

DIVISION 5: GRADE 8 ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY PROMPT

THEME: ENCOURAGING OUR YOUTH TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE

SCENARIO

As you get ready for high school, the questions get bigger. It's no longer just about what is right or wrong, but **how** do you fight for what's right, especially when you're up against powerful systems that don't want to change? This was a question that the greatest agents of change wrestled with their entire lives. One of the most profound and difficult parts of that struggle is understanding how nonviolence actually works.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. built his entire philosophy on the concept of **agape love**. This wasn't a mushy, sentimental feeling. He defined it as an "understanding, redeeming goodwill for all"—a love that sees the humanity in everyone, even your opponent. He believed this "**soul force**" was a powerful weapon. By enduring suffering without fighting back, activists could awaken the conscience of the oppressor and build the "Beloved Community."

But other brilliant thinkers, like the theologian **Reinhold Niebuhr**, challenged Dr. King. Niebuhr's "Christian realism" warned King that while you might be able to appeal to a single person's heart, influential groups and systems don't have hearts to change. They are driven by self-interest and only understand the concept of power. This created a deep tension: *can you truly "love" a system into changing, or must you force it to change?*

The history of the NAACP is filled with this tension. While the organization consistently promoted dignity, its most significant victories often stemmed from a strategic application of power. The landmark 1954 **Brown v. Board of Education** Supreme Court decision wasn't a plea to the hearts of segregationists; it was a legal knockout punch that compelled states to obey the law. Likewise, the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** was passed because leaders skillfully built the political power needed to force it through Congress.

Think about what happened right here in our local history. In 1951, when former Paducah NAACP President **Curlee Brown Sr.** was denied entry to Paducah Junior College because he was Black, he filed a lawsuit. The court's ruling forced the college to integrate. Was that an act of *agape* love designed to transform the college's leaders morally? Or was it a strategic power move, using the force of law to make an unjust institution bend to his will?

This leads to a critical debate about how nonviolence truly functions:

- Is nonviolence a tool for **moral transformation**? This view holds that *agape* love is the key to understanding. The goal is to awaken the conscience of your opponent, leading to true reconciliation and a "Beloved Community." From this perspective, lasting change can only come from a change of heart.
- Is nonviolence a method for **applying coercive power**? This more realist view argues that powerful systems don't change because it's the right thing to do; they change when they are forced. Nonviolent actions, such as boycotts, strikes, and lawsuits, are practical because they inflict economic and political pain, making it more costly for the powerful to maintain injustice than to concede to change.
- Or is it a **combination of both**? In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Dr. King said direct action is meant to "create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." From this angle, nonviolence is a moral strategy that uses tactical pressure and disruption to force a power structure to face its own hypocrisy, creating an opening for both a shift in power and a change of heart.