

[PAST I] Reading History

“Eyes on the Prize: Ain’t Scared of Your Jail

Grade level: 9 to 12

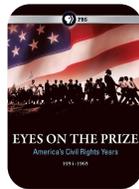
Activity type: Project

Period: Multiple class sessions

Related subjects: Government, U.S History

Overview

The Ten Questions are structured around thinking about the present and future, but they can also be used for looking for choices civic agents have made in the past. How were people in the past able to successfully effect change through civic and political participation? What can we learn from critical action taken by activists in throughout history? How can we use what we learn to shape to present choice-making? This unit focuses on a particular historical moment during the Civil Right Movement portrayed in [Eyes on the Prize: Ain’t Scared of Your Jails](#).



Essential Questions

- What is wrong about segregation? What did the change makers think at the time?
- What choices of action did young activists make to address the issues of segregation?
- How could their action pertain to participatory politics today?

Learning Goals

- Understand how racial segregation is unjust and unconstitutional and why activists fought against it.
- Analyze various steps of how young activists made change, using the Ten Questions framework.
- Draw connections between participatory politics in the 1960s and the challenges and potential of civic action today.

Materials

- “Eyes on the Prize – Ain’t Scared of Your Jails” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=neDpuJVc4Ko)
- Content organizer (Attached)
- Facing History with the YPP Action Frame (available at yppactionframe.fas.harvard.edu)

Activities

1. Before playing a video clip explain students the social and political background to the early 1960s, particularly on issues of segregation following the Brown vs. Board decision.

- Have a conversation with students about what participatory politics means and how it is different from conventional politics.
- Hand out a graphic organizer (attached at the end of this Guide) and have them discuss the Ten Questions in relation to their views of participatory politics.
- Watch the segment from *Eyes on the Prize*, paying attention to how the civic action portrayed corresponds with the Ten Questions. The entire episode runs about 22 minutes but we recommend an 18 minute excerpt.

2. After viewing, briefly refresh story lines and key events. Have student form small groups, discuss around the Ten Questions, and fill the graphic organizer.

3. Coming back to a large group, have students share their thoughts on the questions, comparing how their thoughts are different from others. Encourage students to think further about why participation matters and how participatory politics can change over time.

4. Have students write a reflection note that describes their understanding of participatory politics and discusses how today’s participatory politics is similar or different from the lunch counter sit-ins of the 1960s.

EXAMPLE. The example listed below is distilled from a blog post, "[Facing History with the YPP Action Frame—Focusing on Eyes on the Prize: Ain't Scared of Your Jails](#)," written by Chaebong Nam, Adam Strom, and Danielle Allen. It details short answers to each of the ten reflection prompts. For this exercise, the subject is changed from I/me/we to they/them. This change prompts us to exercise historical imagination, putting ourselves in the activists' shoes.

1. Why did it matter to them?



Leo Lillard and Diane Nash, two student activists, take on this question directly in the opening minutes of the film. Both talked about their own motivations for participation—they are different yet they are moving towards a shared goal. Lillard explains that he began to question the logic of segregation when he was at a department store as a young boy when he asked his mother about the reasons for colored and white water fountains. A young Leo asked his mom, "Why can't I go there [the white fountain]?" Diane Nash moved to Nashville from Chicago for college with high aspirations of expanding her personal growth. Instead, the rigid rules of segregation limited her opportunities. Before long, she "felt stifled and shut in very unfairly... being allowed to do basic kinds of things like eating at restaurants in the ten cent stores" deeply disturbed her.

2. How much should they share?

The question about what to share principle was originally developed to highlight vulnerabilities in a digital context. The Nashville context may not provoke this question in a literal sense. Still, considering that this principle addresses a certain form of self-exposure or sacrifice (or risk) that the participants decide to undertake, we can tweak the question and ask—"How much of a sacrifice should I make?"

Student activists made huge sacrifices by exposing themselves to violence and accepting jail time over paying fines. These sacrifices challenged the accepted

cultural norms of their communities in which African Americans were expected to accept the status quo as a means of survival. Their choices were the result of thoughtful calculation and commitment to the principals of non-violent direct action.

3. How do they make it about more than themselves?

The inclusion of both black and white activists reinforced that the campaign was about more than access to lunch counters; indeed it was about equity and democracy for all people regardless of their skin color. In the video, a reporter asks Congressman and Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, "I take it, then, that you are advocating Negroes in New York to stay out of these national chain stores?" He responds, "Oh no, that's not true. I'm advocating that American citizens interested in democracy stay out of chain stores." Rev. Powell's remark was a public dismissal of the unjust racial privilege in American citizenship. This account encouraged people to pivot from I, and move towards we to make society more equitable and inclusive, regardless of skin color.



4. Where did they start?

In a case of wondering where to start, the students

began by turning to an experienced mentor, Rev. James Forman, who led training in nonviolent resistance. Those workshops were based on Gandhi's principles of Satyagraha (non-violent civil disobedience). Forman's workshops provided not just practical training, but an education and a chance for those interested in challenging Jim Crow to gather and meet one another. Ultimately, the student lunch-counter protest gained traction for the greater movement.

5. How could they make it easy and engaging?

Challenging Jim Crow was never going to be easy. Students and other activists literally put their lives and bodies at risk in the name of democracy. Despite the risks, student protesters stood in solidarity, having each other's back (for example, look at the smiles on the students behind the bar in the video). Though such mutual support did not make participation easier or more enjoyable, at least it may have mitigated, quite considerably, anxieties and fears that otherwise might have consumed the student protesters' zeal and courage. Activists also created a range of ways for people to get involved, ranging from participating in protests to supporting the Easter shopping boycott. Given the huge buying power of blacks in Nashville, this boycott was a fairly effective strategy.



6. How did they get wisdom from crowds?

The key to success for Nashville activism was the solidarity and collective sacrifice contributed by numerous ordinary citizens. Non-violent direct action is designed to activate crowds of "bystanders," compelling them to choose sides. For example, the lunch-counter sit-in became successful due to crowds who willingly took up one row after another and were unafraid of getting arrested (Nash: "And no matter what they did and how many they arrested, there was still a lunch counter full of students there"). Also, in the excerpt we can see how the strategy encouraged others in cities throughout the country to develop their own local campaigns targeting chains that were the sites of

demonstrations in Nashville. Also, the aforementioned Easter shopping boycott also came into fruition, thanks to the crowds. To make the boycott more impactful, the protesters quite proactively persuaded some individuals who were trying to breach it. Lillard noted, "Sending educating committees downtown to convince them [people didn't participate in the boycott] that that was not the thing to do." That tactic was instrumental in generating a cohesive, critical, and burden sharing public body for a shared vision.

7. How did they handle the downside of crowds?

The student protesters and their allies encountered physical attacks, verbal threats, and bombing. One tactic that student leaders used to cope with hostile mobs was to capture such downsides of crowds on film, which they used to expose the brutality behind segregation and white supremacy. For example, the strategies lured those resisting desegregation to the lunch counters where several whites physically attacked the protesters. While it is not explicitly shown in the film, the media was directly brought into the



campaign by activists who reached out to members of the press to encourage them to cover the protests. Activists timed their sit-ins to make it easy for the press to fly film of the demonstrations to New York and have it developed in time to air on the evening news.

8. Are you pursuing voice or influence or both?

Raising voices was the key. Let us recall the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell's response (see point 3), "Oh no, that's not true [that I am representing Negroes in New York]. I'm advocating for American citizens interested in democracy." By raising his voice in this way, Powell claimed an equal share of citizenship for all Americans, regardless of skin color.

In addition, the activists in Nashville created images of confrontations through direct actions that were shared broadly by established media along with reporting on the campaign that informed the clarity of the students' goals. In turn, the press coverage brought the story of segregation into ordinary people's homes where individuals begin to talk about the injustice of the Jim Crow system, many for the first time.



9. How did they get from voice to change? & 10. How did they find allies?

In the case of Nashville, the last two questions are directly related. By finding allies, in this case, an unusual one—the Mayor—the student activists

identified a lever of power (point 9) that helped them to end segregation at the lunch counters. Nash challenged the major, saying, "First of all, Mayor West, do you feel that it's wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of his race or color?" That question induced the major's candid answer: "I could not agree that it was morally right for someone to sell them merchandise and refuse them service." Subsequently, this revelation was a turning point for desegregation in Nashville.



Content Organizer

	PAST		PRESENT
	Choices	Consequences	
1. Why does it matter to me?			
2. How much should I share?			
3. How do I make it about more than myself?			
4. Where do we start?			
5. How can we make it easy and engaging for others to join in?			
6. How do we get wisdom from crowds?			
7. How do we handle the downside of crowds?			
8. Are we pursuing voice or influence or both?			
9. How do we get from voice to changes?			
10. How can we find allies?			