

Activist Mattie B. Meyers & the Civil Rights Fight in Fresno

Overview:

Explore the African American Civil Rights Movement in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Lesson Summary:

Educator and leader of the Fresno NAACP, Mattie B. Meyers was a prominent activist for educational and housing equality in the 1960s. She spoke at hearings held by the U.S. House of Representatives, and was responsible for bringing Martin Luther King, Jr. to Fresno in June 1964. This lesson will help students understand her fight to improve educational opportunities for Fresno’s African American community. She advocated for an end de facto segregation in Southwest Fresno and participated in integration busing debates. Students will be able to define redlining and describe how it fostered educational and economic disparities then and now. Students will connect to the people who fought for equal rights in the central San Joaquin Valley to the national Civil Rights Movement, including the activities of Martin Luther King Jr., Brown v. Board of Education, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

This is designed as a local supplement to a broader foundational lesson.

Time Allotment:

50 Minutes

Grade Level:

Secondary – Grades 8, 11 & 12

Standards:

Grade Eight US.8.2.7

Describe the principles of federalism, dual sovereignty, separation of powers, checks and balances, the nature and purpose of majority rule, and the ways in which the American idea of constitutionalism preserves individual rights.

Grade Eight CS.2

Students analyze how change happens at different rates at different times; understand that some aspects can change while others remain the same; and understand that change is complicated and affects not only technology and politics but also values and beliefs.

Grade Eleven US.11.10.2

Examine and analyze the key events, policies, and court cases in the evolution of civil rights, including Dred Scott v. Sandford, Plessy v. Ferguson, Brown v. Board of Education, Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, and California Proposition 209.

Grade Eleven US.11.10.3

Describe the collaboration on legal strategy between African American and white civil rights lawyers to end racial segregation in higher education.

Grade Eleven US.11.10.4

Examine the roles of civil rights advocates (e.g., A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, Thurgood Marshall, James Farmer, Rosa Parks), including the significance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and "I Have a Dream" speech.

Grade Eleven US.11.10.5

Discuss the diffusion of the civil rights movement of African Americans from the churches of the rural South and the urban North, including the resistance to racial desegregation in Little Rock and Birmingham, and how the advances influenced the agendas, strategies, and effectiveness of the quests of American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans for civil rights and equal opportunities.

Grade Eleven US.11.10.6

Analyze the passage and effects of civil rights and voting rights legislation (e.g., 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act of 1965) and the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, with an emphasis on equality of access to education and to the political process.

Grade Eleven US.11.8

Students analyze the economic boom and social transformation of post-World War II America.

Grade Twelve AD.12.5

Principles of American Democracy - Students summarize landmark U.S. Supreme Court interpretations of the Constitution and its amendments.

Grade Twelve AD.12.5.1

Understand the changing interpretations of the Bill of Rights over time, including interpretations of the basic freedoms (religion, speech, press, petition, and assembly) articulated in the First Amendment and the due

process and equal-protection-of-the-law clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment.

Grade Twelve AD.12.5.4

Principles of American Democracy - Explain the controversies that have resulted over changing interpretations of civil rights, including those in Plessy v. Ferguson, Brown v. Board of Education, Miranda v. Arizona, Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña, and United States v. Virginia (VMI).

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

Describe the role of Martin Luther King, Jr. and local educator Mattie B. Myers in Fresno's Civil Rights Movement and how it relates to Brown v. Board of Education.

Describe the Fair Housing Act of 1968 and its relevance to African American citizens in the central San Joaquin Valley.

Identify the effects of discriminatory housing practices, like redlining, in the central San Joaquin Valley's African American communities and the Fresno school systems.

Materials:

Primary Sources:

Document. Statement of Mrs. Mattie B. Meyers, First Vice President, Central Area, NAACP. "[Racial Discrimination in Federally Assisted Education Programs](#)." Hearing before the Select Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives Eighty-Eighth Congress, First Session on H.R. 7771. Los Angeles, California, August 12, 1963.

Article. Louis Harris. "School Segregation Laws Are Condemned." *The Fresno Bee*. June 18, 1970. Newspapers.com.

Interview. Alice Daniel. "[Civil Rights Leader Mattie Meyers: Son Recalls Her Legacy](#)." Valley Public Radio, January 23, 2019. (Radio Interview 11:56)

Article. Richard Hall. "900 Attend Bullard Meeting; Most Rap Forced Busing Plans," *The Fresno Bee*, January 29, 1970. Newspapers.com.

Article. "Krebs and Busing," [likely from *The Fresno Bee*, circa 1970]. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Records, Special Collections Research Center, California State University, Fresno.

Document. [Fair Housing Act Title VIII of the 1968 Civil Rights Act](#). The United States Department of Justice, August 6, 2015.

Document. Fresno Redlining Map, Home Owners' Loan Corporation, December 7, 1936.

Photograph. Martin Luther King, Jr. Marches to Ratcliffe Stadium for Fair Housing. *The Fresno Bee*. June 4, 1964. Fresno County Historical Society Archives.

Article. Curt Tuck. "Rev. King Stresses Rights Fight Urgency." *The Fresno Bee*, June 2, 1964. Newspapers.com.

Transcript. Florence Atwater Oral History clip. (Audio 1:51) Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978, Fresno County Historical Society Archives.

Article. Editorial. "City Council Should Face Up To Deterioration in East, Southeast." *The Fresno Bee*, November 7, 1973. Newspapers.com.

Secondary Sources:

Article. Carmen George. "[Mattie Meyers: Civil Rights Activist and Educator Addressed Segregation in Fresno](#)." *The Fresno Bee*, August 22, 2017.

Article. History.com Editors. "[Brown v. Board of Education](#)." History.com. A&E Television Networks, October 27, 2009.

Article. "[School Desegregation: The Busing Debate](#)." Law Library - American Law and Legal Information Encyclopedia.

Article. Nellie Bowles. "[Kamala Harris and Classmates Were Bused Across Berkeley. The Experience Changed Them](#)." *The New York Times*, July 1, 2019.

Article. Matthew Delmont. "[There's a Generational Shift in the Debate Over Busing](#)." *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2019.

Article. Amy E. Hillier. "[Redlining and the Homeowners' Loan Corporation](#)." *Journal of Urban History*, Volume 29, Issue 4, 2003, pages 394-420.

Article. Robert Longley. "[What Is De Facto Segregation? Definition and Current Examples](#)." ThoughtCo.com, July 23, 2019.

Article. Sarah Garland. "[Was 'Brown v. Board' a Failure?](#)" *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2012.

Article. Dianna Aguilera. "[Rare Maps Reveal Fresno's Overlooked History of Segregation.](#)" *Valley Public Radio News*, October 27, 2015.

Article. Jesse Meisenhelter. "[How 1930s Discrimination Shaped Inequality in Today's Cities.](#)" Ncrc.org. March 27, 2018.

Article. Reis Thebault. "[Fresno's Mason-Dixon Line.](#)" *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2018.

Article. Margaret Katcher. "[A Mother's Zip Code Could Signal Whether Her Baby Will Be Born Too Early.](#)" *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018.

Article. Manuela Tobias. "[How Fresno is confronting its history of racism.](#)" CalMatters.org, June 17, 2020.

Introductory Activity (15 minutes):

Introduce local educator Mattie B. Meyers and link her activities in Fresno to *Brown v. Board of Education* with brief overview.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which the justices of the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that segregation by race of children in public schools was not constitutional, since separate is inherently unequal.

[De facto segregation](#) refers to racial segregation that is not supported by law, but engaged in nonetheless. This may not be an intentional effort to keep the races apart, but be a result of natural conditions, or due to the gulf between financial classes. For instance, even if a school district does not separate students according to race, schools in different areas of the district may have more students of one race than others.

De facto segregation in schools left African American children with poorer school facilities, larger classes, and less adequate teachers. This resource discrimination was, therefore, associated with poorer academic performance.

School busing systems were put in place to make schools "more equal" in terms of students' educational opportunities. This meant students could be bused to a school miles away from their home rather than attend a school that was closer to them. This often presented problems for the students and their families because they were forced to attend a school in unfamiliar areas.

Mattie B. Myers was a civil rights leader in Fresno and a fighter for equal education in the central San Joaquin Valley. In a 1963 hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, she called for an end to de facto segregation in the schools in Fresno.

Discuss with students Martin Luther King Jr.'s visit to Fresno for a Fair Housing march in 1964 and how that relates to the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

De facto segregation also affected where people lived and worked. Neighborhoods were black or white based on restrictive covenants, and discriminatory lending practices like redlining.

[Redlining](#) is lending or insurance discrimination that bases credit decisions on the location of a property to the exclusion of characteristics of the borrower or property. Lenders will not make loans to areas with African Americans or other perceived risks to real estate investments. The federal government created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), during the Depression to slow down the dramatic increase in the rate of housing foreclosures. Between 1933 and 1936, HOLC made new low interest, self-amortizing mortgages to one million homeowners who were in default or had already lost their homes. As HOLC was nearing completion of its original lending in 1935, HOLC's parent organization, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board (FHLBB), established a program that used HOLC staff and local realtors and lenders to appraise real estate risk levels in 239 cities. This City Survey Program produced detailed reports for each city along with a series of now infamous security maps (redlining maps) that assigned residential areas a grade from one to four. Areas with African Americans, as well as those with older housing and poorer households, were consistently given a fourth grade, or "hazardous," rating and colored red.

Fair housing was a major issue for Fresno's civil rights activists, because new housing developments in the north and east had restrictive covenants in the mid-twentieth century, and Fresno was very segregated. Most of Fresno's African American community lived in Southwest Fresno and still does today.

The legacy of redlining persists today in reduced circumstances in West Fresno, including shorter life spans and [higher infant mortality](#).

Learning Activity (35 minutes - 19 to discuss materials & 16 to present):

Students are separated into four groups with 6-8 students each. Each group is given a primary source(s) and contextual articles to evaluate and analyze in 15 minutes.

At the end of a review session, the groups each teach their key points of analysis

to the rest of the class in four minute presentations. Direct students to consider who will research and who will present at the beginning of the assignment. Groups should present in group number order to retain chronology.

Group 1: Brown v. Board of Education and Educational Inequality in Fresno

Students will understand how Brown v. Board of Education did not solve all the problems with educational inequality. Local educator Mattie B. Myers worked to correct these educational disparities in Fresno.

- Statement of Mrs. Mattie B. Meyers, First Vice President, Central Area, NAACP. "[Racial Discrimination in Federally Assisted Education Programs.](#)" Hearing before the Select Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives Eighty-Eighth Congress, First Session on H.R. 7771. Los Angeles, California, August 12, 1963. Page 4-8.
- Article. Louis Harris. "School Segregation Laws Are Condemned." *The Fresno Bee*. June 18, 1970.
- Article. History.com Editors. "[Brown v. Board of Education.](#)" History.com. A&E Television Networks, October 27, 2009.
- Article. Carmen George. "[Mattie Meyers: Civil Rights Activist and Educator Addressed Segregation in Fresno.](#)" *The Fresno Bee*, August 22, 2017.
- Alice Daniel. "[Civil Rights Leader Mattie Meyers: Son Recalls Her Legacy.](#)" Valley Public Radio, January 23, 2019. (Radio Interview 11:56)

Group 2: Debates over Integration Busing in Fresno Schools

Students will connect national debates over integration busing to Fresno communities. Students will be able to link several Supreme Court cases designed to solve racial inequality to their consequences.

- Article. Richard Hall. "900 Attend Bullard Meeting; Most Rap Forced Busing Plans," *The Fresno Bee*, January 29, 1970. Newspapers.com.
- Article. "Krebs and Busing," [likely from *The Fresno Bee*, circa 1970]. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Records, Special Collections Research Center, California State University, Fresno.

- Article. "[School Desegregation: The Busing Debate](#)." Law Library - American Law and Legal Information Encyclopedia.
- Article. Nellie Bowles. "[Kamala Harris and Classmates Were Bused Across Berkeley. The Experience Changed Them](#)." *The New York Times*, July 1, 2019.
- Matthew Delmont. "[There's a Generational Shift in the Debate Over Busing](#)." *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2019.

Group 3: De Facto Segregation in Fresno and the Fight for Fair Housing

Students will gain an understanding of what redlining was and how it related to fair housing. Students will be able to explain why fair housing was an issue for African American communities in Fresno.

- [Fair Housing Act Title VIII of the 1968 Civil Rights Act](#). The United States Department of Justice, August 6, 2015. Pages 3-6.
- Fresno Redlining Map, Home Owners' Loan Corporation, December 7, 1936.
- Article. Curt Tuck. "Rev. King Stresses Rights Fight Urgency." *The Fresno Bee*, June 2, 1964.
- Photograph. Martin Luther King, Jr. Marches to Ratcliffe Stadium for Fair Housing. *The Fresno Bee*. June 4, 1964. Fresno County Historical Society Archives.
- Transcript. Florence Atwater Oral History clip. (Audio 1:51) Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978, Fresno County Historical Society Archives. Page 2-3.
- Article. Amy E. Hillier. "[Redlining and the Homeowners' Loan Corporation](#)." *Journal of Urban History*, Volume 29, Issue 4, 2003, pages 394-420.
- Article. Robert Longley. "[What Is De Facto Segregation? Definition and Current Examples](#)." ThoughtCo.com, July 23, 2019.

Group 4: The Legacy of Education and Housing Discrimination in Fresno

Students will make connections from the past to the present, from the educational inequality and fair housing fights of the Civil Rights Era to inequality in Fresno today.

- Article. Editorial. "City Council Should Face Up To Deterioration in East, Southeast." *The Fresno Bee*, November 7, 1973. Newspapers.com.
- Article. Sarah Garland. "[Was 'Brown v. Board' a Failure?](#)" *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2012.
- Article. Dianna Aguilera. "[Rare Maps Reveal Fresno's Overlooked History of Segregation.](#)" *Valley Public Radio News*, October 27, 2015.
- Article. Jesse Meisenhelter. "[How 1930s Discrimination Shaped Inequality in Today's Cities.](#)" Ncrc.org. March 27, 2018.
- Article. Reis Thebault. "[Fresno's Mason-Dixon Line.](#)" *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2018.
- Article. Margaret Katcher. "[A Mother's Zip Code Could Signal Whether Her Baby Will Be Born Too Early.](#)" *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018.
- Article. Annette Breazell-Greathouse. "[Growing Up Black in Fresno](#)" *Fresno Community Alliance*, June 1, 2020.
- Article. Manuela Tobias. "[How Fresno is confronting its history of racism.](#)" CalMatters.org, June 17, 2020.

Key Questions:

While the students review and discuss their group's materials, the teacher should guide their understanding of the content with the provided key questions and points below:

Group 1: What does Meyers believe are the biggest issues concerning the inequality in education for minority groups in Fresno schools?

African American parents had called upon the Fresno branch of the NAACP for help because they believed their children were receiving an inferior education and that the schools were not providing these students with the same programs as white students.

99.9 % of African Americans in Fresno lived on the west side of the railroad tracks.

African American students in West Fresno schools were not encouraged to set future college or career goals. African American students were ill prepared for college courses or employment a high school education could offer.

Teachers in West Fresno schools were looked down upon by their colleagues, which caused resentment and reflected on how they teach.

School administrators claimed there was an open enrollment policy but discouraged "mass movement."

Group 2: How does the housing inequality relate to education inequality based on the information found in the articles?

West Fresno was considered a "slum" or "ghetto" that housed a majority of the African American, minority, and poor populations.

The Americans found it easy to justify segregation in education when it was a result of community segregation.

Busing students from one neighborhood school to another to achieve racial balance was mostly favored by African American families, not white families.

Segregated schools are a result of segregated neighborhoods. Segregation in schools will continue because of neighborhood patterns.

Group 3: How do these local primary sources connect Fresno to the national Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Educator Mattie B. Myers worked toward educational equality in Fresno schools and spoke at a hearing of the U.S. House of Representatives.

NAACP leader Mattie B. Myers brought Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. to Fresno.

MLK marched to protest inequality in education, housing, and the workplace in June 1964. These sources are examples of inequality in education, housing, and the workplace occurring in Fresno.

Group 3: What is redlining?

Keeping services (financial and otherwise) out of reach for people who live in certain areas based on race or ethnicity. Redlining refers to lending (or insurance) discrimination that bases credit decisions on the location of a property to the exclusion of characteristics of the borrower or property. Usually, it means that lenders will not make loans to areas with African Americans or other perceived risks to real estate investments.

Group 3: Why was the Fair Housing Act of 1968 important locally and nationally?

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 prohibited discrimination in terms of where a person could rent, lease, or own property. It was designed to help desegregate communities and combat redlining practices.

Group 4: What is Fresno's Mason-Dixon line?

The separation of north and east Fresno from south and west Fresno. Wealthier white families to the north and east, minorities and poor families to the south and west.

Group 4: How have efforts to desegregate Fresno failed?

Southwest Fresno remains Fresno's poorest neighborhood. Mortality rates are higher and people live shorter lives in that area. Communities south of McKinley receive fewer city funds for road improvements, etc. Since the end of integration busing in the 1970s, Fresno, and many other cities, have re-segregated.

Assessment: Use the following questions to guide a recap discussion, as a quiz, or a guideline for a quick write assignment.

How did redlining contribute to the shape of Fresno communities?

Do you think redlining is a thing of the past or does it still affect how people think of Fresno?

How did Mattie B. Myers affect the educational system in Fresno County in terms of education inequality?

Do you think if forced busing had continued it would have been an effective way to desegregate schools?

Do you see segregation in schools and housing now? Give an example to support your answer.

How does the inequality of housing affect the inequality in education?

How do these primary source materials connect Fresno's movement for equality with the national Civil Rights Movement?

Extension Activity (30 minutes):

As a class, listen to these oral history clips and discuss the connections between the oral histories and the students' findings from the group activities.

Florence Atwater Oral History clip – Housing Discrimination, 1:51. Ethnic Oral History Project, 1977-1978, Fresno County Historical Society.

[Nathaniel Colley Oral History Clip](#), 1960. Desegregation in Housing - 14:00, 30:00. California State University, Sacramento, California Revealed.org.

[William Becker Oral History Clip](#), 1965. The Civil Rights Crisis in California - 9:00. California State University, Sacramento, California Revealed.org.

Distance Learning Options:

- Assign the readings and require two group discussions before presenting.
- Hold discussions via video conferencing software like [Zoom](#), or chat service like [Discord](#). Alternatively, require students to contribute to an online discussion board 3-5 times per discussion session.
- Hold live stream or video presentations in which each student is required to fill 1 minute of time. Students must not duplicate information shared by other group members.
- Share presentations with other groups to ensure all students comprehend the content.
- Assign 250-500 word reflection essay.