

PANEL ONE: From Isolation to Awareness (1821-1959)

EDUCATOR DISCUSSION GUIDE

For K-12 Teachers

Overview: This panel introduces students to a challenging period in Missouri history when children with disabilities were isolated from education and community life. Use these discussion questions and activities to help students understand historical context, develop empathy, and recognize the importance of inclusive education.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (Grades K-5)

Key Concepts for Young Learners:

- Long ago, some children couldn't go to school
- Families needed help but didn't have support
- Teachers and parents worked together to make things better

Discussion Questions:

1. Look at the photograph. Who do you think is missing from this picture?
2. How would you feel if you couldn't go to school with your friends?
3. What do you think it was like for children who stayed home while other kids went to school?
4. Why is it important that all children get to go to school together?

Activity: "Everyone Belongs"

- Have students draw a picture of their classroom including everyone
- Discuss: What makes our classroom special? How do we make sure everyone belongs?
- Create a class pledge: "In our classroom, everyone belongs and everyone can learn"

Book Connections:

- "We're All Wonders" by R.J. Palacio
- "All Are Welcome" by Alexandra Penfold
- "Mixed: A Colorful Story" by Arree Chung

MIDDLE SCHOOL (Grades 6-8)

Key Concepts:

- Historical segregation and exclusion affected many groups, including people with disabilities
- Medical misunderstanding led to harmful policies
- Individual advocates created change even when systems resisted

Discussion Questions:

1. What assumptions did people make about children with disabilities during this era? Where do you think those assumptions came from?
2. The panel mentions that language used during this period "now feels deeply outdated and hurtful." Why does language matter when talking about disabilities?
3. Compare this era to other civil rights struggles happening at the same time (1820s-1950s). What similarities do you notice?
4. The home-visiting teachers of the 1930s were described as "radicals." What made their work radical? What risks might they have taken?
5. Why do you think parents started forming support groups in the 1940s-50s? What might they have gained from meeting together?

Activity: "Historical Investigation"

Have students research one of these topics:

- The history of Fulton State Hospital
- Early special education pioneers
- The founding of The Arc (1950)
- Disability rights timeline comparison with other civil rights movements

Students create a timeline, presentation, or poster showing their findings.

Writing Prompt:

"Imagine you are a parent of a child with a disability in 1930s Missouri. Write a letter to your state representative explaining why your child deserves access to education. What arguments would you make? What evidence would you use?"

Connection to Today:

- How has education changed since this era?
- What supports do students with disabilities have in our school today?
- Are there still barriers to inclusion? What are they?

HIGH SCHOOL (Grades 9-12)**Key Concepts:**

- Institutionalization reflected societal attitudes about disability, worth, and belonging
- The medicalization of disability created systems of exclusion
- Early advocates laid groundwork for modern disability rights
- Historical exclusion had lasting impacts on families and communities

Discussion Questions:

1. **Historical Context:** The panel covers 1821-1959, spanning major American events including the Civil War, Progressive Era, Great Depression, and post-WWII period. How did larger historical forces shape attitudes toward disability during this period?

2. **Eugenics Connection:** Research the eugenics movement in America (1900s-1930s). How did eugenic ideology influence the institutionalization of people with disabilities? What connections can you draw to other discriminatory practices of this era?
3. **Medical Model vs. Social Model:** This era reflected a "medical model" of disability (disability as individual deficit requiring treatment or isolation). How does this contrast with the "social model" of disability (disability as created by social barriers)? Find evidence in the panel text of each perspective.
4. **Language and Power:** Analyze the evolution of terminology related to intellectual disability. Research what terms were used in 1821, 1900, 1940, and 1959. Why did each term eventually become considered offensive? What does this tell us about the relationship between language and social attitudes?
5. **Intersectionality:** How did race, class, gender, and geography intersect with disability during this era? Would experiences have differed for a wealthy white family in St. Louis versus a poor Black family in rural Missouri?

Research Project Options:

Option 1: Local Institutional History

Research the history of Fulton State Hospital or another Missouri institution. Investigate:

- When and why it was established
- Living conditions for residents
- Treatment approaches used
- Family experiences
- How and when the institution closed or changed

Create a documentary-style presentation with archival photos, documents, and oral histories if available.

Option 2: Comparative Civil Rights Analysis

Compare the disability rights movement timeline with another civil rights movement (African American civil rights, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights). Create a dual timeline showing:

- Key legal milestones
- Grassroots organizing strategies
- Backlash and resistance encountered
- Language and framing evolution
- Lasting impacts

Option 3: Oral History Project

Interview someone who lived through this era (could be an educator, disability advocate, or family member of someone with a disability). Prepare questions about:

- Personal memories of this period
- How attitudes have changed
- What surprised them about progress made

- What they wish more people understood

Philosophical Discussion:

- What obligations does a society have to its most vulnerable members?
- How do we balance historical understanding with contemporary values when discussing painful histories?
- The panel says this history "planted seeds for a more inclusive future." Can progress emerge from injustice? How?

Connection to Current Issues:

- **Institutionalization:** Research current debates about group homes, sheltered workshops, and community-based living
- **Education:** Investigate least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements and ongoing inclusion debates
- **Representation:** Analyze how people with disabilities are portrayed in current media vs. historical portrayals

Writing Assignments:

1. **Argumentative Essay:** "Was the period 1821-1959 one of complete failure in supporting children with disabilities, or were there meaningful seeds of progress?" Defend your position with historical evidence.
2. **Creative Historical Fiction:** Write from the perspective of a home-visiting teacher in 1930s St. Louis, a parent facing institutionalization decisions, or a child living in Fulton State Hospital.
3. **Policy Analysis:** Research and analyze one policy from this era (compulsory institutionalization laws, sterilization laws, or exclusion from public schools). Examine its justification, implementation, and long-term impacts.

INTERACTIVE QUIZ

10 Questions for Google Forms or other

Question 1: What was the main way Missouri addressed the needs of children with developmental disabilities between 1821-1959?

- A) Specialized schools were built in every county
- B) Children remained at home without formal supports or were placed in institutions
- C) The state provided free therapy and education services
- D) Federal programs funded family support services

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: During this period, most children with disabilities remained at home without formal education or therapy. When families couldn't manage care, institutionalization was often the only option.

Question 2: What was the Fulton State Hospital's original purpose?

- A) It was specifically built as a school for children with disabilities
- B) It served as a rehabilitation center for injured workers
- C) It was designed as a hospital for adults with mental illness
- D) It functioned as a training center for special education teachers

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: Fulton State Hospital was established in 1851 primarily for adults with mental illness, though it later also housed children with developmental disabilities despite not being designed for them.

Question 3: Which innovation emerged in St. Louis during the 1930s?

- A) The first special education classroom opened
- B) Teachers began traveling to homes to educate children who couldn't attend school
- C) The state legislature passed the first disability rights law
- D) Fulton State Hospital started an early intervention program

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: In the 1930s, pioneering teachers in St. Louis began visiting children's homes to provide education to those who couldn't attend school—a radical innovation for the time.

Question 4: What term best describes the medical understanding of developmental disabilities during this era?

- A) Advanced and evidence-based
- B) Focused on early intervention
- C) Limited and often inaccurate
- D) Centered on family support

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: Medical understanding was very limited during this period. Many conditions went undiagnosed or were lumped together under general terms, and the potential of children with disabilities was greatly underestimated.

Question 5: What began happening in the 1940s and 1950s that would eventually transform disability services?

- A) The federal government mandated special education
- B) Parents began forming support groups and advocacy organizations
- C) Institutions were closed by court order
- D) Universities started training special education teachers

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Parents of children with disabilities began meeting in small groups in cities like Kansas City and St. Louis, forming the foundation for larger advocacy organizations like The Arc.

Question 6: What does the exhibit title "From Isolation to Awareness" suggest about this time period?

- A) It was a time of complete isolation with no progress
- B) Society suddenly became fully aware of disability issues
- C) The period began in isolation but showed early signs of changing awareness
- D) Families chose isolation to protect their children

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: While isolation was the dominant experience, the title acknowledges that by the 1930s-1950s, early signs of change were emerging through home-visiting teachers and parent advocacy groups.

Question 7: Why does the panel mention that language from this era "now feels deeply outdated and hurtful"?

- A) To criticize people who lived during that time
- B) To acknowledge that medical terms once considered clinical are now recognized as offensive
- C) To suggest that language doesn't matter
- D) To avoid discussing the historical terminology

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: Words like "feeble-minded" and "idiot" were actual medical diagnoses at the time, but we now understand these terms as inaccurate, dehumanizing, and hurtful. Language reflects and shapes societal attitudes.

Question 8: Based on the panel, what was the PRIMARY barrier to education for children with disabilities during this era?

- A) Lack of school buildings
- B) The assumption that these children couldn't learn
- C) Parents' refusal to send children to school
- D) Shortage of teachers

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: The fundamental barrier was the widespread belief that children with disabilities were "uneducable." The home-visiting teachers of the 1930s challenged this assumption by demonstrating that children could learn with appropriate support.

Question 9: What made the home-visiting teachers of the 1930s "radical" for their time?

- A) They refused to follow the standard curriculum
- B) They challenged the medical establishment's beliefs about children with disabilities
- C) They were paid more than regular teachers
- D) They worked for private organizations instead of public schools

Correct Answer: B

Explanation: These teachers were radical because they directly challenged the prevailing medical and educational wisdom that children with disabilities couldn't benefit from education.

Question 10: What historical lesson does this panel offer about creating change?

- A) Change happens quickly when enough people demand it
- B) Institutions are necessary for progress
- C) Early advocates and small acts of courage can plant seeds for larger transformation
- D) Government action is the only way to create meaningful change

Correct Answer: C

Explanation: The panel shows how home-visiting teachers in the 1930s and parent groups in the 1940s-50s—though small in number—created the foundation for larger changes that would come later. Progress often begins with individuals challenging the status quo.

BONUS REFLECTION QUESTION (Open-ended):

"After learning about this era, what questions do you still have? What would you like to learn more about?"
