



Chicago HOPES for Kids
Juneteenth
Learning Series: Day 7

Learning Objectives:

- Members will reflect on their personal definition of Freedom
- Members will learn the history and significance of Juneteenth
- Members will think critically about the 4th of July
- Members will reflect on how to actively unlearn and relearn the history we were taught and our responsibility as educators

Intro:

- Listen to “[Words for you](#)”
- Complete Journal Question (to be shared with the group via poll everywhere):
How do you define freedom?

Activity 1:

- Read “Teaching Juneteenth”
- Complete Reflection Questions in Journal (will not be shared)

Teaching Juneteenth

The history of Juneteenth acknowledges hard history while also empowering students to be advocates for change.

June 12, 2019

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Each year around June 19, Black communities across the country unite for a family reunion of sorts. Juneteenth activities feature the sights and sounds of Blackness: People enjoying art, music and food that connect them to a shared ancestry and history. They celebrate being their authentic selves. They celebrate freedom in both solemn and festive ceremonies.

This celebration marks a day in 1865 when enslaved Texans learned they'd be free—two months after Robert E. Lee surrendered and ended the Civil War and two and a half years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Initially a uniquely Texan observance, Juneteenth has now been recognized in some form in every corner of the country.

There are many ways to teach students about this celebration. Lessons about Juneteenth need to recognize the challenges those who fight injustice have always faced, but they shouldn't be marked only by the tragedy of enslavement. Students, particularly Black students, can find empowerment in the jubilant celebrations of culture, activism and the humanity of a people.

Teaching Juneteenth: Culture as Resistance

Although the truth had been hidden from them—and they continued to face threats of continued oppression, violence and death—a year after they learned of their freedom, formerly enslaved people resiliently rallied around that date and made the celebration an annual ritual. Early Juneteenth observances included a search for lost family members and an opportunity to uplift each other as they moved through hostile environments.

With this knowledge, students can also identify ways the descendants of the enslaved recapture and honor the cultures, customs and practices lost through slavery.

Early celebrations involved readings of the Emancipation Proclamation, religious ceremonies, singing, games and enjoying foods that enslaved people ate. Today, it doesn't look that much different. People retell histories, have family reunions, eat foods reminiscent of early Juneteenth celebrations such as barbecue, attend religious services or choir performances and have elaborate displays such as fancy dress and parades.



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Teaching Juneteenth: Understanding Emancipation

That's why Juneteenth is more than an observance of freedom. It's also a time to share the experiences of those who fought—literally and figuratively—to seek true freedom for future generations. It's important that we don't whitewash this history.

A common mistake among those who teach the history of American slavery is to center the U.S. government's role in granting freedom while also placing the onus to navigate through a racist society solely on the formerly enslaved.

Perhaps many center Lincoln in this history because we tend to think of the Emancipation Proclamation, instead of the 13th Amendment, as ending slavery. Our 2018 *Teaching Hard History* report found that 59 percent of high school students couldn't correctly identify the latter as the legal end to slavery in the United States.

But it's important for students to know that enslaved people didn't willfully accept enslavement or wait for others to free them. They resisted often and consistently. While rare, violent rebellions did occur. Some people successfully escaped enslavement. And everyday acts of resistance, such as breaking tools or pretending to be ill were other ways enslaved people asserted their humanity.

While it certainly encouraged enslaved people to liberate themselves (letting them know they wouldn't be re-enslaved if they escaped behind Union lines), the Emancipation Proclamation didn't end U.S. slavery because it didn't apply to Union states. January 31, 1865 marks the day the 13th Amendment—which officially abolished slavery in the United States—was passed in Congress. Students need to know that there were people enslaved in Delaware until December 6, 1865, the day the 13th Amendment was finally ratified.



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Juneteenth offers an opportunity to talk to students about this complex history. When you do, you can also talk about the progress and opposing forces that continue to threaten all of these milestones, even though they're protected by the Constitution of the United States.

Teaching Juneteenth: Backlash to Freedom

American history has often been reduced to a simple story of continuous progress. In this context, the Emancipation Proclamation represents an important turning point—the country coming to its senses and setting the course for concrete steps toward true equality.

But it's important for students to know that the announcement—and the celebration afterward—was short-lived and riddled with setbacks, including violence. For example, some enslavers intentionally waited until the harvest before they announced that the enslaved were freed.

And some people taking advantage of their freedom were met with terror or even death. Newly freed people didn't have protection until September 1865 with the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, and even those efforts were often thwarted during Reconstruction.

As TT Associate Editor Julia Delacroix points out, “Students tend to think of the fight for civil rights as though there has always been a set list of hurdles to be overcome—slavery, then racial terror, then segregation, then disenfranchisement, then mass incarceration.”

But we know that “racism takes the shape of whatever will hold it.” Barriers to freedom weren't predestined, but they do confirm that there has always been a force to maintain racial hierarchy by pushing back against change.

In other words, with each attempt to bring justice and equality to all people, there is often a quick and fierce response. With each victory, there is yet another dueling force to conquer. The



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announcement of emancipation was no exception, and Juneteenth is a perfect opening to invite students to think about the “story of America” they often hear.

Teaching Juneteenth: American Ideals

It’s not too challenging to ask students to consider what Juneteenth tells us about our ideas about the United States. After all, another holiday—July Fourth—is in the shadow of Juneteenth. It’s a time when Americans are encouraged to rejoice in the nation’s independence...and freedom.

Students might recognize a paradox with July Fourth celebrations. They might question how a country could have touted the idea of freedom and liberty for all while also oppressing and treating an entire group of people as property. Those celebrations of independence went on for 89 years before the United States abolished slavery.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglass acknowledged this as “inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony” during his July 5, 1852 speech in Rochester, New York.

The irony hasn’t been lost on African Americans, who saw that true freedom included navigating society with social, political and economic power. Yet other Americans—those with and without power—fought actively to deny them those rights. For years this paradox dampened the enthusiasm to celebrate, and Juneteenth was not observed for several decades between WWII and the end of the civil rights movement.

The holiday wasn’t revived until the end of Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s campaign, which fell short of its ambitions after King was assassinated. Campaign organizers and protesters made their way to the National Mall in Washington, D.C., where, for more than a month, they visited federal offices to demand economic justice. The campaign came to an end by late June, but not before recognizing June 19 as Solidarity Day.



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William Wiggins Jr., professor emeritus of folklore at Indiana University and author of *Jubilation: African-American Celebrations in the Southeast*, told *Smithsonian Magazine*: “It was late June and there were people from all different states in that village for that summer, so they had a group from Texas and someone said, ‘Why don’t we have a Juneteenth celebration,’ which again is a way to address poverty and freedom and harkening back to our past.”

The organizers understood the significance of that date and would bring Juneteenth back to their respective communities in the following years. This, too, is an important part of the history of the holiday for students to understand.

Proponents of Juneteenth argue that it should be an officially recognized national holiday, not only as a way for the United States to acknowledge this vital history, but also to celebrate the values it lauds on paper. Texas officially declared June 19 an official holiday in 1980. And today, 40 other states and Washington, D.C., have adopted the holiday. Yet it’s amazing that this milestone in history isn’t officially recognized on a national level.

Knowledge about these dates and the celebration of them give students the steps to advocate for narratives and experiences that have been erased or forgotten. It also empowers them to connect with their own communities and to become advocates in a diverse democracy.

Reflection Questions

Please answer the follow questions in a journal:

1. How does this article challenge what you were taught about slavery and freedom throughout your educational journey?
2. How do you understand the phrase “racism takes the shape of whatever will hold it?”
 - a. What is something that currently “holds” racism and what draws you to this conclusion?

Activity 2:

- Read “As a Black American, I Don’t Celebrate the 4th of July”
- Complete Reflection Questions in Journal (will not be shared)



As A Black American, I Don't Celebrate The Fourth Of July

July 03, 2019

- [Arielle Gray](#)

I don't really celebrate the Fourth of July.

As a child, I was always emotionally apathetic to the spectacular display of fireworks and the school lessons on the history of America's independence. The most exciting thing about this time of year, for me, are the cookouts comprised of meats simmering away on the grill and the communal spirit of breaking bread with family members not seen for months.

In school, the story of Independence Day comprised a rather large portion of our American History curriculum. I learned and memorized the key players in the American Revolution and almost every year was given a typed copy of the Declaration of Independence to study for quizzes and tests. But never once in my school career did anyone mention Frederick Douglass' famous "What to the Slave Is The Fourth of July," decrying the Fourth of July jubilation. Perhaps the spirit of resistance and revolt were only pertinent when it came to how America won its independence, not to how America achieved and maintained its power — through the rod and whip of slavery.

Perhaps the spirit of resistance and revolt were only pertinent when it came to how America won its independence, not to how America achieved and maintained its power...

I was introduced to Douglass' speech through my grandfather, an active man who made it a priority to expose me to black culture from a young age. I cannot quite remember the last time I accompanied him to a reading of "What to the Slave Is The Fourth of July" but I remember the feeling I had. I knew that the Fourth of July wasn't for me.

Douglass gave his seminal "What To The Slave Is Fourth of July" speech in 1852 at Corinthian Hall in New York, addressing the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. He criticized the independence of America, an independence that meant little for the slaves still toiling away in the American South. Up north, free black citizens still bore the burden of living in a systemically



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racist society and were offered no protection by law from housing discrimination, segregated school systems or even bodily harm. “I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us,” Douglass said in his speech. “I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us.”

“What To The Slave Is Fourth of July?” laid bare the hypocrisy of a nation so eager for independence, yet so reluctant to bestow those same freedoms to the enslaved people driving the country’s economy forward. Douglass also turned a critical eye on the church, accusing slaveholders of using the Bible to justify the subjugation of slaves though in reality, the religious tome emphasized the freedom of all people. He believed that the church, in particular, could play a large part in the abolition of slavery.

Eleven years passed, after Douglass’ speech, before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1863. It wasn’t until 1865 when the last enslaved people in Texas learned that they were no longer in bondage. But even after slavery was abolished, freedom and independence were empty, hollow words.

Douglass’ speech is as relevant today as it was in 1852. There’s a reason why groups around Boston continue to recite the speech, year after year during the week of the Fourth of July. Our current political climate speaks volumes on our country’s interpretation of freedom. If you are not white, your freedom is conditional, not a guarantee.

Protests are erupting across the country as more and more evidence of the inhumane treatment of migrant children in detention centers at the border circulates. In these detention centers, migrants are stuffed into small areas and cells, without reliable access to food and water. Reports tell the story of children in these centers, who have no access to regular meals or medical care and are without clean clothing or a way to bathe themselves. At least seven children have died while in immigration custody since last year.

Some may argue that because the people in these detention centers are not American citizens, they aren't guaranteed the rights that come along with citizenship. But what's troublesome is that the United States, a nation that claims to be the land of the free, has a long history of denying citizenship to people who don't fit within certain paradigms. At one point, black people born on



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U.S. soil weren't considered citizens and America employed this same argument to rationalize their immoral treatment. Racism has been codified again and again, from internment camps for Japanese Americans to the Chinese Exclusion Act. Putting migrant children in cages, without reliable access to basic human necessities, is the newest iteration of this great American sin.

There is great irony in the pomp and circumstance of the Fourth of July, in the number of free musical concerts, fireworks and other themed activities.

What, to us, is the Fourth of July when our freedoms are provisional and subject to alteration? What does the Fourth of July actually stand for?

What, to us, is the Fourth of July when our freedoms are consistently infringed upon by a government meant to uphold those very freedoms? What, to us, is the Fourth of July when our freedoms are provisional and subject to alteration? What does the Fourth of July actually stand for? Does it mean something? Or is it an empty promise?

“The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me,” Douglass said in his speech. “...This Fourth of July is yours, not mine.” His assertions are ones we must meditate on when the time comes to pull out the fireworks and light up the grill, when it’s time to head down to the Esplanade to watch the lights explode over the Charles River.

This year, I was unable to attend the annual reading of Douglass' speech in the Boston Common and I'm not sure if my grandfather and I will ever attend together again. But the lesson I learned, all those years ago alongside him, is timeless. For us, the Fourth of July remains a hollow statement, a shallow symbol of a freedom that is only a mirage for many. It remains a festivity with no substance, a celebration with no soul. And every year, we are reminded that while we are able to participate in the party, the party isn't for us. We are only visitors who may or may not be asked to leave once the party is over.



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Reflection Questions

Please answer the follow questions in a journal:

1. Free write: write whatever comes to mind. If you need guiding questions, consider using the following:
 - a. Does this provide a counter story to your understanding of the 4th of July? Why or why not?
 - b. Does this article change your understanding of freedom?
 - i. How would you rewrite your definition of freedom if it does?