

2026–27 FREDRICKIA HARGROVE POSTER AND ESSAY CONTEST

DIVISION 5 — GRADE 8 ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY PROMPT

Theme: “Blueprint for Tomorrow: Constructing Your Character”

Anchor Passage: “Stay in school... in spite of your economic plight”

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 the passage in which Dr. King urges them to “study hard, to burn the midnight oil” and says plainly, **“don’t drop out of school.”** Read the next sentences very carefully. Dr. King immediately adds, **“And I understand all of the sociological reasons why we often drop out of school.”** Then he says: **“But I urge you in spite of your economic plight, in spite of the situation, that you are forced to live so often with intolerable conditions, stay in school.”**

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

Read those three sentences again, because Dr. King does something remarkable in them.

He tells students to stay in school. Then he says he *understands* the reasons they leave — the economic plight, the intolerable conditions. He does not pretend the barriers are imaginary. He names them. And then he tells the students to stay anyway.

In approximately twenty seconds, Dr. King presents both sides of a longstanding debate among adults. Is the solution encouraging young people to persevere? Or should we address the conditions that make perseverance so costly? He refuses to pick a side—and instead leaves students to determine what a school should actually do with that.

Kentucky is living with this question right now, and the numbers are stark.

Before the pandemic, in the 2018–19 school year, **119,581 Kentucky students — 17.8% —** were chronically absent, meaning they missed 10% or more of the school year. By 2022–23, that number had climbed to **198,524 students, or 29.8%.** Nearly one in three. In the most recent data, chronic absenteeism has fallen from **28% to 25%** — real progress, and still far above where it started. Meanwhile, Kentucky’s graduation rate reached **93.5%** over four years and **94.2%** over five.

Kentucky is graduating nearly all students, but a quarter are missing enough school to fall behind during the process.

Kentucky’s response is worth studying closely. The Department of Education built a statewide campaign around a single phrase: **“You belong.”** Commissioner Robbie Fletcher explained the message this way: when you miss school, *“you miss more than lessons... you miss connection with your school, you miss connection with students, and you miss on building on your own future.”*

That is Dr. King's word. The Commonwealth's answer to a difficult attendance statistic was not a stricter rule. It was **somebodiness**.

Paducah has been struggling with this question for a century, and its heroes did not all answer the same way.

Curlee Brown Sr. was denied admission to Paducah Junior College in 1951 because he was Black. He did not respond by trying harder. He sued — and the court forced the college to integrate three years before *Brown v. Board of Education* reached the Supreme Court. He changed the condition.

Dr. Dennis H. Anderson founded the West Kentucky Industrial College because Black students had nowhere to go. He built the opportunity that did not exist.

Oscar Cross and **Shirley Bunch** worked on the other side of the equation. Cross built a club so children had somewhere to belong after school. Bunch, the first Black female deputy in the McCracken County Police Department, spent her life mentoring young people — because she knew what many of them needed most was one adult who believed in them.

Kentucky history adds **Lyman T. Johnson**, who sued to integrate the University of Kentucky, and **Georgia Davis Powers**, the first Black member of the Kentucky Senate. National history adds **Thurgood Marshall**, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The King Center is asking the **Paducah Independent** and **McCracken County Boards of Education** to help gather student recommendations about how schools should respond when students stop showing up.

This raises a difficult question: **What should schools focus on first to keep students present and building?**

VIEWPOINT 1: CHARACTER AND PERSEVERANCE

Supporters believe schools should emphasize responsibility, work ethic, discipline, and striving for excellence. Dr. King encouraged students to remain in school despite their challenges — his message was not dependent on conditions improving first. They also argue that handling absences as someone else's fault teaches students that their decisions are irrelevant, which contradicts the concept of 'somebodiness.' Each hero in this story, they point out, persisted through adversity.

VIEWPOINT 2: OPPORTUNITY AND BARRIERS

Supporters believe schools should prioritize conditions like transportation, internet access, health care, advanced course availability, mentoring, and cost. Dr. King acknowledged the sociological reasons behind student dropout rates and took them seriously. Supporters note that Curlee Brown Sr. didn't just persevere against segregation; he challenged it legally. Telling a student to persist through barriers that could have been removed is not encouragement but an excuse.

VIEWPOINT 3: BELONGING AND CONNECTION

Supporters claim that other perspectives overlook the real data. Kentucky didn't cut chronic absenteeism through student lectures or poverty reduction. Instead, it launched a campaign called **"You belong"**—recognizing that a student who feels invisible won't return, regardless of buses or pep talks. They argue this aligns with King's core principle: a sense of somebodyhood precedes excellence, as emphasized in his blueprint. Oscar Cross didn't solve poverty or lecture students; he created a space where kids felt they belonged, and as a result, they showed up.

YOUR TASK

A quarter of Kentucky students are chronically absent, and the Paducah Independent and McCracken County Boards of Education must decide where to put their effort first. The King Center wants student recommendations to shape that decision. Write a formal argumentative essay to them that answers one question:

What should schools focus on first to keep students present and building — character, opportunity, or belonging?

Argue for the principle that should guide schools:

1. **Character and perseverance** — schools should emphasize responsibility, persistence, and excellence.
2. **Opportunity and barriers** — schools should remove the obstacles that make staying difficult.
3. **Belonging and connection** — schools should make every student feel they are somebody who is missed when they are gone.

Be sure to:

- State your claim clearly in the introduction.
- Support your claim with reasons and evidence from Dr. King's speech transcript.
- Use at least one statistic from the scenario and explain what it means.
- Use facts and details from local, Kentucky, and national history.
- Fairly present the opposing view and rebut it with logical reasoning and evidence.
- Cite at least three sources. You may draw on King's speech, the NAACP mission, Kentucky School Report Card data, local history, Kentucky history, national civil-rights history, or other documented sources.
- Organize your essay with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.
- Use a formal tone appropriate for The King Center and school boards.

Word Count: 300–750 words.

A note on this question: Dr. King held all three of these ideas at once, in a single passage, without resolving them. That is not a flaw in his speech. It is the assignment.

RESEARCH EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

Data

- Kentucky School Report Card — attendance, graduation, and readiness data by district: kyschoolreportcard.com
- KDE “Attendance Matters” chronic absenteeism resources
- Education Recovery Scorecard — Kentucky: educationrecoveryscorecard.org

Local History

- Curlee Brown Sr. and Paducah Junior College (1951)
- Dr. Dennis H. Anderson and West Kentucky Industrial College
- Oscar Cross and youth opportunity
- Shirley Bunch and mentoring

Kentucky History

- Lyman T. Johnson and the University of Kentucky
- Georgia Davis Powers
- Kentucky higher-education access

National History

- *Brown v. Board of Education*
- Thurgood Marshall
- Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Voting Rights Act of 1965

KSA ALIGNMENT FOR DIVISION 5

KSA Focus Area	What It Means	How to Show It
Clarity & Coherence	Write arguments supporting claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence	“Schools should prioritize ____ because...”
Support/Development	Introduce and distinguish claims from opposing claims	Use King, data, the NAACP mission, and history
Counterclaims	Acknowledge and respond to an opposing claim with logical reasoning and evidence	“Some may argue that _____. However, _____.”
Use of Data	Interpret a statistic rather than only quoting it	“A 25% absenteeism rate means one in four students...”
Citations	Integrate and attribute sources	Name at least three sources
Organization	Use transitions to clarify relationships	Use furthermore, however, consequently
Audience & Purpose	Establish and maintain a formal style	Write respectfully to The King Center and school boards
Language & Conventions	Demonstrate command of standard English	Use precise language and varied sentence structure

TEACHER’S TOOLKIT FOR DIVISION 5

Activity 1: “Twenty Seconds” — Close Reading

Objective: Show students that King holds both sides at once.

1. Isolate the three sentences: *don’t drop out / I understand all of the sociological reasons / in spite of your economic plight... stay in school.*
2. Students annotate each: which viewpoint does each sentence support?
3. Ask: “He argues against himself in twenty seconds. Why would a speaker do that on purpose?”

KAS Alignment: RI.8.1.

Activity 2: Read the Actual Data

Objective: Build statistical literacy.

1. Students pull their own district’s numbers from kyschoolreportcard.com.
2. Each student must find one figure for **their own school** and state what it means in a sentence with no percentage sign in it.
3. Discuss: “What does this number NOT tell us? Can a statistic show whether a student feels they belong?”

KAS Alignment: RH.8.7.

Activity 3: “You Belong” — Analyzing the State’s Answer

Objective: Connect King’s vocabulary to current policy.

1. Present KDE’s campaign message and Commissioner Fletcher’s explanation.
2. Ask: “The state’s answer to an attendance problem was a message about connection. Is that a serious policy or a slogan?”
3. Students find the passage in King’s speech that the campaign echoes.

KAS Alignment: RH.8.1.

Activity 4: Paducah’s Two Answers — Local Case Study

Objective: Connect Paducah history to the debate.

Half the class researches **Curlee Brown Sr.** (changed the condition — he sued). Half researches **Oscar Cross** (built belonging — he opened a club). Each side presents. Then the hard question: *Both worked. Does that mean schools have to choose?*

KAS Alignment: RH.8.1.

Activity 5: Character Is Not Excuse-Making

Objective: Explore the tension honestly.

Discussion question: *Can we believe in personal responsibility and still demand equal opportunity — or does each one weaken the other?* Students must use evidence from King and local history, not opinion alone.

KAS Alignment: SL.8.1.

Activity 6: Counterclaim Workshop

Objective: Improve rebuttal quality.

Students introduce the opposing view fairly, rebut with evidence, and explain why their claim is stronger. Peer review checks one criterion: *is the rebuttal supported by evidence, or only by assertion?*

KAS Alignment: W.8.1b.

Activity 7: Mock Board of Education Hearing

Objective: Practice civic argument.

Students testify for three minutes about what schools should prioritize. Board members ask questions about fairness, cost, feasibility, and student responsibility — and must vote at the end and justify the vote.

KAS Alignment: SL.8.1.

HOME & COMMUNITY CONNECTION: A PARTNER'S GUIDE FOR GRADE 8

Family Activity: The Hardest Sentence

Read King's three sentences together. Ask:

- Is he telling students to persevere, or telling adults to fix things?
- Can he mean both?
- Which one did our family need more?

Community Activity: Opportunity Audit

Look up available school programs: advanced courses, CTE pathways, clubs, internships, tutoring, dual credit, mentoring. Ask: *"Who has access to these opportunities, and who might be missing them?"*

Local History Activity

Research Curlee Brown Sr. Ask:

- Why did he have to sue?
- What did his case change?
- How does his story connect to Dr. King's idea of "somebodiness"?