

A Standards-Aligned Educator Guide for Grades 3 - 7

# FARMERS UNITE!: PLANTING A PROTEST FOR FAIR PRICES

## About the book:

In the late 1970s, grain prices had tanked, farm auction notices filled newspapers, and people had forgotten that food didn't grow in grocery stores. So, on February 5, 1979, thousands of tractors from all parts of the US flooded Washington, DC, in protest.

In 1979, US farmers traveled to Washington, DC, to protest unfair prices for their products. Farmers wanted fair prices for their products and demanded action from Congress. After police corralled the tractors on the National Mall, the farmers and their tractors stayed through a snowstorm and dug out the city. Americans were now convinced they needed farmers, but the law took longer. Boldly told and highlighted with stunning archival images, this is the story of the struggle and triumph of the American farmer that still resonates today.

## About the author - Lindsay Metcalf:

Lindsay H. Metcalf grew up bumping along in her dad's tractor, just like the red one on the cover of *Farmers Unite!* She is a journalist and author of nonfiction picture books: *Beatrix Potter, Scientist*, illustrated by Junyi Wu (Albert Whitman & Company, 2020); *Farmers Unite! Planting a Protest for Fair Prices* (Calkins Creek, 2020); and *No Voice Too Small: Fourteen Young Americans Making History*, a poetry anthology co-edited by Lindsay H. Metcalf, Keila V. Dawson, and Jeanette Bradley, illustrated by Bradley (Charlesbridge, 2020). Lindsay lives in north-central Kansas, not far from the farm where she grew up, with her husband, two sons, and a variety of pets. You can reach her at [lindsayhmetcalf.com](http://lindsayhmetcalf.com).



## Pre-Reading Discussion:

Consider the photograph featured on the front of the jacket flap.

- Identify the vehicles featured in the photograph. Have you ever ridden in vehicles such as these? If so, describe the experience.
- Do you recognize any buildings and structures in the background? If so, which ones?
- What time of year was this photograph taken? Describe how weather contributes to the tone of the photograph.
- Examine the messages printed on the signs posted on the vehicle. Interpret the intended message of each.
- Read the title of the book. The word protest means to oppose, to challenge, and to put up a fight. Determine where, how, and why farmers might plant a protest.
- Make a connection between the title of the book and the photograph. Predict what this book is going to be about.

## Post-Reading Discussion:

"When a bushel of wheat costs me \$3.20 cents to raise and the selling price is around \$2.40, something is wrong," said Fred Bartels, a Colorado farmer.

To survive, farmers got creative (3).

Flags flapped. Signs screamed. "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" blared. The tractors rolled along for weeks, until February 5, 1979, when up to ten thousand vehicles—tractors, trucks, and campers—trampled through rush hour toward Capitol Hill (11).

"It's going to take a united effort to stop the going-out-of-business sale currently under way in rural America," wrote Toni Kelley, one of the organizers (52).

- The word *disparity* means imbalance, inconsistency, and inequality. Discuss the disparity of the situation, that farmers – whose labor feeds the nation – can barely survive on the selling price of their crops.
- Kansas Farmer Marjory Scheufler stated that, "Apathy is going to destroy us" (5). If the word *apathy* is defined as having an uncaring attitude or lack of interest, explain what Marjory meant by that comment. Is she referencing lawmakers or farmers in her statement? Explain your answer.
- Determine why the farmers took initiative to organize a protest. What does this type of "creativity" reveal about the farmers' tenacity?

- Describe the impact ten thousand tractors, farm trucks, and campers rolling into Washington must have been like – powerful farm equipment ascending upon the Capital with a spirit of domination and power.
- Discuss the plan to thwart the farmers' impact devised by the police. Examine the farmers' reaction to being "corralled" like cattle by city dump trucks, garbage trucks, buses, police cars, and vans (19).
- How did the farmers' feel about such inconsiderate and disrespectful treatment? Cite examples from the text to verify your statements.
- When heavy snowfalls paralyzed the city, it was the farmers who banded together to save the community. *The Washington Post* referred to the protesters as being the "best kind of neighbors in a storm" (38). And, yet, Congress still had not responded to their demands for economic parity. Analyze the significance of this event.

- Examine the effect the Farm Aid concert had upon raising public awareness of the importance and critical nature of farmers' plight.
- Through strategic organization and education of citizens and lawmakers, the United Farmer and Rancher Congress eventually had significant impact on both national and state legislation. Compare and contrast the United Farmer and Rancher Congress as an organization and the early protesters of 1977. Discuss the similarities and differences of their methods, intent, and results.
- Analyze the effect the Agricultural Credit Act of 1987 had upon the farmers of the past, present, and future.

## Writing Activity:

Analyze the overall message of the button to the right.

- Identify the emotional impact of the button. List the graphic elements that communicate the determination and significance of their protest.
- Analyze the graphics featured on the button. Explain how the image and text work together to express the intended message of the button.
- Discuss how the graphic elements of this button identify who is protesting and what they want.
- Write an essay summarizing the effectiveness of the protest button. Make a personal connection with the overall messaging. Share your work with the class.



Courtesy of the  
Bayer Museum of Agriculture



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## Create a Protest Button of Your Own

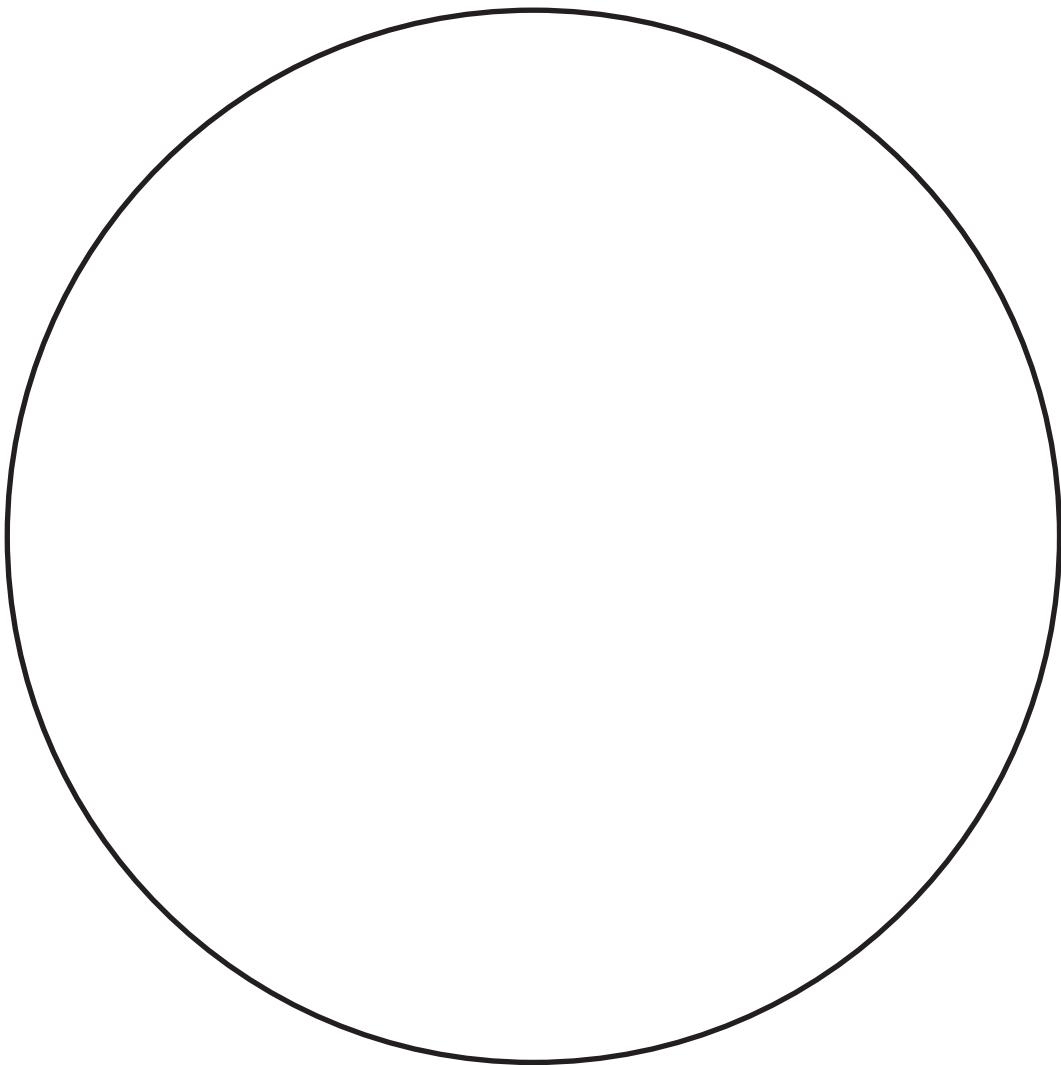
**"We only want to get a fair wage for our work," said George Burrows of Kansas (13).**

### Instructions:

Create a protest button graphic in the circular space below. Plan for the content by asking yourself the following questions before planning your design:

- Define your message. What do you want to say? Who do you want to communicate your message to and why?
- Brainstorm ideas for the graphics, colors, and the messaging for your button.
- What type of font do you plan on using? How will the font choice support the intended message of your button?

Illustrate your prototype in the circle below. If possible, use digital software to create a final product to share with the class. Write a short summary expressing your planning process and intent for your protest button. Share your work with the class.



### COMMON CORE STATE ANCHOR STANDARDS ALIGNMENT:

Reading: R.1, R.2, R.3, R.4, R.7, R.10

Writing: W.2, W.3, W.4, W.7

Speaking & Listening: SL.1, SL.2, SL.4, SL.6

History/Social Studies: RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.3, RH.6-8.5, RH.6-8.7

