

## Lesson 6

# Building Alliances

## Rationale

The purpose of this lesson is for students to explore what it means to be an ally, and to use historical examples of ally behavior as a bridge to their own lives. Students begin by examining excerpts from a 1952 amicus brief filed in support of *Brown v. Board of Education* and reading about a little known civil rights activist from the Jewish community. Students then brainstorm different types of ally behavior and identify specific ways in which they can be allies in their school and communities.

## Objectives

- Students will learn about historical examples of ally behavior.
- Students will learn what it means to be an ally and identify different levels of ally behavior.
- Students will reflect on ways that they can be an ally and develop plans for taking action in their school and communities.

## Age Range

Grades 9–12

## Time

Two class periods or 1 hour 30 minutes

## Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [1952 Amicus Brief](#) (one for each student or prepare to be projected)
- [A Selected List of Allies Throughout History](#) (optional)
- [Esther Swirk Brown](#) (one for each student)
- [Pyramid of Alliance](#) (one for each small group)

Other Material:

- chart paper, markers, LCD or overhead projector (optional)

## Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Makes copies of the [Pyramid of Alliance](#), one for each small group (see Part II #2-3).

## Techniques and Skills

brainstorming, cooperative group work, critical thinking, examining primary documents, forming opinions, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, reading skills, social action

## Procedures

### Part I

1. Write the following quote on the board:

“That which is unequal in fact cannot be equal in law and, therefore, segregation and equality cannot co-exist in public education.”

## Key Words

Alliance  
 Ally  
 Amicus brief  
 Desegregation  
 Discrimination  
 Integration  
 NAACP  
 Risk  
 Segregation  
 Social action

2. Ask students to guess who might have written these words and in what context. After some speculation, inform students that the statement comes from a 1952 amicus brief for the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Ask students if they know what an amicus brief is and encourage them to reason the meaning based on other words they may know that come from the same root as amicus (amiable, amicable, amigo, etc.). Inform students that amicus comes from the Latin for friend. An **amicus brief** is a statement of support submitted to the court by a person or organization—a “friend of the court”—that is not a party to the case in question.
3. Project or distribute the cover page to the original [1952 amicus brief](#) and ask students to identify the “friends of the court” in this particular instance. Ask students if they are surprised to learn that these six groups—including two Jewish and one Japanese organization—made such a strong statement of support. Ask why these organizations, none of which were black civil rights groups, may have spoken out. Share the following statement from the brief, which sums up its rationale:
 

“The present case...present[s] an issue with which all six organizations are deeply concerned because such segregation deprives millions of persons of rights that are freely enjoyed by others and adversely affects the entire democratic structure of our society.”
4. Tell students that the organizations who filed the brief acted as allies. Draw a circle on the board and write the word “ally” in the center. Ask students to brainstorm all of the associations they have with this word and record them on spokes radiating from the circle (e.g., supporter, advocate, one who takes risks to help others). Ask students to identify allies they know (from history, current events or their own lives) who took risks to support others when it was not required of them. Record these names on the chart. ([A Selected List of Allies Throughout History](#) is included as an optional handout and students can be assigned people from this list to investigate further for homework or as a research project).
5. Inform students that they will be reading about a little known ally from the civil rights movement. Distribute copies of [Esther Swirk Brown](#) and have students read it either silently or together as a class.
6. Lead a group discussion using the following questions:
  - In what ways did Esther Swirk Brown act as an ally?
  - Why do you think she risked her safety to support others?
  - What personal experiences might have caused Brown to empathize with the victims of prejudice?
  - Can you imagine yourself doing the things that Esther Swirk Brown did? Why or why not?
  - In general, what might motivate a person to be an ally?
  - What might discourage or prevent someone from becoming an ally? What is the cost of not acting—to the target? To the bystander? To society?

## Part II

1. Ask students if they have ever acted as any ally and allow them to share their experiences. Ask if those who did not share can imagine themselves being an ally to others. Suggest that being an ally doesn’t necessarily mean fighting bigotry in a very large-scale and public manner as Esther Swirk Brown did. Being an ally also includes smaller and less risky acts that demonstrate our support for others.
2. Draw a large triangle on a piece of chart paper and label it the “Pyramid of Alliance.” Draw two horizontal lines to divide the triangle into three sections and label them, from bottom to top, “low,” “moderate,” and “high level of alliance.” In the top section, write a couple of the actions that Esther Swirk Brown took (e.g., challenging institutional segregation, organizing a lawsuit) and identify these as high levels of alliance. Ask students to describe one or two actions that demonstrate a moderate level of alliance (e.g. attending a rally or march, joining a human rights club or group) and low level of alliance (e.g., interrupting a racist joke, reading multicultural literature). Record their examples on the chart. Once students understand the concept, divide them into small groups of about four.
3. Provide each group with the [Pyramid of Alliance](#) handout and ask them to brainstorm additional examples for each level. Encourage students to focus on actual needs in their own school or community, and to list actions that they can realistically envision themselves or their peers taking.
4. As each group finishes, have them post their pyramids around the room and share one or two actions from each category with the whole class. Note that the categories are somewhat fluid and overlapping—what some individuals see as a low level of alliance may seem like a moderate or high level of alliance to others, depending on the individual and the

circumstances. Confronting someone about a prejudiced comment, for example, may involve different levels of risk and courage in different situations. More important than debating what items belong in which categories, though, is to identify concrete actions that students can actually see themselves taking based on real problems that they have identified. Highlight these problems and actions, and challenge students to put them into practice. For most students, this will involve behaviors such as using more respectful language, not laughing at a joke, and showing kindness to targets of bullying. Some students may be motivated to do more, however, such as starting or joining a group, doing volunteer work, or organizing a social action project. Whatever level of commitment students are willing to make, help to identify and structure time for follow-up and planning so that students' ideas are actually implemented.

# 1952 Amicus Brief in Support of *Brown v. Board of Education*

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IN THE  
**Supreme Court of the United States**  
 October Term, 1952

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No. 8

OLIVER BROWN, MRS. RICHARD LAWTON,  
 MRS. SADIE EMMANUEL, ET AL.,  
*Appellants,*

vs.

BOARD OF EDUCATION OF TOPEKA, SHAWNEE  
 COUNTY, KANSAS, ET AL.,  
*Appellees.*

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**BRIEF ON BEHALF OF  
 AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION  
 AMERICAN ETHICAL UNION  
 AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE  
 ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE OF B'NAI B'RITH  
 JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE  
 AND  
 UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE  
 AS *AMICI CURIAE***

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## A Selected List of Allies Throughout History

Jonathan Daniels

Eleanor Roosevelt

Princess Diana

Oskar Schindler

Frederick Douglass

Michael Schwerner

Rabbi David Einhorn

Mitch Snyder

Andrew Goodman

Chiune Sugihara

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Mother Teresa

Rev. Bruce Klunder

Harriet Tubman

Viola Gregg Liuzzo

Lillian Wald

Iqbal Masih

Raoul Wallenberg

William Moore

Donald Woods

Rev. James Reeb

# Esther Swirk Brown (1917–1970)

## Civil Rights Activist

Esther Swirk Brown was a woman who was small in stature, but who made large contributions to the U.S. civil rights movement. Born in Kansas City, Missouri, Esther involved herself in the struggle for social equality early in life. In high school, she joined a picket line of workers striking a cosmetics manufacturer because, in her words, “it was the right thing to do.” After attending the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, she settled down with her husband, Paul Brown, in suburban Kansas during the 1940s. Brown was an active member of her local synagogue and other Jewish organizations, but also strived to build alliances with people from other backgrounds.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, desegregating the armed forces and guaranteeing “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons...without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.” During that same year, black and white students in Esther Swirk Brown’s South Park neighborhood attended separate and very unequal schools.

Population growth in South Park after World War II led to the construction of a new \$90,000 elementary school, but the local school board redrew district lines so that African-American students would be excluded. Black students in South Park were sent instead to Walker School, which was a run-down and unsafe building with only two teachers and outdoor plumbing. When African-American children were turned away from the new South Park School solely on the basis of race, some local parents pulled their children from Walker and started a home school for thirty-nine students.

Esther Swirk Brown was outraged by the segregation of African-American students and the condition of the schools they were expected to attend, so she worked with local parents to organize a lawsuit. The case was handled by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization that fights racism and works for civil rights for African Americans. *Webb vs. Kansas*—named for the father of a South Park black student—was prosecuted by attorney Elijah Scott with the help of Thurgood Marshall, who would later become the first African-American Supreme Court Justice. In 1949, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled that equal facilities must be provided for all children and the local school board was forced to admit black students to South Park School.

As the beginning of the new school year approached, Esther Swirk Brown purchased a new dress or shirt for every student and worked tirelessly to raise money for books and supplies for students who could not afford them. Alfonso Webb, a South Park resident and lead plaintiff in the case, reflected, “if it had not been for Mrs. Brown, we would not have gotten as far as we did as quick as we did. It took a white woman who had determination and contacts to spearhead the movement...Black people were just too scared, at least some of them were. Scared from history, scared from experience, scared from not enough experience.”

Despite the threats and harassment that Esther Swirk Brown received for supporting desegregation, she continued to fight for equal rights. Esther helped the NAACP to build the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* case in Topeka, Kansas by persuading Oliver Brown to be lead plaintiff, gathering expert witnesses and providing moral support. Esther also helped convince the NAACP to shift its strategy from challenging segregated graduate schools to demanding the desegregation of all public schools.

In addition to carrying on school desegregation efforts in Kansas and Missouri, Esther Swirk Brown worked on the issue of discrimination in the workplace. Her testimony before a committee of the Kansas legislature about discrimination in public employment helped to establish an antidiscrimination commission in Kansas in 1953.

In 1957, Esther Swirk Brown helped to organize the Panel of American Women, which brought together women from different races and religions to speak out against prejudice. By 1970 the organization had 1,400 members throughout the U.S. and Canada, and Esther had become the national coordinator for almost fifty panels in twenty-three cities.

Brown was recognized for her dedication to equality through a number of awards from organizations including the Kansas City Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, the Missouri Association of Social Welfare, and the Diocese of Catholic Women. When Esther Swirk Brown died of cancer in 1970, a local newspaper, *Call*, printed this tribute:

“Never did a human light shine so brightly as did the life of this young woman who devoted her time and talents in a never-ceasing struggle to make the world a better place for all...If there were more like her in the world, the struggle for justice and equality would have been over long ago.”

# Pyramid of Alliance

