

## Examining the Issues

**Grade Level:** Appropriate for Grades 9-12

**Overview:** This activity is designed to give students the opportunity to examine, discuss, and formulate opinions on issues concerning educational equality and civil rights. It works well as a preview activity for a lesson or unit on civil rights or the fiftieth anniversary of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will identify and discuss issues as a group.
2. Students will gain practice formulating and presenting reasons for their opinions.
3. Students will gain a basic understanding of some of the issues associated with equality in education and civil rights.

**Materials:**

1. Issue cards
2. Note cards (optional)
3. Materials relating to civil rights and equality in education

### Activities and Procedures:

(The instructions below represent one way of conducting this activity. Modify as needed for your class.)

1. Print and cut out the issue cards. Paste them on note cards or laminate (optional).
2. Divide the students into groups of 2-4.
3. Give one card to each group, or to each student in the group (depending on the number of students).
4. Give the students adequate time to read and discuss each of the issue cards within their groups. It is important to emphasize that the groups do not need to reach a consensus on the issues. Rather, they need to help each other examine, formulate, express, and *clarify* their individual positions on the issues.
5. After students have had a chance to discuss their issues, open the discussion to include the entire class.

### Culminating Activities:

1. Instead of opening the discussion to the entire class, have students write their opinions and responses to the discussion and turn it in.
2. During the activity, some students might discover that they need more information about an issue before forming an opinion. Encourage the students to research the needed information, or focus on that information during the unit. At the end of the unit or research, they can revisit their issue to see if their views have changed.
3. Students could organize a formal debate around one or more of the issues.
4. Students may elect to write letters to policymakers concerning one or more of the issues. Similarly, they might want to write an editorial in the local newspaper or otherwise present the issue to the community.

## Can Segregation Be “Equal?”

There are two high schools in a small, racially diverse city. Both schools are tangibly equal in every way—they are the same size, they are the same age, they have the same amenities (gymnasiums, auditoriums, cafeterias, etc.) The teachers in both schools are equally trained and have the same salaries. The classrooms are equipped with the same books and technology.

One of the schools is for white students only. The other school is for African Americans only.

**Discuss: Will the students who attend these schools receive an “equal” education?**

### **Methods to help you reach an answer:**

1. Brainstorm a list of pros and cons concerning the separate schools.
2. Discuss the phrase “separate but equal.” What do you know about it? Is it possible?
3. Research the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court cases. What did they have to say about “separate but equal?”

## What Does “Equal” Mean?

You are a high school principal. Until recently, all of your students spoke English as a first language. Now a group of students have enrolled in your school who can hardly speak English.

You are mandated by law to give all students an “equal” education. Some teachers and parents have argued that “equal” means that all students will learn the same things in the same classes, regardless of their ability to speak English. Other teachers and parents have argued that in order to treat the non-English speaking students equally, the school needs to provide them with a special class to help them learn English. However, a special class would require hiring a new teacher, which would mean taking money away from a program that already exists, such as a sport, a music class, or an extracurricular club.

You are the principal—it is your decision. **What do you do?**

**After you decide, discuss the following: Does “equal” mean giving people an equal chance to succeed, even if they must be treated differently in order to do so?**

## Changing Hearts and Minds

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court announced its decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. The Court ruled that segregation in public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. Schools were ordered to desegregate.

Upon hearing the decision, President Eisenhower remarked, “I don’t believe you can change the hearts of men with laws or decisions.”

**Discuss Eisenhower’s statement.** Do you agree or disagree?

**Methods to help you:** Generate a list of laws and decisions that have had a large impact on society. Discuss whether or not they changed people’s hearts and minds. For example, did outlawing slavery make slavery more or less acceptable to people? If the law allowed marriage at age 13, do you think people would agree that 13 year-olds are capable of marriage? Would they change their minds over time?

## Breaking the Law

William Kingdon Clifford wrote: “All our liberties are due to men who, when their conscience has compelled them, have broken the laws of the land.”

**Discuss the meaning of this quote.** Do you agree with the quote?

**Method:**

1. Brainstorm a list of situations where people have broken the law in protest.
2. Discuss each situation.
  - Was breaking the law *necessary* in this situation? Were there alternatives?
  - Was breaking the law *justified* in this situation?
  - What was the reaction to the “crime?”
  - Was breaking the law worth it? Did it lead to new liberties?

## Would You Have Remained Seated?

In 1955 Rosa Parks, an African American, boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She sat directly behind the “Whites Only” section in a row that was designated for either race unless the bus was full. Soon the bus filled up, and the bus driver noticed a white man standing near the front. He ordered Parks and three other African Americans in her row to stand so that the white man could sit down. No one moved. After a second warning, the three others stood, but Parks remained seated. The police were called and she was arrested.

Note that the bus driver ordered four African Americans to stand so that one white person could sit. Faced with this kind of racial climate and the fact that the bus was full, **would you have done what Rosa Parks did?**

**Questions for Discussion:** Do you think the outcome would have been different if an African American man had refused to give up his seat? What would have happened if the African Americans had responded violently to the demand? Did Rosa Parks have alternatives? Why did she remain seated?

**Research:** What major event in the Civil Rights movement was caused by this incident?

## Nonviolent Protest—Could You Keep The Peace?

It is 1960. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) has made segregated schools illegal, but segregation, both de facto (in fact) and de jure (by law), remains.

You are an African American high school student. You go into the local general store to buy school supplies and are served at the checkout counter. But when you order a cup of coffee in the store’s diner (lunch counter), you are refused service—the lunch counter serves white people only.

In protest, you and your friends decide to sit at the counter every day until you are served. While you are sitting there, white people your age begin to hassle you—calling you names, dumping food on you, even burning you with coffee and cigarettes.

**What do you do? What are your choices? What are the consequences of those choices?**

**Research:** The sit-ins, as these anti-segregation protests were called, were one form of nonviolent protest. What is nonviolent protest? What is the goal of nonviolent protest? Who was the leader of the civil rights movement who championed non-violent protest?

## Do You Have A “Choice?”

It is 1955. You are the parent of high school-age children in a newly desegregated Southern school district. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision made segregation in schools illegal, your local school district came up with a plan to desegregate its two high schools. The plan is called “freedom of choice.” You can now choose which high school to send your children to—the formerly all-white school, or the formerly all-black school.

**What is your choice?** Do you keep your children where they are, or choose to send your child to the school previously set aside for children of the other race?

**Do you really have a choice in this situation?** What are the consequences of your choices if you are the parent of African American children? Of white children?

**Research:** This situation is based on a real plan and a real Supreme Court case, *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, Virginia* (1968). Look it up to see what really happened.

## School Funding—What Is Fair?

Most public schools get their funds from local property taxes on homes and businesses. Schools located in wealthy neighborhoods are usually well-funded. Schools located in poor neighborhoods are usually not well-funded. Thus, wealthy school districts often spend much more money per student than poor districts. **This disparity, or inequality, in funding leads to unequal public schools. But does it lead to unequal educations?**

You are a parent in a wealthy school district. Your children attend the very nice public school that you help pay for through the property taxes on your home. Recently, the citizens of your state have been asked to vote on a bill that, if passed, would redistribute local property taxes throughout all of the school districts in the state in an attempt to give all public schools equal funds per student. Your property taxes will remain the same, but your school may lose some of its funding in order to increase the amount spent per students in the poorer districts.

**Do you support or oppose the bill?**

### **Questions to help you reach a decision:**

1. Will redistributing the funds provide a more equal education for all public school students?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this bill?
3. Is the existing funding system unfair?
4. What are some other ways to fund schools?

**Use the blank cards below to create your own issues.**

