On Monday, Jan. 15, in each of its schools and classrooms, 5,400 QCSD students learned of the great civil rights leader.

By Gary Weckselblatt

The Quakertown Community School District honored Martin Luther King Jr. on Monday, with students at every grade level learning about the heroic civil rights leader, whose profound words and selfless deeds place him among the greatest of all Americans.

In one class after another King’s passion for racial justice and equality was sparked by teachers engaging students in the legacy of the man who preached for a colorblind society.

“It was a tremendous day,” Superintendent Bill Harner said of Monday’s curriculum developed specifically to honor Dr. King.

Perhaps there was nothing more stirring than watching King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in Tom Brader’s U.S. History Class.

The last five minutes of the 1963 speech, before 250,000 civil rights supporters in Washington, D.C., “came from his soul, and became the Constitution of the civil rights movement going forward,” Brader said.

Both Brader and Andrew Boquist, the U.S. Government teacher, had students break into smaller groups to read and discuss King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” in which King responded to the criticism of white Alabama clergy, who wanted the battle fought in the courts, and not on the streets.

“The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we stiff creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of water at a lunch counter,” King wrote in the margins of the newspaper, a note that Boquist found fascinating.

He had his students discuss the difference between just and unjust laws and how a law may be perfectly fine as long as it is applied fairly.

It wasn’t only social studies classes where King was part of the curriculum. Amy Eisenmann’s AP Psychology classes used Monday to learn about
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“creative maladjustment,” a term King used in his speeches. Several times he described himself as being “psychologically maladjusted” and called for an International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment.

She had students read excerpts from his speeches and then played videos of King and his melodious tones. “What a dynamic speaker he was,” Eisenmann said.

She also asked students how they could apply his concept of creative maladjustment in today’s society, and spoke of the need to have the “confidence and courage to stand up for what you believe in.”

The reverence for King was also heard at Strayer Middle School, where Principal Derek Peiffer used his morning announcement to talk of King’s legacy.

“He preached that we should stand up to injustice, but do so in a peaceful manner,” Peiffer said. “He spoke about looking at a person for who they are and not what they look like.”

Peiffer read excerpts from “I Have a Dream,” and said King talked about “coming together as humans to help each other and everyone having the same freedoms. With freedom comes responsibility. So ask yourself the following: Do I treat everyone the way I would want to be treated? And do I always do my best and do I help others be successful? And finally, do I do my best to make Strayer Middle School the best it can be?”

Kevin McLaughlin spoke to his seventh graders about King’s “message of equality for all” and of “community service and helping others. The students watched the cartoon “My Friend Martin,” about two boys transported to the time when King was growing up.

“It took them in with the cartoon,” McLaughlin said, “but then you get the history and the message.”

He also gave the students a homework assignment: “What can you do in your community to continue the message of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.?”
Richland Elementary School third graders in Kelly Esposito’s class put together a hallway wall in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on Monday. At right, Quakertown Elementary School kindergartners sing songs with their teacher, Jane Germani, in a day with lesson plans dedicated to the civil rights hero.