Narrative

Elizabeth Eckford and Courage

☐ I can analyze the story of Elizabeth Eckford to identify an example of courage.

Essential Vocabulary

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<table>
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<tr>
<td>courage</td>
<td>The ability to take constructive action in the face of fear or</td>
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<td></td>
<td>danger. To stand firm as a person of character and do what is</td>
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<td></td>
<td>right, especially when it is unpopular or puts one at risk.</td>
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<tr>
<td>desegregated</td>
<td>To end a policy of legally required separation of races.</td>
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<tr>
<td>integrate</td>
<td>To bring separated races together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>specter</td>
<td>The idea of a disturbing event.</td>
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Narrative

The Supreme Court desegregated the nation’s schools in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka 1954 because segregation was “inherently unequal” and unconstitutional. Many white southerners pledged to resist the Court and preserve segregated schools. Young Black students such as Elizabeth Eckford showed great physical and moral courage as they faced threatening mobs and hostile authorities who sought to prevent them from attending school. They demonstrated courage by persisting in fighting for justice and their constitutional rights.

On the morning of September 3, 1957, fifteen-year-old Eckford nervously prepared for school. She 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. She and the other eight students and their families awaited word if they would be allowed to go to school. Because of strong opposition and threats, the school board asked them to stay away and try the next day. Whites who opposed integration drove by her home at night honking horns and yelling racial slurs. One of the Little Rock Nine had 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 called the families to inform them of the plan to get the children safely to school. She had arranged for them to meet the police at a pre-arranged location and ride the police cars safely to school. The Eckford family, however, did not have a phone.

While Eckford ate breakfast and got ready for school, her parents watched the news and grew increasingly concerned about their daughter’s safety. She wanted an equal education and steeled her courage to attend school. She went to the public bus stop and headed to Central High.
When Eckford arrived at Central High School, she saw a wild scene of an angry mob filling the school grounds and surrounding streets. She found herself alone but found courage in the reassuring presence of the Arkansas National Guard, which she assumed was there to protect her. However, as she approached the main entrance, the guards blocked her way and pointed to another entrance.

The crowd followed and menaced her, calling Eckford racial slurs. She became increasingly terrified and shocked when more guards blocked her way — this time with bayonets. She walked quickly away from the school to get away from the intimidating crowd. Members of the mob spit on her and screamed at her. A person yelled, “Drag her over to a tree!” raising the specter of a lynching. Despite the threatening crowd, she kept her dignity and tried to move away from the danger without any help. She sought refuge at a bus stop, but members of the mob continued to follow her.

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 slammed the door in their faces. Finally, the pair ran to a bus and quickly climbed aboard.

After weeks of negotiations between national and state authorities, the Little Rock Nine returned to school, but nervous school officials, fearing violence, immediately forced them to go home. On September 24, President Dwight Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard, placing it under his direct authority. He also ordered more than a thousand troops of the 101st Airborne to protect the Little Rock Nine.

Eckford and the other members of the Little Rock Nine courageously attended school. The federal troops drove them to school in armed jeeps. They drove off the mob and served as personal bodyguards. Several white students admired the courage of the Black students and treated them with respect. With relative peace restored, the troops left a week later, although the name-calling, tripping, shoving, and threats persisted.

Eckford’s strength flagged because of several incidents, and she wanted to quit. She went to the Vice Principal Elizabeth Huckaby’s office crying. “I want to go home,” she explained. Huckaby helped calm Elizabeth down and strengthened her resolve to bear up under the strain. Eckford walked back to history class and had renewed courage to face the crisis. She completed the year with seven of her brave companions.

The highly-publicized story of the Little Rock Nine was repeated in many other southern schools. Elizabeth Eckford and the other members of 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 courageous in the face of great adversity. While the Supreme Court had unanimously decided that segregated schools were unconstitutional, brave young Black students made it a reality in their local communities.
Analysis Questions

1. How did Elizabeth Eckford’s actions illustrate courage as a civic virtue?

2. The federal district court ordered Governor Faubus to withdraw the National Guard, which he did. The Little Rock Nine students tried again three weeks later; this time escorted by city police. Protesters soon forced their way into the building, and police escorted the Black students out for their own safety. How do Eckford’s actions illustrate the virtue of perseverance?

3. In response to the crisis, President Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard. Troops from the 101st Airborne Division assisted in the integration of the high school. In his address to the nation on September 24, 1957, the president said that “mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of our courts.” What kinds of respect are lacking when there is “mob rule”? Respect for the law? Respect for the rights of other people? What others? (Optional extension: Find primary sources that provide additional information about these events. Report back to the class on what you found, including a citation of the source or sources that you found.)

4. Use the photograph from the Engage: Primary Source Analysis, and ask students the following questions.

   - The woman pictured screaming racial epithets at Eckford is Hazel Bryan. What virtues are absent in Bryan at that moment? What virtue (s) appears to be absent among the many bystanders in this photograph?

   - One moment in time was captured in this photograph and may or may not have reflected the full dimension of each of the depicted students’ characters. Yet the people in the photograph must live with what they did on that day. What similar “moment in time” scenarios may exist in your life today? In what situations is it possible that you could do or say something that you can’t take back — and that people may never forget?

   - How might this photograph have been different — and how might history have been different — if one of the bystanders had acted in defense of Eckford and the other Black students?