background.

### **Elaborate**

In 1964, Dr. King became the youngest person at the time to win the Nobel Peace Prize, in honor of his efforts to combat racial inequality through nonviolent protest. In his acceptance speech, he spoke about how he believed that only truth and love could conquer hate.

That same year marked the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which mandated integration in public facilities and outlawed employment discrimination. Though some Southern lawmakers fought the legislation, it ultimately made it through Congress, and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed it into law. Dr. King and other civil rights leaders were present for the signing.

### **Evaluate**

But Dr. King's dedication to equality didn't stop there. After the Civil Rights Act became law, he went on to fight poverty, protest war, and advocate for workers. When he was assassinated in Tennessee in 1968, he was helping Black sanitation workers organize for better treatment and higher wages. Though he was only 39 years old, Dr. King's work had made an indelible impact on the entire country.

