

2026–27 FREDRICKIA HARGROVE POSTER AND ESSAY CONTEST

DIVISION 2 — GRADES 4–5 OPINION ESSAY PROMPT

Theme: “Blueprint for Tomorrow: Constructing Your Character”

Anchor Passage: “Sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures”

READING PASSAGE

Students will read the full transcript of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech “What Is Your Life’s Blueprint?”

As they read, students should pay special attention to **Number 2: Determination to Achieve Excellence** — the section where Dr. King talks about choosing your life’s work and doing it well. It contains the most famous words in the whole speech.

Official contest text: the full transcript, printed in this manual. Listening support and the full source note appear under “Official Contest Text and Listening Access.”

SCENARIO

Adults often ask children, “**What do you want to be when you grow up?**”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asked the students at Barratt Junior High a better question. He didn’t ask them what job they wanted. He asked them **how they were going to do it.**

Listen to what he told them. He said that if it “falls to your lot to be a street sweeper,” then you should “sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures.” Sweep streets like Beethoven composed music. Sweep streets like Leontyne Price sings at the Metropolitan Opera. Sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep them so well, he said, that everyone in heaven and earth would have to pause and say, “*Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.*”

Think about that. Dr. King was standing in front of a room of kids, and he did not tell them to become famous. He told them that **a street sweeper can be great** — if the sweeping is great.

But he said something else too, in the very same part of the speech. He told the students that “doors of opportunity are opening to each of you that were not open to your mothers and your fathers,” and that “the great challenge facing you is to be ready to enter these doors as they open.” He told them to study hard and to “burn the midnight oil.” He seemed to want them to reach for something big.

And then he read them a poem:

If you can’t be a pine on the top of the hill, be a scrub in the valley — but be the best little scrub by the side of the rill; Be a bush if you can’t be a tree.

If you can’t be a highway, then just be a trail; if you can’t be the sun, be a star; it isn’t by size that you win, or you fail—Be the best of whatever you are!

Paducah has been answering this question for a long time.

Oscar Cross was a juvenile officer. That is not a famous job. Nobody makes movies about juvenile officers. But he did it so well that Paducah named a whole club after him, and children still walk through its doors today.

Shirley Bunch became the first Black female deputy in the McCracken County Police Department. She could have stopped at being first. Instead, she spent her whole life mentoring young people — work that never made headlines and changed everything.

Dr. Dennis H. Anderson did the opposite. He looked at a door that was closed to Black students in western Kentucky, and instead of doing a smaller job well, he founded an entire college.

The King Center is asking your school's Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM) Council to help gather student ideas about what schools should teach young people about work.

This leads to an important question: What should our school teach students about work?

VIEWPOINT 1: AIM FOR THE TOP

Supporters of this view say schools should push every student to reach as high as they possibly can. Dr. King said doors are opening that were closed to our parents and grandparents, and that our job is to **be ready when they open**. He told students to study hard and burn the midnight oil. People fought and even died so those doors would open—and supporters argue that walking past an open door wastes everything they paid for. Dr. Dennis H. Anderson did not settle. He established a college.

VIEWPOINT 2: DO ANY JOB WELL

Supporters of this view say greatness is not about *which* job you get. It is about **how you do it**. That is the whole point of the street sweeper. Dr. King did not say “become a painter like Michelangelo.” He said, “Sweep streets like Michelangelo painted.” Supporters argue that a town needs street sweepers, nurses, mechanics, cooks, and juvenile officers — and that a school that only celebrates the students headed for famous jobs is quietly telling everyone else they do not count. Oscar Cross had an ordinary job title and did extraordinary work with it.

VIEWPOINT 3: BE THE BEST OF WHATEVER YOU ARE

Supporters of this view say the poem Dr. King read is the real answer. Not everyone is a pine on top of the hill, and pretending otherwise makes students miserable. The poem says, “*It isn't by size that you win or you fail.*” Supporters argue that schools should help each student find out who **they actually are** — what they are good at, what they love — and then become the best version of that, instead of measuring every child against the same ruler. Shirley Bunch did not copy anyone's blueprint. She built her own.

YOUR TASK

Your school's SBDM Council — the parents, teachers, and principal who make your school's rules — is deciding what to teach students about work and success, and The King Center wants to hear from students. Write an opinion essay to them that answers one question: What **should our school teach students about work?**

Pick the one you believe in most, and make your case:

1. **Aim for the top** — be ready when the doors open.
2. **Do any job well** — sweep streets like Michelangelo painted.
3. **Be the best of whatever you are** — find who you are and become the best of that.

Be sure to:

- Open with a hook — a question, a vivid picture, or a surprising fact — that grabs your reader's attention before you state your opinion.
- State your opinion clearly in the introduction.
- Quote or paraphrase Dr. King's exact words from the transcript to support your opinion, and name him when you do.
- Support your opinion with reasons and evidence from Dr. King's speech transcript.
- Use facts and details from the scenario.
- Include at least one local, Kentucky, or national example of a person who did their work well.
- Organize your essay with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Use linking words to connect your ideas.
- Write respectfully to your SBDM Council and The King Center.

Word Count: 100–500 words.

Key Words: *excellence* (doing something as well as it can be done) · *opportunity* (a chance to do something) · *lot* (what life hands you) · *rill* (a tiny stream) · *contralto* (the lowest singing voice for a woman)

*A note on this question: All three of these ideas are in Dr. King's speech. He said all of them, in the same three minutes. Your job is not to prove the other two are wrong. Your job is to say which one you believe **your school** should teach first — and to explain why.*

KSA ALIGNMENT FOR DIVISION 2

KSA Focus Area	What It Means	How to Show It
Clarity & Coherence	State your opinion clearly and stick to it	"In my opinion, our school should teach ____ because..."
Support/Development	Use reasons and evidence from the text	Quote or paraphrase Dr. King's speech transcript
Organization	Structure your essay with introduction, body, and conclusion	Use linking words: first, another reason, finally
Language & Conventions	Use grade-appropriate language with correct grammar and spelling	Write clearly so school leaders and The King Center understand
Audience & Purpose	Show you know you are writing to school leaders and The King Center	Maintain a respectful tone

Activity 1: “The Greatest Street Sweeper” Read-Aloud

Objective: Let the passage land before any analysis.

1. Read the street sweeper passage aloud twice. The second time, ask students to close their eyes.
2. Ask: “Who did Dr. King compare a street sweeper to?” List them: Michelangelo, Beethoven, Leontyne Price, Shakespeare.
3. Ask the real question: **“Was Dr. King serious?”** Let students argue. Most will say he was exaggerating. Push back: “He said heaven and earth would have to pause. Does he sound like he’s joking?”

KAS Alignment: RI.4.1.

Activity 2: “Great Job or Great Worker?” Sorting Game

Objective: Separate the job from the doing of it.

1. Name pairs aloud: *a lazy doctor / a wonderful bus driver; a bored famous singer / a school custodian who knows every child’s name.*
2. For each pair, students vote: who is greater?
3. Discuss: “Dr. King has an answer. What is it? Do you agree with him?”

KAS Alignment: SL.4.1.

Activity 3: “Ten Names in Two Minutes” — How King Argues

Objective: Teach argument by example.

1. Students hunt the transcript and list every person Dr. King names as an example. They will find about ten.
2. Ask: “Why didn’t he just say ‘people can do great things’? Why name ten?”
3. Then the key move: “He was in Philadelphia, so he named **Marian Anderson**, who grew up in Philadelphia. He even says you should know this because it’s in your own city.”
4. Challenge: **“You are in Paducah. Who is your Marian Anderson?”** Students should name a real local person in their essay.

KAS Alignment: RI.4.8.

Activity 4: “Community Job Walk”

Objective: Ground the debate in real work.

1. Students list every job that keeps their school running for one day — including the ones nobody thanks to.
2. Ask: “What would happen tomorrow if the custodian didn’t come? What if the principal didn’t?”
3. Discuss: “Which of these jobs would Dr. King say can be great?”

KAS Alignment: SL.4.1.

Activity 5: Three Corners Opinion Debate

Objective: Help students form and defend an opinion.

1. Label three corners: *Aim for the Top* · *Do Any Job Well* · *Be the Best of Whatever You Are*.
2. Students move to the corner that matches their opinion and explain using evidence from the transcript.
3. Students may move if persuaded — and must say what changed their mind.

KAS Alignment: SL.4.1.

Activity 6: Opinion Essay Blueprint

Objective: Help students organize the essay.

- Introduction (hook + opinion): ____
- Reason 1 + evidence from Dr. King: ____
- Reason 2 + a real person who did their work well: ____
- Conclusion: Our school should ____

KAS Alignment: W.4.1.

Activity 7: Formal Tone Sort

Objective: Help students write respectfully to real audiences.

Students sort informal and formal phrases. Example — Informal: “Some jobs are lame.” Formal: “Every job in our community deserves respect.”

KAS Alignment: L.4.3.

A note for teachers on one passage: In this section, Dr. King also tells students not to set out to do “a good Negro job,” but “a good job that anybody could do,” and says that anyone who aims lower has “flunked your matriculation exam for entrance into the University of Integration.” The language is of its era and belongs to Dr. King. The idea underneath it is powerful and very much alive: he is telling students to refuse a ceiling that someone else built for them, and to measure their work against the whole world’s standard rather than a lowered one. Read this passage in context and be ready to discuss it plainly.

HOME & COMMUNITY CONNECTION: A PARTNER’S GUIDE FOR GRADES 4–5

Family Activity: “Sweep Streets Like Michelangelo”

Read the street sweeper passage together. Ask: Do you think Dr. King really meant it? What is a job in our family that nobody notices but everybody needs? Who do you know who does an ordinary job extraordinarily well?

Family Activity: The Question Behind the Question

Instead of “What do you want to be when you grow up?”, try Dr. King’s version: **“However you spend your life, how do you want to do it?”** Ask: What would it look like to do that *really* well? Would it matter if nobody noticed?

Community Activity: Learn About a Local Helper

Research Oscar Cross or Shirley Bunch together. Ask: Was this a famous job? Did they do it well? Which mattered more — the job itself, or the doing of the job?