

“All the World is Watching Us”: The Crisis at Little Rock Central High School, 1954-1957

Grade Level: 7-12

Objectives:

- To learn about and feel emotions of the events surrounding the integration of Little Rock Central High School.
- To relate the events of the Little Rock Central High School crisis to the overall Civil Rights movement, to current events, and to themselves.
- To better understand race relations of the past and present and be encouraged to think about race relations in the future.

Ties to Arkansas History Frameworks: (grades 5-8) TCC1.1, 1.3, 1.4, TCC2.2, 2.3, PPE2.2, PAG1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, SSPS1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, (grades 9-12) TCC1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.2, 2.3, PPE1.1, 1.2, 2.1, PAG4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, SSPS1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6

Ties to the Social Studies Frameworks (U.S.): (grades 5-8) TCC1.3, 1.4, 2.1., 2.3., 2.4, PPE1.3, 1.4, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 2.4, 2.6, 2.7, PDC1.1, 1.7, PAG1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 2.1, 2.5, 2.6, SSPS1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3; (grades 9-12) TCC1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, PPE1.1, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.7, PDC1.1, PAG1.1, 1.4, 1.5, SSPS1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7

Teacher's note: Read aloud the Gilder-Lehrman AP US Study Guide page on the civil rights movement:

<http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-rights-movement/essays/civil-rights-movement>

Little Rock Central High School, the symbol of the end of racially segregated public schools in the United States, was the site of the first important test for the implementation of the United States Supreme Court's historic *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision of May 17, 1954. This decision declared that segregation in public education was an unconstitutional violation of the "equal protection of the laws" clause in the Fourteenth Amendment.

Events in the fall of 1957 drew international attention as Little Rock became the epitome of state resistance when Arkansas Governor Orval E. Faubus directly questioned the sanctity of the federal court system and the authority of the Supreme Court's desegregation ruling when nine African-American high school students sought an education at Little Rock Central High School.

The controversy in Little Rock was the first fundamental test of the United States' resolve to enforce African American civil rights in the face of massive southern defiance during the period following the Brown decisions. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower was compelled by white mob violence to use federal troops to ensure the rights of African-American children to attend the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School, he became the first president since the post-Civil War Reconstruction period to use federal troops in support of African-American civil rights. As a result, the eyes of the world were focused on Little Rock in 1957 and the struggle became a symbol of southern racist reaction, as Governor Faubus created a constitutional crisis.

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. In August of 1954, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) petitioned the Little Rock School Board for immediate integration of the schools. In response, the school board stated that "until the 'Supreme Court of the United States makes its decision...more specific, Little Rock School District will continue with its present program." With this statement, the school board ensured that they would not desegregate the schools of the city quickly. The NAACP (led by lawyer Wiley Branton) petitioned the school board "to take immediate steps to reorganize the public schools under your jurisdiction in accordance with the constitutional principles enunciated by the Supreme Court."

In 1955, responding to further Supreme Court rulings and re-argument of the *Brown v. Board* case known as *Brown II*, the Little Rock School Board adopted a plan of gradual integration called the Blossom Plan (named for the Little Rock School District superintendent, Virgil T. Blossom). It called for desegregation to begin at the high school level in September of 1957. Lower grades would be gradually integrated over the following six years.

While the local, state, and federal governments were trying to figure out ways to desegregate schools, a group of segregationists formed and called themselves the Capital Citizens Council. Their goal was to keep the schools of Little Rock segregated. Another group, headed by several women, formed the Mother's League of Central High School to oppose desegregation

The first test came in 1956, when 27 African American students attempted to register in white Little Rock schools but were turned down. Instead, they were told to attend school in the newly opened Horace Mann High School for black students at the former Dunbar High School building because construction was not yet completed. Superintendent Blossom assured the student's parents that he wanted to be "kind" to these students, but one NAACP representative said that the superintendent's actions were "more like the old run-around deception, than an honest and conscientious plan of the school board to integrate the schools."

Next, the NAACP filed a lawsuit on behalf of 33 black students who were denied admittance to white Little Rock schools in 1956. In *Aaron v. Cooper*, the NAACP stated that their objective in filing the suit "was to secure the prompt and orderly end of segregation in the public schools. We want all children, regardless of race, to have the opportunity to go to the public schools nearest their homes." The suit was dismissed, and a federal judge declared that the Little Rock school board acted in "good faith" but the judge retained jurisdiction over the case.

As desegregation of Little Rock schools grew closer, the Arkansas State Legislature approved four "segregation bills" in early 1957. These bills created the State Sovereignty Committee (House Bill 322) to investigate those encouraging integration, removed the mandatory school attendance requirement at all integrated schools (HB 323), required the registration of certain individuals and organizations such as the NAACP (HB 324), and authorized school boards to use school funds to fight integration (HB325). In addition, the legislature also placed a three percent sales tax on the election ballot to ensure that more money would be spent toward education and fighting desegregation.

The Capital Citizens Council issued a statement in mid-1957 that supported segregation: "The Negroes have ample and fine schools here and there is no need for this problem except to satisfy the aims of a few white and Negro revolutionaries in the local Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People."

Other members of the Capital Citizens Council gathered in the summer of 1957 to plan their fight against desegregation. They ran advertisements in newspapers that included the following questions: "At social functions would black males and white females dance together? Would black students join clubs and travel with whites? Would black and white students use the same rest rooms?"

“We are confident that the citizens of Little Rock will demonstrate on Tuesday for the world to see that we are a law abiding people.”

—Arkansas Gazette editorial, September 1, 1957

Amid growing turmoil in August 1957, the governor of Georgia came to Arkansas and held a state-wide meeting to oppose desegregation. He praised the Arkansans who were fighting to preserve the right of the state to oppose the federal government (also called state’s rights). He also met with the Capital Citizens Council and Governor Faubus to show his support for their efforts.

On the morning of September 2, 1957, Governor Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine African American students from entering Little Rock Central High School. In a televised speech, he proclaimed that it was to prevent violence and protect the students. The nine students were told by the Little Rock school board members to stay away from school for their own safety because the governor had heard a rumor that white supremacists were headed toward Little Rock.

On September 3, 1957, the Mother’s League held a sunrise service at Little Rock Central High School. It was attended by members of the Capital Citizens Council, angry parents of white students, and local religious figures. The crowd sang “Dixie,” flew the Confederate battle flag, and praised Governor Faubus. Despite the protest, federal Judge Richard Davies issued his ruling that desegregation would continue the next day. In response, Governor Faubus ordered the National Guard to stay at the school.

The nine black students attempted to enter Little Rock Central High School and were turned away by the National Guard on September 4. Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, and Terrence Roberts arrived at the school without their parents. Eckford found herself surrounded by an angry mob. She sat alone at on a bus stop bench and waited to go to her mother’s work. Later, Eckford remembered, “I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the mob – someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.” At least one sympathetic member of the crowd, Dr. Benjamin Fine, a white reporter from New York, sat down beside her and said, ‘Don’t let them see you cry.’” The following day, none of the nine students attempted to re-enter the school and the Little Rock School Board requested that desegregation be temporarily halted.

“Little Rock arose yesterday to gaze upon the incredible spectacle of an empty high school surrounded by National Guard troops called out by Governor Faubus to protect life and property against a mob that never materialized.

—Arkansas Gazette editorial, September 4, 1957

In the following days, Governor Faubus appeared on national television to reaffirm his belief in segregation. He also met with President Eisenhower and “assured the President of my desire to cooperate with him in carrying out the duties resting upon both of us under the Federal Constitution.” Meanwhile, Judge Davies began legal proceedings against the governor and several National Guardsmen for interfering with integration. Under federal court order, Governor Faubus removed the troops, left the state for a governor’s conference, and the city police had to try and keep order at the school.

Finally, on September 23, the nine African American students (after facing a crowd of over 1,000 white protestors), entered Little Rock Central High School. An anonymous man commented, “They’ve gone in...Oh, God, [they] are in the school.” Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the nine, remembered the moment, “I had long dreamed of entering Central High. I could not have imagined what that privilege could cost me.”

White students had mixed reactions to the nine African American students. Several jumped out of windows to avoid contact with the students. Others, like Robin Woods, said, “That was the first time I’d ever gone to school with a Negro, and it didn’t hurt a bit.”

Outside of the school, black journalists who covered the story were harassed and physically attacked. They ran from the mob and took refuge elsewhere in Little Rock. President Eisenhower was “disgusted” when he heard about the rioting and ordered in federal troops to contain the chaos. Over 1,000 members of the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division (“Screaming Eagles”) from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, came to Little Rock. The Arkansas National Guard troops at the school were then placed under their command. Observing the soldiers, activist and mentor to the nine students, Daisy Gatson Bates commented that “any time it takes eleven thousand five hundred soldiers to assure nine Negro children their constitutional rights in a democratic society, I can’t be happy.”

On September 25, the nine students were escorted back into Central High School after General Edwin Walker of the United States Army addressed the white students of Little Rock Central High School in the auditorium, “You have nothing to fear from my soldiers, and no one will interfere with your coming, going, or your peaceful pursuit of your studies.” When they arrived, the student body reaction was once again mixed. One student commented that “if parents would just go home and let us alone, we’ll be all right...we just want them to leave us be. We can do it.”

Governor Faubus, meanwhile, took a siege mentality to forced integration at Little Rock Central High School and said, "We are now in occupied territory. Evidence of the naked force of the federal government is here apparent, in these, unsheathed bayonets in the backs of schoolgirls." After less than a month at the school, most members of the 101st Airborne left Arkansas and turned their duties over to the Arkansas National Guard, which was now federalized. Discipline problems resurfaced at the school after the federal troops left and school records indicate that incidents of harassment of the nine students escalated.

Local business leaders, who had called for peaceful compliance with court orders for school integration, were met with resistance. For instance, the Mother's League sought through the court system to have the federal troops removed from Central High School on the grounds that it violated federal and state constitutions (the action was dismissed) and Governor Faubus issued statements expressing his desire that the nine students be removed from the school. Religious congregations of all faiths gathered to pray for a peaceful end to the conflict and the NAACP fought the validity of the Sovereignty Commission and the forced registration of certain membership lists and organizations. One of those fined for not registering as a member of the NAACP was Daisy Bates, mentor to the nine students, who was fined \$100 for not complying with the State Sovereignty Commission regulations.

Throughout the school year, incidents of violence against the nine students grew. Verbal arguments and physical violence were common. The school received five bomb threats in a seven-day period in January 1958. That month, Minnijean Brown, one of the nine students, had chili dumped on her shoulders by a boy in the lunchroom. A month later, Brown called one of her tormenters "white trash" and was attacked by several bystanders. She said of the argument, "I just can't take everything they throw at me without fighting back..." Brown was expelled - along with several other white students who had cards that read, "One down...eight to go" (these cards were distributed to the school students). After these incidents, Minnijean Brown left the school and moved to New York. The violence was not limited to the nine students--a white boy who talked with Ernest Green was verbally threatened and his car was vandalized.

The crisis at the school spilled over into the city of Little Rock. Segregationists threatened to boycott businesses that advertised in the Arkansas Gazette (which they viewed as being pro-integration). A new African American organization, the Greater Little Rock Improvement League formed to end the crisis without pursuing litigation (counter to the actions of the NAACP). Meanwhile, the Capital Citizens Council and other segregationists continue to file legal action against integration of the city's schools. Local businessmen proposed alternate plans for desegregation which were supported by both the Arkansas Gazette and the Arkansas Democrat, but opposed by the NAACP, the Capital Citizens Council, and the Mother's League (Governor Faubus remained non-committal), and Harry Ashmore, a journalist/editorialist for the Arkansas Gazette, received a Pulitzer Prize for his objectivity in covering the Little Rock Central High School Crisis.

By the time the first African American student graduated from Little Rock Central High School in the spring of 1958, events had not calmed down. The only senior among the nine students, Ernest Green, was given his diploma while police and federal troops stood in attendance. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. attended the graduation ceremony virtually unnoticed. Green later commented, "It's been an interesting year. I've had a course in human relations firsthand."

Vocabulary

Aaron v. Cooper: United States Supreme Court decision (1957-1958) that instructed the Little Rock School Board to proceed immediately with the Blossom Plan for desegregation.

Arkansas Gazette: Arkansas's oldest newspaper (1819) – now known as the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*; Gave coverage to the crisis at Little Rock Central High School in 1957; Received both the Pulitzer Prize and the Freedom Award for unbiased news reporting of events.

Arkansas National Guard: State militia called up by Governor Orval Faubus to keep the nine African American students from attending Little Rock Central High School in September of 1957; Later used to protect the nine students during the 1957-1958 school year under federal orders.

Arkansas State Legislature: Law-making body for the State of Arkansas; Composed of the Senate and House of Representatives; Instrumental in passing segregationist bills during the 1950s that supported Governor Orval Faubus in his quest to keep the Little Rock schools separate.

Blossom Plan: Little Rock School District plan for desegregation of public schools beginning in 1957; named for the Little Rock District Superintendent, Virgil Blossom.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka: Landmark 1954 court case in which the Supreme Court of the United States unanimously declared that it was unconstitutional to create separate schools for children on the basis of race. The *Brown* ruling ranks as one of the most important Supreme Court decisions of the 20th century. At the time of the decision, 17 southern states and the District of Columbia required that all public schools be racially segregated. A few northern and western states, including Kansas, left the issue of segregation up to individual school districts. While most schools in Kansas were integrated in 1954, the elementary schools in Topeka were not.

Capital Citizens Council: Group of segregationists that formed to keep the schools of Little Rock separate.

Civil Rights: The rights belonging to an individual by virtue of citizenship, especially the fundamental freedoms and privileges guaranteed by the 13th and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and by subsequent acts of Congress, including civil liberties, due process, equal protection of the laws, and freedom from discrimination.

Daisy Gatson Bates: (born Huttig, Union County, Arkansas in 1914 and died in 1999; married L. C. Bates (1901-1980) and settled in Little Rock) Bates and her husband published the *Arkansas State Press*, the most influential African American newspaper in Arkansas. Bates also served as a member of the NAACP and served as president of the Arkansas State Conference of NAACP branches. It was in this capacity that Daisy Bates became the advisor to the Little Rock Nine. In 1960, Bates moved to New York City and spent two years writing her memoirs of the Central High crisis. *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* was published in 1962 with an introduction by Eleanor Roosevelt. After completion of the book, Bates moved to Washington, D. C. where she worked for the Democratic National Committee and for the Johnson administration's anti-poverty programs. After suffering a stroke in 1965, she returned to Little Rock.

Desegregation: To abolish or eliminate segregation in; To open (a school or workplace, for example) to members of all races or ethnic groups, especially by force of law.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: (1929-1968), American clergyman and Nobel Prize winner, one of the principal leaders of the American civil rights movement and a prominent advocate of nonviolent protest. King's challenges to segregation and racial discrimination in the 1950s and 1960s helped convince many Americans to support the cause of civil rights in the United States. After his assassination in 1968, King became a symbol of protest in the struggle for racial justice.

Dwight D. Eisenhower (born in Denison, TX [1890-1969]): American military leader and 34th president of the United States (1953-1961).

Fourteenth Amendment: An amendment to the Constitution of the United States adopted in 1868; extends the guarantees of the Bill of Rights to the states as well as to the federal government.

Greater Little Rock Improvement League: Organization that formed to end the desegregation crisis at Little Rock Central High School without pursuing litigation.

Judge Richard Davies: Federal judge who ordered the continued desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in September of 1957.

Integration: The act or process of making whole; the bringing of people of different racial or ethnic groups into unrestricted and equal association, as in society or an organization.

Little Rock Central High School: High school built in 1927 that served as the scene for the desegregation crisis of 1957; the building was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1982 and a National Historic Site in 1998.

Little Rock Nine: Term given the first nine African American students who attended Little Rock Central High School during the 1957-1958 school year. The nine students are Melba Pattillo, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Gloria Ray, Carlotta Walls, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, Minnijean Brown, Thelma Mothershed.

Mother's League of Central High School: Group of women that opposed desegregation.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP): Organization founded in 1909 in New York City for the purpose of improving the conditions under which African Americans lived at that time. Although these conditions have improved enormously, many differences still exist in the exercise of rights of U.S. citizens solely because of race or ethnic origin. The NAACP continues to seek a single class of citizenship for every American.

Orval Faubus: (born Combs, Arkansas [1910-1994]: Governor of Arkansas (1955–67) and schoolteacher, Faubus served in World War II. After the war, he became a state highway commissioner. Elected governor, Faubus initially pursued a liberal course in office but to combat his political opponents who were staunch segregationists, he adopted a hardline civil rights position. In 1957, Faubus gained national attention when he called out the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, but he was eventually forced to withdraw the Guard. After rioting broke out, President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent U.S. troops to Little Rock and put the National Guard under federal command in order to ensure the integration of the school. Faubus's political expediency resulted in his repeated reelection as governor but also prevented him from moving into the national political arena. In 1970, 1974, and 1986 he sought reelection as governor of Arkansas but was unsuccessful in each attempt at a political comeback, the last time losing to Bill Clinton.

Segregation: The act of segregating, or the state of being segregated; separation from others; a parting.

State Sovereignty Committee: Committee formed by the Arkansas State Legislature to investigate the forces pushing for integration of Little Rock public schools.

States' Rights: All rights not delegated to the federal government by the Constitution nor denied by it to the states; The political position advocating strict interpretation of the Constitution with regard to the limitation of federal powers and the extension of the autonomy of the individual state to the greatest possible degree.

Unconstitutional: not constitutional; not according to, or consistent with, the terms of a constitution of government; contrary to the constitution.

U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division: Federal troops sent from Fort Campbell, Kentucky to ensure the safety of the nine African American students at Little Rock Central High School and to keep peace in the city of Little Rock in the event of protest or violence.

Teacher Strategies and Evaluation

1) Timeline (BT: Knowledge, Comprehension, Analysis)

Create a timeline of events surrounding desegregation at Little Rock Central High School from 1955 to the present, including international events, national events, local events in the community or school, personal events (when most students in the class were born, parents, grandparents, etc.). Invite all members of the class to add to the timeline now or during the study of the civil rights movements.

2) Writing (BT: Knowledge, Comprehension, Synthesis)

Create a newspaper from 1957 that has articles on the crisis at Little Rock Central High School. Include editorials and illustrations. Use sound historical accounts for the articles.

3) Research (BT: Comprehension, Application, Analysis)

The following questions for answer are suitable with use in this lesson and on a unit on the civil rights movement:

- * What were the social conditions like for African-Americans in Arkansas in the mid-20th century?
- * What rights did African Americans have in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 (voting, transportation, public school choices, restaurant choices) and what does this imply about the state of integration in Little Rock at this time?
- * In what states besides Arkansas did similar patterns exist (include Northern states, who had similar conditions – not by law – but by custom)?
- * What is the history of these patterns in your own community?
- * What role did students play in the Civil Rights Movement?
- * What role did the media play in the Civil Rights Movement?

4) Conflict Resolution Skills (BT: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Synthesis):

Allow students to talk, listen, show, understand, express strong feelings without insult, and find a mutually agreeable solution that meets the needs of both sides. Use the following questions:

- * What was the issue?
- * What were the causes?
- * How can you solve this in the future?

5) Character Description (for individual students) (BT: Knowledge, Comprehension, Analysis):

Think about a person in this narrative that you would most or least like to be. Write a description of one of these persons that answers the following questions:

- * Why would you like/not like to be this person?
- * What do you think were the most important influences on this person?
- * What do you think were the greatest challenges this person faced?

6) Reflection (for individuals, small groups, and the whole class) (BT: Application, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation):

This activity is designed to help students link the past to the present. Ask students to write down answers to the questions that follow. Then ask students working in small groups to reflect on these questions. Finally, have a spokesperson for each group offer its best answers to these questions in a whole class discussion:

- * Are there any examples of inequities, great or small, in your school community now? If so, what are they?
- * What can an individual student do to remedy any inequities?
- * What can students acting together do to remedy any inequities?

7) Research Skills (BT: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis)

Investigate the lives of Civil Rights leaders in Arkansas and the nation, including but not limited to Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Daisy Bates, Martin Luther King. Jr., Malcolm X, and the Little Rock Nine. Through visual methods and writing, define their personal experiences, the time in which they lived, and how national and local events shaped their personal philosophies and actions.