

## Elizabeth Eckford and the Little Rock Nine

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### **About this Lesson**

*“Elizabeth Eckford and the Little Rock Nine”* is a brief lesson plan designed to familiarize high school students with the history of racial segregation in American schools, and to introduce them to the bravery of nine African-American students who forever changed the course of American education. This lesson plan is designed to prepare students participating in the live student discussion with Ms. Eckford, so that they have a greater understanding of her contribution to American history, and the significant role that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment played in this historical drama.

The activity consists primarily of reflection questions which allow the student to consider the rationale behind the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown vs. Board of Education, the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and the acts of the Little Rock Nine as seen through photos of Ms. Eckford and her subsequent comments.

**Grade(s) Level**

7-12

**Classroom Time**

20-45 minutes

**Handouts**

- **Photos of Elizabeth Eckford**

**Constitution Connections**

Articles

Amendments

14<sup>th</sup>,

## Background

### A Brief History of School Segregation

American schools were legally segregated by race until the 1950's. Though the enslavement of African peoples ended with the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1865, the legacy of racism was undeniably present in everyday activities that were regulated by Jim Crow laws and other forms of discrimination. Educational segregation was justified by the courts in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), which stated that state-imposed segregation did not violate the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. But this equality was an impossibility in many ways, as most African-Americans were denied the same resources as their White counterparts to create good schools.

*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas (1954)* changed educational segregation when young people in Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware all sued their local education boards so that they could attend public schools in their community on a non-segregated basis. The Supreme Court ruled that such segregation violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment requirement that a state cannot "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." The court wrote specifically that

"To separate [children in grade and high schools] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds."



Little Linda Brown with her new white classmates  
(<http://www.nathanielturner.com/educationhistorynegro27.htm>)

Of course, many southern states were outraged by this ruling and southern legislators swore that integration in the schools would never happen. On Sept 2, 1957, Orval Faubus, governor of Arkansas, defiantly declared that “blood will run in the streets” if African-American children tried to attend Central High School. Two days later, 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford and eight other brave African-American students attempted to do just that.

### **A Brief History of the Little Rock Nine**

After the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, President Dwight Eisenhower tried to get Governor Faubus to voluntarily allow desegregation in Arkansas schools. But Faubus was adamant that he would not allow segregation, and in response, the NAACP filed a lawsuit asking the federal court to prevent Faubus from interfering with desegregation.

On September 4, 1957, nine African-American students attempted to attend the first day of school at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Faubus had called the Arkansas National Guard not to protect the nine students, but instead to block them from entering the school. The Little Rock Nine were turned away in the face of 150 protesters.

Three weeks later, the nine students again attempted to enter Central High. Local police had set up barricades, but because they were not experienced in crowd control, over 1,000 people showed up in protest. The Little Rock Nine entered the school through a side door, after school had already started. It took the mob and people in the school an hour and a half to realize that the nine were in school, and the angry mob took out its frustration on an African-American reporter named Alex Wilson who happened to be standing in the crowd, beating and kicking him. Some police refused to arrest the attackers, saying that they would rather throw down their badges than arrest white people. However, a few kind police helped the Little Rock Nine get out of the building, and whisked them away to safety.

When President Eisenhower saw the television footage of the reporter being attacked, he knew he had to do something. In one of the only two times that an elected official acted to enforce a desegregation court order, Eisenhower sent in 1,200 soldiers from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to Little Rock. The soldiers arrived on the night of September 24, dispersed the mob, and escorted the Little Rock Nine into school on September 25. The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne followed the nine throughout the school until October, at which point the Arkansas National Guard took over. However, the Guard was instructed not to interfere with any student activity within the school. Consequently, the Little Rock Nine were regularly assaulted both mentally and physically throughout the school year. There were constant bomb threats and fire drills, and the school hired 26 additional janitors to go through all the lockers every night to check for bombs. Only once was a bomb found, and it had not exploded only because it contained a faulty fuse.

Faubus was so angry with the forced integration of Central High that the following year, 1958, he shut down all three high schools in Little Rock for the entire school year. Three of the Little Rock Nine graduated from Central High School; three others would have graduated had Faubus not closed the schools during their senior year. In 1959, the high schools were reopened as desegregated high schools.

### **Elizabeth Eckford**

Ms. Eckford was born in 1941, as one of six children born to Oscar Eckford, a railroad worker, and his wife, Birdie, a state employee. Her mother was a overprotective parent, and it was quite difficult for her to watch her daughter go back into harm’s way each school day. Mrs. Eckford lost her job at the end of the school year due to the stress. Mr. Eckford worked at

night, where he remembered “men walked around with shotguns, even though it was not hunting season.” But that intimidation did not keep him from taking Elizabeth to school each morning.

On the morning of September 4, 1957, Ms. Eckford went to school alone because her family lacked a telephone, and therefore, could not communicate with the other students regarding where they would meet up. The photo of Ms. Eckford walking through the mob alone has become the symbolic image of the quiet, dignified determination of the Little Rock Nine and the non-violence beliefs of the Civil Rights heroes.

Ms. Eckford did not graduate from Central High because the schools were closed her senior year. Instead she earned enough credits to attend Central State University in Ohio, where she graduated with a degree in history. Ms. Eckford has received the Army Good Conduct Medal, and together with the Little Rock Nine, she is the recipient of the Springarn Medal, the NAACP’s most prestigious award, and the Congressional Gold Medal.

Ms. Eckford, who is an army veteran and a probation officer, still lives in Little Rock. She continues to challenge students to be active participants in standing up for despised minorities, stating, “true reconciliation can occur when we honestly acknowledge our painful but shared past.”

## Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the rights guaranteed to citizens by the states, with particular focus on the Equal Protection Clause
- Understand the history of racial segregation prior to the courageous acts of the Little Rock Nine
- Understand the enduring legacy of the Little Rock Nine and how their courageous acts forever changed American education

## Activity

Encourage students to consider the following questions:

1. Do you agree with the Supreme Court's position that separating children based on their color can create a feeling of "inferiority...that may affect their hearts and minds?" How might this feeling of inferiority affect these children in later life, when they become adults?
2. Distribute the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and focus on the Equal Protection Clause:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; **nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.**

Equal treatment means the law must treat everyone the same. Why might this Amendment have angered those opposed to school desegregation?

3. Distribute the photos of Ms. Eckford, explaining to them that Ms. Eckford was walking alone from the rest of the other 8 students because she lacked a telephone and did not know the exact time they were all to meet up. Further explain that Ms. Eckford attempted to enter Central High on September 4, 1957, but was turned away. Ask them to consider the following questions:
  - What would you have done when you realized you were surrounded by a hostile and angry mob? What qualities of character do you think Ms. Eckford had to call on/employ in that moment?
  - The white woman yelling at Ms. Eckford, Hazel Massery, called Ms. Eckford in the early 1960's and apologized. In the 1990's, both Ms. Eckford and Ms. Massery appeared together at speaking engagements. However, they have since stopped speaking to each other.
    - Why do you think they have ceased speaking to one another?
  - In her speaking engagements, Ms. Eckford often reminds audiences that "true reconciliation can occur when we honestly acknowledge our painful but shared past".
    - What do you think she means by this statement?



Hecklers follow Elizabeth Eckford as she walks in front of Central High.



After being heckled by protesters, Elizabeth Eckford waits for a bus.



## Further Resources

- “In Little Rock, A Small Act of Defiance Endures,” USA Today, August 30, 2007, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-08-29-Littlerock\\_N.htm?csp=34](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-08-29-Littlerock_N.htm?csp=34)
- [www.centralhigh57.org/](http://www.centralhigh57.org/) - this site was created to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary
- [www.littlerock9.com](http://www.littlerock9.com) - this site is the home of the Little Rock Nine Foundation
- [www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=721](http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=721) - this site gives a great overview of Ms. Eckford
- [www.nps.gov/chsc/](http://www.nps.gov/chsc/) - this site talks about Little Rock Central High, which is now considered a National Park site
- [www.constitutioncenter.org/constitutionday](http://www.constitutioncenter.org/constitutionday)