Eyes on the Prize is the 14-hour series on the Civil Rights Movement, produced by Blackside, Inc. Since it was first aired in 1987 it has garnered every major award, from an Academy Award nomination to education awards such as the “Best of Festival” of both the National Educational Film Festival and the American Film and Video Festival, to journalistic awards such as the top Peabody and duPont-Columbia Broadcast Journalism awards.

The series also has a second, almost more important life—its use in classrooms and other educational settings around the country:

Teachers, without exception, thought that Eyes on the Prize was the single best video history series of its type that they had ever used. Teachers consistently commented on the accessibility of the series to engage the interests and concerns of the current generation of students. Teachers report that Eyes was especially useful in helping them and their students confront difficult philosophical and moral issues such as racism and equality.

“Eyes on the Prize makes the concepts I teach come alive for my students. Abstract lessons about democracy have greater impact when they see real people, like themselves, fighting and dying for basic things like the right to vote. And the series really increases my kids’ sense of self-esteem,” asserts Derrick Evans, a ninth-grade civics teacher in Boston, Massachusetts.

Cindy Henry, department chair and 11th-grade history teacher in Wilmington, North Carolina, says, “I can stand up there and talk about democratic concepts and the responsibility we have to each other and to our society until I’m blue in the face, but these concepts become much more real when my students see them graphically played out in the series.”

Documentary Format

Eyes is a historical documentary based both on interviews with individuals who experienced the Movement and on archival footage from that time. In the segment on the 1965 voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, for example, Selma mayor Joseph Smitherman explains why he believes the Movement chose Selma for a voting rights mobilization:

They picked Selma just like a movie producer would pick a set. You had the right ingredients. I mean, you had to have seen [Sheriff Jim] Clark in his day. He had a swagger stick. And then [Alabama Public Safety Director Wilson] Baker was very impressive. And I guess I was the least of all. I was 145 pounds and a crew cut and big ears.

The film then cuts to Mayor Smitherman at a 1965 press conference saying, “Our city and our county has been subjected to the greatest pressures I think any community in the country has had to withstand. We’ve had in our area here outside agitation groups of all levels.”
Narration explains why citizen mobilization was necessary: “More than half of Dallas County’s citizens were black. But less than one percent was registered by 1965. Throughout much of the South, custom and law had long prevented blacks from registering.” Sheyann Webb, then only nine years old, remembers the bravery of her teachers: “And it was amazing to see how many teachers had participated. I remember vividly on that day when I saw my teachers marching with me, you know, just for the right to vote.” Film footage shows the courage of those teachers confronting violence as they line up to register to vote.

Eventually, in a monumental display of conscience, thousands of Americans of every race and religion traveled to Selma to bear witness. In a present-day interview, the Reverend C. T. Vivian comments:

It was clear engagement between those who wished the fullness of their personalities to be met, and those that would destroy us physically and psychologically. You do not walk away from that. This is what Movement meant. Movement meant that finally we were encountering, on a mass scale, the evil that had been destroying us on a mass scale. You do not walk away from that, you continue to answer it.

**Brief Description**

The series is divided into two parts. The first part includes six one-hour segments beginning with the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision and progressing through the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965. This part covers the Montgomery Bus Boycott; the Little Rock, Arkansas, school integration crisis; the student sit-ins and freedom rides; the demonstrations and church bombing in Birmingham; the March on Washington, D.C.; and the nuts-and-bolts mobilization around the right to vote in Mississippi.

The second part continues with eight hour-long segments, beginning in 1964 with a portrait of Malcolm X and ending with the 1985 Chicago election of Mayor Harold Washington. *Eyes II* documents the election of the first African-American mayor of a major U.S. city, the last whirlwind year of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life, the battles champion boxer Muhammad Ali faced both inside and outside the ring, the building of the Black Panther Party in Chicago and its tragic outcome, and affirmative action as seen against the backdrop of the election of Atlanta’s first African-American mayor. Each hour-long program is divided into two or three 20- to 30-minute stories, allowing for class discussion within most school schedules.

**Themes**

Throughout the 14 hours of the series, the following major themes emerge:

1. The Civil Rights Movement was a primary force for the expansion of democracy for all.
2. The Movement was based on the work of thousands of ordinary people who both organized and sustained it.
3. The Movement emphasized our responsibility to each other.
4. The Movement was based on humane values that brought out the best in each individual involved.

5. The Movement was not simply a series of spontaneous demonstrations—it was carefully planned and executed.

6. A continuity of protest exists within African-American history.

7. Women were a fundamental part of the leadership and the troops of the Movement.

1. The Civil Rights Movement was a primary force for the expansion of democracy for all.

The issues raised by the Movement—social, economic, and political—are repercussions throughout our society. A segment in *Eyes II*, for example, chronicles Dr. King’s last year. The story demonstrates that he, and the Movement as a whole, began to organize actively around economic issues and became more vocal about disparities, not just between black and white, but between rich and poor across the board. The issues raised in that segment have particular resonance now. Linda Nathan, a teacher at Fenway Middle College High School in Boston, builds on this relationship between the Movement and the problems students confront today: “We can take off from *Eyes* to discuss current problems—everything from homelessness to unemployment to racism. *Eyes* helps students see that our history is not yet completed, that these issues are still alive and will remain with us until we actively deal with them” (interview with author, April 15, 1990).

2. The Movement was based on the work of thousands of ordinary people who both organized and sustained it.

*Eyes* shows that the Movement included not only King, but also many important and ordinary people. It was our parents, our teachers, and our peers who initiated and sustained the Movement. Until students understand this, they will continue to abdicate their responsibility to change things—or worse, continue to display the righteous rage of those who feel powerless—under the mistaken impression that they have neither the responsibility nor the power to effect change. If nothing else, *Eyes* teaches the undeniable power of one person or a group of people united to make the world a better place.

One of the most powerful *Eyes* segments discusses Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Chicagoan who was killed in Mississippi in 1955 for saying “Hey, baby” to a white female storeowner. Several aspects of this story are engaging for students: as teenagers, they can relate to Till; Till’s murder demonstrates the absurdity of racist violence; and Till’s grand-uncle shows great courage in testifying against the murderers in court. It is the courage of that lone individual, standing up for what is right no matter what the cost, that touches a common chord.
Throughout the series, people act at great personal risk to change conditions for the better. While the series helps students become aware of the struggle against racism and for human rights, it also shows numerous agents of change, who seem no different than the students themselves, actively and successfully working to improve conditions.

For example, students see people their age becoming key players in the Movement. When I showed the Birmingham segment to ninth-grade students in Roxbury, Massachusetts, the reaction was absolute silence. The image of rows and rows of students resolutely marching into the tunnel that led to the Birmingham jail was magnetic. This segment provoked a discussion of choices: Why students at that time chose to take that action when they could have sat on the sidelines. Students talked about whether they would have joined the demonstrations and on what issues they would be willing to take action today.

3. The Movement emphasized our responsibility to each other.

It was commonly understood by those involved in the Movement that they were not just struggling for themselves, they were struggling for their communities and for the next generation (in the same way that others had prepared the way for them). Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi sharecropper and courageous Movement organizer, appears in the Mississippi segment of Eyes. She was thrown off the plantation where she worked because she tried to register to vote. When she and her family moved into town with friends, that house was shot into 16 times, barely missing the occupants. Later, she and others were brutally beaten in a Winona, Mississippi, jail when they sat on the “whites only” side of the Greyhound bus terminal on their way home from a voter education workshop in South Carolina. Hamer became a powerful symbol of resistance, particularly when she spoke at the nationally televised hearings during the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, where she explained, “We just got to stand up now as Negroes, for ourselves, and for our freedom. And if it don’t do me any good, I do know the young people it will do good.”

Within the context of responsibility, students can discuss the role of nonviolence—both as philosophy and as a tactic. Students will see leaders in Eyes, such as King; several members of King’s staff; and the Reverend James Lawson, who greatly influenced the students of the Nashville sit-in movement and philosophically believed in nonviolence. For these activists, to meet violence with violence would mean they had descended to the level of those they opposed. They believed that the morality upon which the Movement was based mandated aspiring to a higher purpose—that once a violent response occurred no cap could be put on the higher and higher levels of violence that would result.

Other Movement activists, however, saw nonviolence primarily as a tactic—for example, many activists involved in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and local leaders such as Mississippi’s Hartman Turnbow, who protected his home with a 12-gauge shotgun. Civil rights workers routinely saw both the local leaders with whom they worked and their peers brutalized and sometimes killed for mobilizing for the right to vote and for the desegregation of public facilities. Rarely was anyone punished for those crimes.

For these activists it became clear: Given this unbridled atmosphere of terror, nonviolence was the only practical course. It was absurd to think about retaliation when the entire state government machinery was amassed against you. It was also irresponsible to consider a violent response when you were responsible for more than yourself. Your primary responsibility as an organizer was the well-being of the community and your ability
to continue to organize around basic human rights issues. Both would be put in serious jeopardy if the Movement returned violence with violence.

For today’s students, who may be unable to accept fully the philosophy of nonviolence, and who may have difficulty relating to the nonviolence demonstrated in *Eyes*, it may be easier to discuss this concept in the context of what was possible, what was at stake, and the responsibility civil rights workers had to their communities.

4. The Movement was based on humane values that brought out the best in each individual involved.
The moral basis of the Movement is evident throughout *Eyes*, particularly in showing the way the Movement looked at certain issues. Participants talk about the moral basis of the struggle even when they become involved in the political arena, where morality and politics seem to be a contradiction in terms.

5. The Movement was not simply a series of spontaneous demonstrations—it was carefully planned and executed.
The general representation of the Movement in news footage of the time was one of protests that seemed to spring spontaneously from a mere whim. This image ignores the intelligence of Movement activists, and is refuted consistently in *Eyes on the Prize*; for example, in the segments on Birmingham; the sit-ins; the Lowndes County, Alabama, organizing effort; the Howard University takeover; and the Harold Washington mayoral campaign in Chicago. All of these segments emphasize the intense degree of planning, organization, and constant discussion that were necessary to build an effective movement. The series thus helps to build self-esteem among African-American students, while at the same time breaking down common stereotypes of the African-American community.

6. A continuity of protests exists within the African-American community.
The question most frequently asked by students is, Why did it take so long? Students need to recognize that African-American resistance has always existed and that it did not just begin in the 1950s. Dr. Vincent Harding likens the theme of resistance to a river of struggle coursing through African-American history. In the Birmingham segment, for example, we learn that Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth had been working to desegregate even
before King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began their campaign. In addition, Dr. Robin Kelly of the University of Michigan notes that in 1941–42 more than 50 incidents of protest against segregated seating by African-American bus riders in Birmingham were recorded.

Eyes on the Prize helps teachers address the difficult issue of race, which is often sublimated but sometimes surfaces explosively and unexpectedly. Teachers may find that students are more comfortable discussing their concerns about race after seeing Eyes because it is based on events from the past. These historical events can provide a platform for a broader discussion, particularly once an environment of trust and respect has been established.

In addition, teachers will likely find that students do not believe some of the history presented in Eyes until they see it for themselves, and that they tend to think all of this happened a long time ago. These events become real—and immediate—only when they see them on the screen. For younger viewers, though, it is still important to emphasize that these are not actors reading a script, but real people marching, going to jail, and fighting for their rights. Understanding that this is recent history helps students consider whether the environment that existed before the Movement could reoccur—and what they can do to prevent that from happening.

Professor Jim McLeod, who uses Eyes in his classes at Washington University in St. Louis, notes that the power of the series is not so much in the events as in the people whose courage and commitment it chronicles. Eyes puts a face on these events; it brings to life pieces of history that textbooks often render static and lifeless, if they cover them at all. The strength of Eyes is that it powerfully shows not only how the Civil Rights Movement transformed a country, but how it transformed all who were a part of it and called on them to be the best that they can be. What better lesson can we teach our children?