

## Teaching about the Civil Rights Movement on Long Island

by Alan Singer

Most middle school and high school students see history as something that happened in the distant past (defined as before they were born) and in far away places, that has little impact on their lives. A study of the civil rights movement on Long Island during the 1960's provides social studies teachers with a powerful tool for challenging these conceptions. These events happened here, happened during the life time of their parents, defined currently existing institutions and communities, and continue to shape the attitudes of Long Islanders (including our students) about issues like race relations and social justice. In addition, they illustrate the interplay of local and national forces.

The same qualities that make this topic contemporary, interesting and valuable for students, also make it controversial and potentially explosive for the classroom. Because racial conflicts during the 1960's were not resolved on Long Island or in the United States, racial tension simmers below the surface in many communities and students still live with prejudices and stereotypes about other racial and ethnic groups. Teaching the material in this curriculum guide requires careful preparation and sensitivity. It also offers tremendous potential rewards as students begin to question their assumptions about the importance of understanding history and their ideas about and relationships with people whose cultures and experiences are different from theirs.

As social studies teachers examine this curriculum guide, they will quickly discover that the authors of the explanatory essays in this collection are not "neutral" in their summaries of the articles and issues they researched. In general, the guide presents the view that racial injustice was a major factor in life on Long Island during the 1960's, and that it continues to influence the ways that Black, white, Latino, and Asian people in Nassau and Suffolk Counties live today. However, instead of presenting our conclusions to middle school and high school students as historical fact, the curriculum guide attempts to provide students with documents that will allow them to draw their own historical conclusions. Key to this effort are interviews with Dr. Eugene Reed, a civil rights activists who spearheaded drives to challenge racial discrimination on Long Island, Frank Phillips and Emil Cianciulli, who discuss efforts to integrate Great Neck public schools, and former State Senator and Congressman Norman Lent, who represented white homeowners in their battle to preserve neighborhood schools in Malverne. The interviews allow advocates for different positions to discuss events as they experienced and understood them and provide students with multiple perspectives on major controversies. Social studies themes woven throughout this curriculum guide include the idea that in a democratic society like the United States, the "rights" and aspirations of different social groups and individuals frequently conflict and that these conflicts are not easily resolved.

The curriculum guide committee shortened and edited most of the newspaper articles to eliminate street addresses and focus attention on particular topics. However, language was not changed and the committee believes that the editing leaves both the meaning and tone of the articles intact. For example, the word "nigger" was not removed from an article that appeared in the New York Times on September 23, 1963.

The committee recommends that prior to beginning the study of this material in class, teachers and students agree to basic guidelines for discussions. For example, articles use the terms "colored", Negro, and Black, to describe African Americans. Also, Black is used as a group name and is capitalized, while white is used as a collective term to describe people and is written in lower case. Students need to understand that both language and the way that people identify themselves individually and collectively changes over time. They also need to discuss the way that language impacts on people and the importance of individual sensitivity and respect for groups within their classroom community.