



Street-Smart Second-Graders Navigate the Political Process

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Sometimes the most obvious questions elude all but children. Inexperienced with the inequities of life and adult strategies to adjust and adapt to them, the vision of children is unclouded. They see all the contradictions and discrepancies before them, and they ask why. My most exciting year of teaching began with one such question, and the map of New York City was forever changed by it!

It all began in September 1992 at the Mary McLeod Bethune School in Central Harlem, New York. I was leading my second-graders through a geography lesson. Using a map of Harlem, I pointed out that many of the streets in our neighborhood are named after famous African Americans, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Malcolm X. And right in the middle of my lesson, a seven-year-old boy popped the big question, "Why are all the streets named after men?" The question stunned me. While it pointed to a blatant omission in the naming of streets, it was one that I had never noticed. Once pointed out, it could not be ignored. And so we set out to redress this injustice; little did we know that, in doing so, we would make history!

I initiated the new project by seeking out detailed maps of

Harlem. The children worked in small groups, poring over the maps in search of a street named after a woman. There was none to be found, and so we wrote a class letter to the mayor and to our local community board, requesting further information. The response: Not only was there no street in Harlem named after an African American woman, but there wasn't one street in all of Manhattan named for one. We wrote back to the mayor and to the community board for information on street naming procedures. The response took several months; and we used this time to prepare our case. We conducted a study of famous African American women. Each child chose one woman to research and write about for the class. The students presented their reports, and the class voted on a woman for whom they wished to name a street. It was a three-way tie: Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Harriet Tubman.

Next, we took neighborhood walks and scoured over our maps to compile a list of all the streets in Harlem that were not named after anyone. We matched each of our three candidates with a street from the list. The students were required to articulate their rationale for this matching, to show a clear and logical connection between the street and woman.

For Rosa Parks, the class picked 126th Street. Since 125th Street is named after Martin Luther King, Jr., and since Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks worked side by side, the class reasoned that they should have streets that were side by side. For Harriet Tubman, we picked Fifth Avenue. Since Harriet Tubman played such a central role in African American history and in the lives of so many runaway slaves, the class felt she should be given a street which was central to passage in the city. And for Mary McLeod Bethune, we chose 134th Street because our school, which is named after Mary McLeod Bethune is on 134th Street, and the students would pass it every day.

We were now ready to take a final vote. This time the class chose Mary McLeod Bethune, who dedicated her life to educating and helping young African Americans. She was also the founder of Bethune-Cookman College in Florida and the National Council of Negro Women.

By now, we had received a letter from the community board, detailing the procedures that must be followed for requests of street and park name changes. We had to: (1) write a letter to the Community Board requesting to be heard before the Transportation Committee; (2) include a biography of the person to be honored; (3) show support from



▲ Former Mayor Dinkins about to sign the bill into law.

residents along the affected street.

We drew up a petition to rename 134th Street and scouted the neighborhood, seeking signatures.

We filled several pages with names of local residents in support of our cause. We wrote a compelling letter to the Community Board, presenting our case. We sent copies of this letter to the mayor, our borough president, our United States and state senators, our state assemblyman and United States congressman, our city councilwoman, the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the National Council of Negro Women, and many community leaders.

At the next meeting of the community board's transportation committee, several students made a presentation, requesting that 134th Street be renamed after Mary McLeod Bethune. The board approved our request, and referred the resolution to our local councilwoman, who introduced it to the City Council. They, in turn, referred it to their Committee on Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs, which scheduled a hearing in early October, 1993.

By this time it was a new school year. I called all the parents of my old class and arranged to take them to the committee hearing, and I worked with students,

preparing them to testify before the committee. At the hearing, the children gave a splendid presentation and the committee passed the bill unanimously. Ten days later we were at City Hall, where the entire City Council voted unanimously to rename the street. And then on November 22nd, we were back at City Hall to meet Mayor Dinkins and watch as he signed the bill into law!

One of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of this project was learning to navigate and sometimes push my way through the city bureaucracy. Before every meeting, I had to make countless calls to city offices in order to confirm and reconfirm plans. I often met with multiple layers of miscommunication and confusion. I sometimes encountered a certain reluctance to earnestly and meaningfully include the children throughout the process. I had to plead, shout, and rant and rave to make sure my students' voices would be heard and that they would actively participate in every step of the legislative process. Getting the bill passed was not enough! I wanted my students to know that they had attended every meeting, that they had pleaded their case, that they had fought for

their cause, and that they had made it happen!

Although the legislative process was not part of the second-grade social studies curriculum, an important question had been raised and needed to be addressed. In the process of addressing that question we did accomplish our original goals, which were to learn about Harlem, read maps, and navigate the neighborhood. But the students also developed a whole host of other skills which were not included in the curriculum, yet were an integral part of the process and crucial to reaching our goal. Students learned about government and democracy; they learned about the legislative process and how to access it; they learned how to develop arguments and write persuasively; they learned to prepare and present testimony; they learned how to speak and carry themselves in public. They learned that they can make a difference and, at the same time, that it can take a long time to make a change and that you need to be persistent to be successful. The children had a chance not only to learn about democracy but to experience it and to participate in the process. These are lessons that they normally would not have had in second grade. They are also lessons that they never forget. Each morning, as the children set out for a new day of learning, a tangible reminder of these lessons hangs high and proud above them. It is there for everyone to see ... the children, their parents, neighbors and friends. It is Mary McLeod Bethune Place, a sign of their accomplishment!

About the Author

Syma Solovitch-Haynes, 1993 Teacher of the Year for New York City School District 5, received national attention for her work with the second-graders at Mary McLeod Bethune School in Central Harlem.