

## Lesson 1

# The Problem We Still Live With?

### Rationale

The purpose of this lesson is to elicit students' understanding of the history of school desegregation in the U.S. Through a Norman Rockwell painting and the story of Ruby Bridges—the sole African American child to attend a New Orleans elementary school after court-ordered desegregation in 1960—students are introduced to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case and the subsequent conflict over school integration. Students are asked to consider whether or not, 50 years after the historic court ruling, they think segregation and unequal opportunity are still problems in U.S. schools.

### Objectives

- Students will use analytical skills to uncover the meaning of a well-known painting and to make connections between the image and historical events.
- Students will examine the story of a historical figure in order to better understand the history of school desegregation in the U.S.
- Students will draw upon their knowledge of history and current events in order to articulate an opinion about the current state of segregation in U.S. schools.

### Age Range

Grades 9–12

### Time

One class period or 45 minutes

### Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Norman Rockwell's Painting The Problem We All Live With](#) (prepare to be projected)
- [Discussing The Problem We All Live With](#) (for teacher reference only)
- [Definitions](#) (for teacher reference only)

Other Material:

- chart paper, markers
- computer and LCD or overhead projector
- access to internet for students (optional)

### Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.

### Techniques and Skills

analyzing visual art, connecting past to present, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, reading skills

### Procedures

1. Project the [Norman Rockwell Painting The Problem We All Live With](#), excluding the heading title on the handout, so that all students can clearly view it. During this first part of the lesson, do not provide students with any background information about the painting.

### Key Words

Civil rights  
Desegregation  
Equal opportunity  
Integration  
Segregation

Pose some of the following questions in order to engage students in a discussion:

- What do you think is taking place in this painting?
  - Where do you think the young girl is going? What do you think are the circumstances?
  - What do you think the girl is thinking and feeling?
  - Who do you think the men in the painting are? What relationship do you think they have to the girl?
  - When and where do you think this scene may have taken place?
  - What was going on in the U.S. in that time and place? How might this relate to the painting?
  - How does the painting make you feel?
  - What questions does it evoke? If you could ask the girl or the men in the painting a question, what would it be?
  - What do you think the artist is trying to tell us? Why do you think he called the painting, *The Problem We All Live With*?
  - What artistic elements does the artist use to get his message across? (See [Discussing The Problem We All Live With](#)).
2. After about 10–15 minutes of discussion, provide students with brief background information about the painting (see [Discussing The Problem We All Live With](#)). Ask students if they understand what the words segregation, desegregation, and integration mean, and define these terms together (see [Definitions](#)).
  3. Ask students if they know what prompted the initial stages of school integration in our country. Make sure that students are aware of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but do not go into a lot of detail about the case at this time.
  4. Provide students with background information about the story of Ruby Bridges as a follow-up to the Rockwell painting and to place the issue of school integration in a personal context. Several sources are listed below, which can be used for large/small group reading or assigned as independent research/homework, depending upon your time constraints and the abilities of your students.
    - [Ruby Bridges Foundation](#): The official Web site with narrative by Ruby Bridges
    - [Ruby Bridges Remembers](#): YouTube video of an interview of Ruby Bridges in 2010
    - [PBS Online NewsHour](#): Transcript of a 1997 conversation with Ruby Bridges
    - [Through My Eyes](#): Ruby Bridges recounts the story of her involvement, as a six-year-old, in the 1960 integration of her school in New Orleans. Though this book is intended for grades 3–6, it is told in Ruby Bridge’s own words and through her unique childhood perspective. It includes photos and succinct writing that can be excerpted to provide a simple overview of Ruby’s story. (*Scholastic, Inc., 1999, 63 pages*)

## Norman Rockwell's Painting *The Problem We All Live With*



## Discussing *The Problem We All Live With*



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### About the Painting

*The Problem We All Live With* by Norman Rockwell appeared in *Look* magazine in 1964, ten years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The artist was inspired by Ruby Bridges, the sole African American child to attend a New Orleans elementary school after court-ordered desegregation in 1960. Although Bridge's story was the inspiration, the painting is not meant to be specifically about her. It is a broader social commentary on the situation into which thousands of African American students were thrust during the early years of school desegregation.

### Discussing Artistic Elements With Students

#### Contrast

When we view the painting, our eyes are immediately drawn to the young girl because her dress, socks and sneakers are a bright white, which provides a strong contrast to the dark brown of her skin. The colors of the marshals' skin and clothing, however, provide little contrast and blend more with the background.

#### Line

We are also drawn to the girl by the ridge running horizontally across the wall and by the sidewalk cracks, which together frame the girl. If the sidewalk cracks were further extended, they would actually point right to the girl.

#### Rhythm

The repetition of shapes in the painting provides a certain rhythm that pulls various elements together. Notice the position of the arms and legs, the recurring loose fists, and the walking motion.

#### Color

One of the first things we notice in this painting is the bright red of the tomato splattered against the wall. Notice how the splatter runs down the wall and across the ground, creating a trail back to the girl, who is the central focus of the painting. Bright color is also used for the marshals' armbands. The bright yellow contrasts with the muted color of their clothing and skin tones, capturing our attention and suggesting danger.

#### Other Elements

The image is composed to evoke an affective response. The disturbing graffiti, the violent splatter of a hurled object, the lone girl, and the police presence combine to create a strong emotional content. The marshals' faces are not included in the painting and only the girl's body is fully visible, which increases our sense of emotional connection with the girl. While we may identify with the girl, however, a certain physical separation is present. The artist has placed the viewer across the street from the procession, where she/he must rely on instinct and imagination to understand what may be going on inside the hearts and minds of the paintings' subjects.

# Definitions<sup>1</sup>

The words *segregation*, *desegregation*, and *integration* will be used frequently throughout this unit, so it is important for students to work from shared definitions of these terms. The term *segregation* should not be used to refer solely to the experiences of “minority” communities, as majority or dominant groups also bear the consequences of racial separation in U.S. society. As noted below, it is also important not to use the words *desegregation* and *integration* interchangeably, as the spirit of each term is markedly different. The definitions below have been adapted from the following sources to specifically address a school or education context.

**Segregation:** The separation or isolation of a race, class or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary attendance in separate educational facilities; refers to situations in which a disproportionate number of white students or students of color attend a school or school system.

**Desegregation:** Efforts to eliminate *segregation* by removing laws or practices that require or encourage separation. *Desegregation* aims to reduce racial imbalances, usually by moving and mixing racial populations to end racial isolation. As it has played out in most U.S. educational settings, *desegregation* requires students of the non-dominant group (most often non-white) to assimilate into the school and culture of the dominant group (most often white) without changes in school structures to meet the needs of the new students.

**Integration:** The incorporation of individuals from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups as equals into a school. *Integration* moves beyond removing legal barriers and simply placing students of different backgrounds together. It addresses the racial hierarchies and prejudices that exist in school communities by reforming structures to be more inclusive and transforming the culture of the school.

## “Ethical Demands for Integration” from Martin Luther King, Jr.

The word segregation represents a system that is prohibitive; it denies the Negro equal access to schools, parks, restaurants, libraries and the like. Desegregation is eliminative and negative, for it simply removes these legal and social prohibitions. Integration is creative, and is therefore more profound and far-reaching than desegregation. Integration is the positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes in the total range of human activities. Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. Desegregation then rightly is only a short-range goal. Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community. Thus as America pursues the important task of respecting the letter of the law, i.e., compliance with desegregation decisions, she must be equally concerned with the spirit of the law, i.e., commitment to the democratic dream of integration.

<sup>1</sup> These definitions have been adapted from *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* and *An “Integrated” Theory of Integrated Education* by John A. Powell, The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University to specifically address a school or education context.