

Helping Kids Become Heroes

Creating a Culture of Heroism in Your School

This lesson plan is designed to directly support English Language Arts core curriculum as set forward by the Michigan K-12 Standards. By using this lesson in class, you help your students:

- **Communicate**, by working to define a difficult word (“hero”) that is used many different ways
- **Reason & think critically**, by developing their own theory of what is and is not heroism
- **Solve problems**, by applying the principles of heroism to real-life problems in their school

This supports three of the four key areas of Michigan’s College & Career Readiness model. Specifically, we recommend using this curriculum to support Standards for Speaking & Listening, at the grade 6-12 level. However, the lesson plan is easy to adapt to almost any K-12 classroom environment.

Above all, we believe that this curriculum will help your students be more responsible, proactive, and community-minded. It is our hope that thousands of students will internalize what it means to be a hero, and will go on to make a difference in the lives of those around them.

Introduction for Teachers

The word “hero” is used many different ways. However, all the real-life people we call heroes have one thing in common: **they make a sacrifice or take a risk for the sake of others**. This makes heroism different from other sorts of moral behavior, like donating to a charity or volunteering for a good cause. Volunteers and donors do good work, but in most cases they don’t have to make a deep sacrifice or take a risk.

This lesson plan has three objectives:

1. Help students understand that a hero makes a sacrifice for others
2. Identify examples of this kind of heroism that students are familiar with (their heroes)
3. Help students understand *how someone becomes a hero*, and what it takes to do the heroic thing in a difficult situation

At the end of the lesson plan we’ve also included two supplements: a list of tough questions students ask (and some ways to help answer them) and visual handouts of some real-life heroes you can use as examples.

I. What Do Your Students Know about Heroes?

Every child already has their own ideas about who is a hero. The easiest way to get them thinking critically about heroism is to simply ask them to name their own heroes. Start with this brainstorming exercise:

1. **Ask your students who they think of as a hero.** Get responses from around the room and write them on the blackboard/whiteboard as you go.
2. **Accept any answer.** Right now we're in brainstorm mode. There is no right or wrong answer. You can accept fictional characters, historic figures, celebrities or anyone else they name.
3. **Guide students.** We've noticed that when you ask, "Who is *your* hero?" you get personal answers like Grandpa, my mom, and so on. If you ask, "Who is *a* hero?" you get more famous examples like Harry Potter or Martin Luther King, Jr. If the list on the board is mostly personal heroes, you can guide your students by asking, "Who are some heroes you know of from history class?" or "Who are some heroes in your favorite movies?"

Once you have about 20 names on the board, it's time to ask students the big question:

"What characteristics do these heroes have in common?"

This may stump your students at first. If needed, explain that you're looking for what *makes* these people heroes, or what the students admire about them.

As your students give answers, write them down on the chalkboard as well. You'll get a wide variety of answers—everything from "they're strong!" to "they care about people." As you write down these answers, start to look for responses that get at our definition of a real-life hero: *someone who makes a sacrifice or takes a risk for the sake of others.*

Once you have about 10 characteristics written on the board, you might already see students leaning in this direction. If you don't, it's okay. Try asking them: "Do you think it's easy for these people to be heroes?" Students will know the answer is no. From here, you can ask other open-ended questions:

- "What's the hardest thing these heroes had to do?"
- "Why did these heroes do what they did, if it's not easy?"

This will get students thinking about the *cost* of being a hero: the sacrifice or risk involved. At this point, you can summarize what they've said with our working definition of heroism, and write it on the board:

A hero is someone who makes a sacrifice or takes a risk for the sake of others.

II. Teaching Kids about Heroism

The heart of the lesson is understanding what makes a person do something heroic. All of us have a natural instinct *not* to be the first person to take action in a bad situation. We would rather keep our heads down and wait for someone else to act. This is known as the Bystander Effect. Learning to overcome the Bystander Effect is the most important part of learning to be a hero.

Talking Points

Here are talking points you can use in teaching your students about heroism:

- **The opposite of a hero is not a villain, it's a bystander.**
We've all seen something bad happen, like someone tripping and falling, or being bullied by an older kid. Usually, when this happens there are other people around—and they just watch. These people are called “bystanders.” Bystanders have a lot of power, because if they just step up and do something to help, they immediately become the hero in the situation.
- **The Bystander Effect happens because no one wants to be the *first* person to act.**
When lots of people witness something bad, but no one steps forward to do anything, that's the Bystander Effect. Usually, everyone there *wants* to help; they just don't want to be the first one to do it. The Bystander Effect is what holds us back from being someone else's hero.
- **If you decide to be the first person to act, you'll often find that others join in and help you.**
It can be scary to be the first one to take action. But you usually won't be alone. Other people will feel more comfortable helping once they see that they're not the only ones. You just have to get over the initial fear of being the first one to act.
- **Even small actions can make a big difference.**
Think about what makes a difference in real-life situations. If you see someone trip and fall, most bystanders just watch or even laugh. You can be the one who asks the person if they're okay.

You may also find it helpful to watch [the TedX talk by Matt Langdon](https://www.tinyurl.com/herotalk) (tinyurl.com/herotalk), educator and founder of the Hero Round Table. Langdon's talk gives a detailed explanation of how he teaches kids to be heroes.

Discussion Questions

It may help your students to have an open-ended discussion about the ideas being presented. Here are some questions you can use to get a discussion going:

1. Can you think of some examples in which people would act as bystanders?
2. What could they have done differently?
3. Have you ever been a bystander?
4. Can you think of a situation in which taking a small action would make a big difference?
5. Can you explain a time when you did this?

Practicing to Be a Hero

You can also tell your students that there are specific things they can do to “train” to be heroes:

- **Become comfortable standing out.** Wear something funny to school, or do something that makes you uncomfortable, like singing a song in front of everyone at recess. This will make it easier to be the first one to act—and stand out—when a hero is needed
- **Pay attention to how other people are feeling.** The best way to be ready to be a hero is to notice when something is wrong. If a friend looks sad or upset, ask them if they want to talk. If someone needs help, like looking for something they lost, volunteer to help them out.
- **Compliment people.** If you like someone’s shoes, or backpack, or t-shirt—tell them. When you look for ways to compliment people, you will be more aware of how they feel and what they need.
- **Imagine yourself being a hero.** When you watch a movie or read a book, imagine being the main character. What would *you* do in their situation?

Often, no special training is needed to be a hero. Simply stepping forward and trying to help sets a powerful example, and can make a difference in many situations.

III. Applying Heroism to the Real World

Here are two different projects you can use with your students to help them apply what they've learned to real-life situations.

1. Group activity:

Break the class into groups of 4-5 students. Give the class the following scenario:

“You’re coming into school and you see three older kids bullying a younger kid. They’re making fun of his hair and one even pushes him. The bullies are older than you, and you don’t see any adults or teachers around. What can you do?”

Each group should take about 10-15 minutes to brainstorm as many different ways to help as possible. They should write down all their ideas. Then, ask each group to choose their 1 favorite idea. Each group will take turns presenting their solution to the bullying scenario.

2. Individual activity:

Ask each student to choose a problem they’ve seen in school. They should do an individual project that explains the problem and suggests one heroic action that could solve it. The project could be a short essay, a PowerPoint presentation, a video or a different format.

If you want to give students sample problems, here are three to use:

- A new student transfers into the school halfway through the year. They don’t have any friends, and some students pick on them because they’re new.
- The school has recycling bins, but a lot of students don’t use them, and lots of recyclable bottles and cans get thrown out.
- The most popular item at lunch is pizza, but sometimes it runs out halfway through lunch. A lot of kids wait in line but never get it.

Supplement I: Tough Questions & Answers

Heroism is a complex subject and sometimes students will ask difficult questions, especially at higher grade levels. This kind of discussion is good, because it gets students thinking critically, but it can also be hard for the teacher. Below, we give some of the most common “tough” questions and some possible answers. We also offer food for thought on each one, which you can use to spark further discussion.

Q: What about terrorists? If they make a sacrifice for something they believe in, are they “heroes”?

A: No. Although terrorists make a sacrifice, they aren’t doing it for the sake of helping others. They do it for a movement that hurts people. Terrorists believe in attacking civilians and forcing their beliefs on other people, which makes their entire cause immoral and wrong. No one who serves an immoral cause is ever a hero.

Food for thought: Many terrorists think they’re doing something heroic. What do you think causes people who could have been heroes to become villains instead?

Q: Isn’t heroism subjective? Everyone has their own definition of a hero, so isn’t one person’s terrorist another person’s hero?

A: No. Sometimes people call a bad person a hero, either because they have their own agenda or because they don’t understand what heroism really means. A hero is someone who makes a sacrifice *while acting in a moral way*. If the person does something immoral they cannot be a hero, even if people call them one.

When it’s unclear whether someone is a hero or a villain, or if some people call them a hero and other people call them a villain, we recommend a simple rule to tell them apart: *Does the person force their point of view on others?* If the answer is yes, they are not a hero.

Food for thought: Sometimes bad people get called heroes, and sometimes real heroes never get recognition for what they’ve done. Is it worth it to do something heroic, if no one ever recognizes it or says thank you?

Q: What about everyday heroes, who do small but important acts? Are these people really heroes?

A: Yes! Not every hero is going to save the world. Many will make a difference in just one or two people’s lives. If they took a risk to help someone, no matter how small the act is, it is a form of heroism.

Food for thought: Who are some of your “everyday heroes”? What risk did these people take, or what sacrifice did they make?

Q: Does every hero have to fight, or risk their life?

A: Absolutely not. In fact, most heroes don't fight anyone at all. Often they do something that risks their career, or their popularity, to help someone else. In other cases they do risk their lives, but not in a physical confrontation.

Here are three examples of real heroes who never fought anyone:

- **Coleen Rowley** sacrificed her career as an FBI agent by documenting how the government mishandled an investigation that could have prevented the 9/11 attacks.
- **John Lewis**, now a congressman, organized some of the most famous Civil Rights actions of the 1960s. He was one of the original Freedom Riders, led lunch counter sit-ins, and helped give birth to the Selma to Montgomery march. He knew his life was in danger because of his work, but he strictly adhered to nonviolent principles.
- **Chiune Sugihara** was a Japanese diplomat in Europe during World War II. He violated orders from his superiors and issued visas to 6,000 Jewish people, saving their lives. Sugihara knew he could lose his job and that his family could face reprisals, but he did it anyway.

Food for thought: *What are some of the things that are most important in your life? What would it take for you to be willing to risk losing them?*

Supplement II: Real Life Heroes



Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon

Bayard Rustin

Bayard was raised by his grandparents in Pennsylvania. They introduced him to many people involved in the civil rights movement and he helped whenever he could. After college, he learned about pacifism and nonviolence through the words of Thoreau and Gandhi. He put it into practice by protesting separate seating on interstate buses, World War II, and segregated dining in prisons.

His first big moment came when he organized the Journey of Reconciliation to test the new laws against discrimination on interstate buses. Blacks and whites rode buses across southern America and were often beaten and arrested. This got him a lot of attention and he started working with Martin Luther King, Jr., eventually convincing him to protest nonviolently. Bayard became the obvious choice to organize the March on Washington due to his skills and successes. He accomplished all of this despite many people discriminating against him for being a gay man. He was a man of integrity and stuck with his values even when it hurt him.

"We need in every bay and community a group of angelic troublemakers."

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Irena Sendler

Irena was living in Warsaw, Poland during the occupation by Germany in World War II. When the Jewish people were confined to the Ghetto, she was determined to help the children, knowing that so many people were being sent to death. As an employee of the Social Welfare Department, she was allowed to enter the Jewish Ghetto. Irena built a team of people to begin saving children by smuggling them out of the Ghetto, hidden in ambulances, carts, and even sometimes disguised as packages.

Each child was given to a foster family under a different name. She kept a list of all of the children's real names buried in her garden, knowing she would need it after the war in order to reunite the children with their families. Irena's group was responsible for saving 2,500 children. In 1943, Irena was arrested by the Gestapo and tortured. She gave up no information, despite having her legs broken, and was sentenced to death. Her team saved her life by paying bribes. Irena went into hiding - listed as being executed.

"Every child saved with my help is the justification of my existence on this Earth, and not a title to glory."

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David Shepherd & Travis Price

David and Travis were twelfth graders at a Canadian high school. At the end of the first day of school they heard about a ninth grade boy who had been crying. This boy had spent his first day of high school being teased by a group of twelfth graders for wearing a pink polo shirt. They had called him gay and threatened to beat him up.

David and Travis decided they would not stand for that sort of behaviour in their school. They planned to unleash a sea of pink the following day. Using the internet and their phones they urged everyone to wear something pink to school. The two boys purchased dozens of pink shirts, handing them out at the front door the next day. Out of a school of 1,000 students, 800 came in pink! When Travis and David saw the boy who had been bullied, the smile on his face rewarded them more than they could have imagined. Pink Shirt Day is now celebrated around the world every year.

**"We're not heroes,
we're just two kids who stood up for a cause."**



Images and text courtesy of *The Hero Field Guide* by Matt Langdon and Matthew Osmon



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Irene Morgan

Feeling sick and tired on a bus ride to a doctor's visit, Irene refused to give up her seat to a white couple. She was already in the black half of the segregated bus. The driver drove straight to a police station, where an officer boarded the bus and gave Irene a warrant for her arrest. Irene tore up the warrant and kicked the deputy sheriff, saying she was within her rights.

She was arrested and pleaded guilty to resisting arrest, paying a \$100 fine and apologizing for her violent behavior. But she refused to pay the \$10 fine for sitting in the wrong seat. She appealed, and her case caught the attention of Thurgood Marshall, who took the case to the Supreme Court. They won. Her actions inspired others to stand up to injustice, including those on the Journey of Reconciliation led by Bayard Rustin. Eleven years later, Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat on a bus.

"I can't see how anybody in the same circumstance could do otherwise."

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