

## Elizabeth Eckford, the Little Rock Nine, and Purpose

- **Compelling Question**
  - How does Elizabeth Eckford’s courageous perseverance in the face of incredible adversity help us understand purpose in our own lives?
- **Virtue:** Purpose
- **Definition** – Purpose is my answer to the question “why do I exist?” It is the reason for which I exist; it is my goal, that thing to which my actions are directed. It is our answer to the question “what are you for?”
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about Elizabeth Eckford and the sense of purpose that drove the Little Rock Nine. They will explore how the perseverance of Elizabeth and the other minority students helped advance freedom and equality as well as learn how dedication to their own purposes also benefits society.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Elizabeth Eckford’s performance during the fight over segregation in Little Rock.
  - Students will understand how they can pursue their purpose in their own lives
  - Students will apply this knowledge to pursue purpose in their own lives.
- **Background**
  - In 1954, the Supreme Court decided in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that segregated schools were “inherently unequal” and unconstitutional. Moreover, it soon decided that schools would have to desegregate with “all deliberate speed.” Nevertheless, many white southerners pledged to resist the Court and preserve segregated schools.

In January 1956, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus asserted that since a poll demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of whites in Arkansas opposed integration, he would not “be a party to any attempt to force acceptance of change.” When nine African American young people called “The Little Rock Nine” registered for Central High in the capital of Little Rock, Governor Faubus mobilized the National Guard ostensibly to preserve expected violence but in reality to keep the black students out. Faubus lobbied the federal government’s Justice Department and sought injunctions in court to block integration. At first, President Dwight Eisenhower and his administration attempted to persuade the governor to allow desegregation, but became more forceful as they encountered continued resistance. When Faubus proved intransigent, President Eisenhower reluctantly federalized the state’s National Guard and sent in federal troops to protect the Little Rock Nine.

Eight of the nine black students finished the year. Faubus closed the Little Rock public schools the following year to prevent continued integration. Nevertheless, the schools opened in 1959 and were integrated. Faubus could not stem the movement for equality and justice, and was defeated by the strength of purpose in the characters of young people like Elizabeth Eckford who would not be diverted in their stand to earn the right to an equal education.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Segregation
  - National guard
  - Injunction
  - NAACP
  - Menace
  - Lynch
  - Plight
  - Bolster
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - Who were Elizabeth Eckford and the Little Rock Nine?
  - What was Elizabeth's role in the Civil Rights Movement?
  - How did Elizabeth's actions demonstrate her care for others? How did her actions help protect the rights of others?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Penguin, 2013.
  - BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION (I)," The Oyez Project at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, [http://www.oyez.org/cases/1950-1959/1952/1952\\_1](http://www.oyez.org/cases/1950-1959/1952/1952_1).

## Handout A: Elizabeth Eckford, the Little Rock Nine, and Purpose

### Background

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### Narrative

The morning of September 3, 1957 was an extremely tense day for fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford. It was the first day of school, and it should have been an exciting day for a young woman who was picking out her favorite dress for school and hoping she might make friends at her new school. But, Elizabeth was one of the Little Rock Nine, a small group of black students who had volunteered to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Therefore, she anxiously awaited word with the other students and their families whether she would be allowed to go to school. Finally, they complied with the school board wish that they stay away and try the next day. Elizabeth would have a fretful night of sleep as whites who opposed integration drove by her home at night honking horns and yelling racial slurs. One of the Little Rock Nine had a rock thrown through her window a few nights before with a note that read: “Stone this time. Dynamite next.”

The following day, Daisy Bates, the president of the Arkansas state chapter of the NAACP, who was helping the families in their struggle, made several telephone calls to the families. She had arranged for the children to meet the police at a pre-arranged location and ride the police cars safely to school. The only problem was the Eckford family did not have a phone and were forgotten.

Elizabeth wore a pretty black-and-white pressed dress as she had breakfast and gathered her things for school. Her parents, however, listened to the controversy on the television news and grew increasingly nervous about their daughter’s safety. Elizabeth tried to reassure and calm them. She then went to the public bus stop and boarded the bus to Central High.

When Elizabeth arrived at Central High School, she saw a wild scene of a mob of whites filling the surrounding streets and grounds. She was alone and nervous as she passed the angry, shouting whites, because she knew her purpose. She placed her faith in the presence of the armed soldiers of the Arkansas National Guard that she assumed were there to protect her. As she walked toward the main entrance, she encountered the guards who instead of protecting her, blocked her way and pointed to another entrance. The crowd followed and menaced her, calling her names. She became increasingly terrified and then shocked when more guards blocked her way—this time with bayonets. Confused and afraid, she walked quickly away from the school, unsure of where she was going.

She became even more frightened when someone in the crowd screamed “Lynch her! Lynch her!” Meanwhile, Daisy Bates heard of Elizabeth’s plight on the car radio and sped toward the school.

Elizabeth tried to find a friendly face in the crowd, and instead an old woman spit in her face. The mob continued to call her names and warned her to “get out of here.” Even worse, a person yelled, “Drag her over to a tree!” raising the specter of a lynching. With her knees shaking, Elizabeth sought refuge on a bus stop bench. A New York Times reporter tried to comfort her and bolster her courage by raising her chin with his finger and encouraging her, “Don’t let them see you cry.” A kind white woman tried to usher her into a drug store to call a cab but a member of the crowd reached in and slammed the door in their faces. Finally, the pair spotted a bus, darted to it, and quickly climbed aboard. Elizabeth Eckford had endured a horrific test of her courage and purpose. It remained to be seen whether she would have the strength of will to return to school after such an ordeal.

After tense weeks of negotiations between national and state authorities, the Little Rock Nine returned to school but were forced to go home by nervous school officials who feared violence. Indeed, that day, several newspaper reporters were assaulted, including one who was knocked unconscious by a brick. On September 24, President Dwight Eisenhower federalized the National Guard, placing them under his direct authority, and dispatched more than a thousand troops of the 101st Airborne to protect the Little Rock Nine.

The three boys and six girls finally attended school with a feeling of security so that they could spend the day learning alongside white students. The federal troops drove them to school in armed jeeps and worked with local police to drive off the mob. They also provided a personal bodyguard for Elizabeth and the other eight students. Several white students came around and treated the new students with more respect than anticipated. With relative peace restored, the troops left a week later, though the name-calling, tripping, shoving, and threats persisted.

Only a few weeks later, Elizabeth’s strength flagged and she wanted to quit. She went to the Vice Principal Elizabeth Huckley’s office with tears falling down her cheeks and her handkerchief balled up in a wet mess. “I want to go home,” she explained, and told of several incidents she suffered. Huckaby helped calm Elizabeth down and strengthen her resolve to bear up under the strain. They walked back to history class, and Elizabeth had a renewed sense of purpose in the crisis. She and the Little Rock Nine would be continually challenged by racial taunts and a student who threatened to shoot acid in their faces and hit them with water they thought was acid.

One of the Little Rock Nine, Minniejean Brown cracked under the pressure. Taught not to respond because it would damage their cause, Minniejean dumped a bowl of chili on an annoying white student’s head and was promptly suspended. When victimized by a racial slur, she responded in kind and was finally expelled. Some white students carried cards that proudly read, “One down, eight to go.”

Elizabeth completed the year, as did the Ernest Green, who was the lone graduating member of the remaining Little Rock Nine. He received his diploma without any applause from the white audience but had achieved a great accomplishment. Though the Little Rock public schools were closed to prevent integration in 1958, they were re-opened in 1959 as integrated school. Elizabeth Eckford and the Little Rock Nine had started their quest for an equal education and were pushed to the edge of human endurance. Nonetheless, she and the others were strong in their purpose and their example helped desegregate schools in their city, state, and country.