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present

A GUIDE TO



POPKADOTS

THE COOL KIDS MUSICAL

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INTRODUCTION

Lily Polkadot is the new kid in the “Squares Only” small town of Rockaway—and the first Polkadot to attend an all-Square school. Lily faces an almost impossible task of gaining acceptance from her classmates, facing daily bullying and even segregated water fountains. But, together with Sky, a shy Square boy who shows kindness to Lily and curiosity for her unique polkadot skin, Lily helps the residents of Rockaway learn that our individual differences make us cool, not outcasts!

Polkadots: the Cool Kids Musical is inspired by the real-life bravery of the Little Rock Nine: nine Black students who first integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas following the 1954 Supreme Court decision that made segregation in schools illegal. Just like Lily Polkadot, the Little Rock Nine faced countless obstacles in finding acceptance. Indeed, on their first day of school in September 1957, the governor of Arkansas placed the National Guard at the doors of the high school to physically block their entrance. For weeks, the students could not attend their new school, even though the law said that they could. The ongoing conflict eventually prompted President Dwight D. Eisenhower to order federal troops to escort the Black students to their classes to help keep them safe. The students would continue to face

prejudice and injustice, but the Little Rock Nine continued to fight for equality and their right to a better education.

Constellation welcomes you and your students to join us in Rockaway for this upbeat, puppet-filled musical that packs a big message: **we all play a role in honoring the legacy of civil rights leaders' fight for equality and inclusivity.** In this guide, educators will find background on the musical and its themes paired with lesson ideas that help contextualize the story and meet a variety of academic standards. Pick and choose from the following activities designed to help elementary-age theatergoers learn about the historical events that inspired the musical while highlighting the pretty *cool* role that youth have played in being the first to enact positive change. And don't forget to check out the discussion questions at the end of the guide to help continue the conversation after the show!

MEET THE CHARACTERS

Lily Polkadot is a new student at Rockaway School. She wants to make new friends, but the dots on her skin make finding acceptance amongst her square-skinned peers difficult.

Sky Square likes video games and finds it challenging to get along with his sister, Penelope. He thinks Lily's dots are interesting, and he wants to get to know her better.

Penelope Square, Sky's sister, can be very mean. She doesn't like that Lily is different and often laughs at her and calls her names. She struggles to accept change.

Ms. Square is their teacher at Rockaway School. She knows what it's like to be different from everyone else and helps Lily adjust to her new environment.

Mama Square is Sky and Penelope's mom. She encourages Sky to make a new friend, but is skeptical about Lily's differences.

THE STORY & ITS AUTHORS

Conceived by composer and lyricist, Douglas Lyons, and inspired by the events of the Little Rock Nine, *Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical* premiered in spring 2016 and has since garnered critical acclaim and enjoyed hundreds of performances across the country. Lyons was first inspired by actress Phylicia Rashad's recollections of growing up in the American South in the 1950s and '60s. Jim Crow laws kept schools and other public places unfairly segregated, and, as a young Black girl, Rashad remembers becoming obsessed with a water fountain marked "Whites Only." As Lyons tells the story, one day when no one was looking, Rashad tasted the water from the white-only fountain only to learn that it was the same water that was in the Negro fountain. Rashad's story and her statement that "humanity tried to trick itself to believe that it could divide the races" sparked something in Lyons and inspired him to research the stories of the Little Rock Nine and Ruby Bridges, children who were among the first to integrate schools in southern states.

With the concept for *Polkadots* in mind, Lyons reached out to friend and writer Melvin Tunstall and composer Greg Borowsky with a request to collaborate. Tunstall grew up in the South and recalls wanting to fit in as he was frequently "the only Black person in the room." His desire to write stories for families that speak to our shared humanity made the project a perfect fit. As a white man growing up in apartheid South Africa, Borowsky recalls the integration of his own schools and knew that a musical like *Polkadots* would resonate with individuals around the world just as the concept had spoken to him. With Tunstall on board to write the book and Borowsky as co-composer, the team set out to bring Lily Polkadot's journey to the stage in a fun, exciting musical format that would make the weighty topics of segregation, diversity, and inclusion accessible for young audiences.

Douglas Lyons (music & lyrics) is a composer-lyricist and actor who has originated roles on Broadway in *The Book of Mormon* and *Beautiful*. As a writer, Lyons was awarded the Bully Free Communities Spotlight Award and, alongside his co-creators (bios below), earned the “Best Family Show” Off Broadway Alliance Award for *Polkadots* in 2018.

Melvin Tunstall, III (book) began his writing career while still a student at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music as a founding member of the AMP Theatre Company. He made his Broadway debut alongside Douglas Lyons in *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* after originating the role of “Ja’Keith” in the Toronto Company production of the hit musical *Rock of Ages*. His original musical *BLooM!* was a finalist in the renowned NAMT Festival in New York City.

Greg Borowsky (music) is a songwriter and producer from South Africa and is the creative producer and writer behind some of South Africa’s biggest SAMA (SA Grammy) winning artists. After co-writing and producing the official “20 Years of Freedom” song for the South African government, Greg moved to New York to produce a new album featuring soul and Broadway artists. The album, *The Greg Dean Project*, remained on the USA Billboard RnB chart for six weeks in 2016 around the same time as the premiere of *Polkadots*.

BEFORE YOU GO TO THE SHOW

Pre-Show Discussion Activities

Prepare your students for the themes, characters, setting, and ideas they will encounter when they see the musical with the following discussion and activity prompts.

- In the show, Lily moves to the town of Rockaway and is the first Polkadot to attend an all-Square school. Think about what it would feel like to move to a new place and attend a new school. How would you feel on your first day? What would make the

experience harder or easier? Imagine that you just finished your first day at a new school. Write a short journal entry chronicling your day. Who did you meet? What did you do in your classes? How did you feel? Were the other students welcoming?

- Lily faces prejudice and bullying on her first day of school, especially from Penelope Square. In contrast, Penelope’s brother Sky shows kindness to Lily. Have you ever tried to make friends in a new place? What are the attributes of a good friend? Think about a time you had the opportunity to show kindness to someone else. What did you do? How did the other person react?
- Ms. Square the teacher tells Lily that she must drink water from the Polkadot Pump instead of the Square Sprinkler the rest of the kids use. Real-life segregation laws in the American South meant that drinking fountains—as well as buses, schools, restrooms, and other public places—were marked for use based on the color of your skin: one drinking fountain for white individuals and another drinking fountain for Black individuals. Research photos of segregated drinking fountains and other public places in books or online. Discuss as a class why the idea of “separate but equal” facilities really aren’t equal at all.

WORD STUDY: WHAT IS SEGREGATION?

To better understand Lily Polkadot’s journey in the musical and the real-life experiences of the teenagers known as the Little Rock Nine, students will need to know about segregation. Begin the lesson by inviting students to learn and talk about the word “segregation.” Depending on your students’ age group and readiness, either ask them to discuss the meaning of the word segregation, or offer the following definition:

Segregation is keeping people apart unfairly.

For Younger Kids:

Gather students in a circle and place various toys such as blocks in the center. Ask students to separate the toys into groups based on color or shape. Explain that, just like the toys have been separated based on their appearance, children used to be kept apart in schools based on the color of their skin; in many places in America, Black children were not allowed to attend school with white children. This wrong and unfair practice is an example of segregation.

For Older Kids:

After you have defined the word “segregation” as a class, allow older elementary-age students to delve deeper by asking them to explore the encyclopedic article on segregation from Britannica Kids. The article can be found at the following link: <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/segregation/632620>. (Note: teachers can differentiate the content for “Kids” up to grade 5 or “Students” in grades 6–8 in the upper righthand corner). Students can read the article individually or aloud round robin-style in small groups; either way, ask them to annotate the page or take notes on key terms and ideas they see in the article. Students will encounter terms including:

- Enslaved people
- Jim Crow laws
- Civil Rights Movement
- Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka
- Systemic racism

Follow-Up Discussion:

Prompt students to discuss what they’ve learned about the word segregation and the history of racial segregation in the United States. Invite students to share their thoughts, feelings, or facts they perhaps did not know and perhaps record common responses on the board as students share.

COOL KIDS WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE: “YOU CAN’T REHEARSE BEING THE FIRST!”

Lots of brave people in our country’s history fought to end segregation—especially in schools—and many of those to first take action were kids! In the musical *Polkadots*, Lily Polkadot, the first Polkadot to attend an all-Square school, sings that “you can’t rehearse being the first” person to do something that no one has ever done before. That was also true for the first Black students to attend all-white schools after the Supreme Court decision in the court case *Brown v. Board of Education* that made segregation in schools illegal.

In 1957, a woman named **Daisy Bates**, president of the Arkansas chapter of the NAACP or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, began gathering Black students to enroll at Central High School in Little Rock. Even though segregated schools had been against the law for three years, many white schools continued to refuse to let Black children attend. The nine students who enrolled became known as **the Little Rock Nine**. Because they were the first Black students in Little Rock to go to the all-white high school, their journey was anything but easy.

Pause to ask your students: Why do you think people oppose change? Why is change sometimes difficult to achieve?

Photo Analysis:

Show students the following images of the Little Rock Nine on their way to and from their classes at Central High School.



Photo by journalist Will Counts

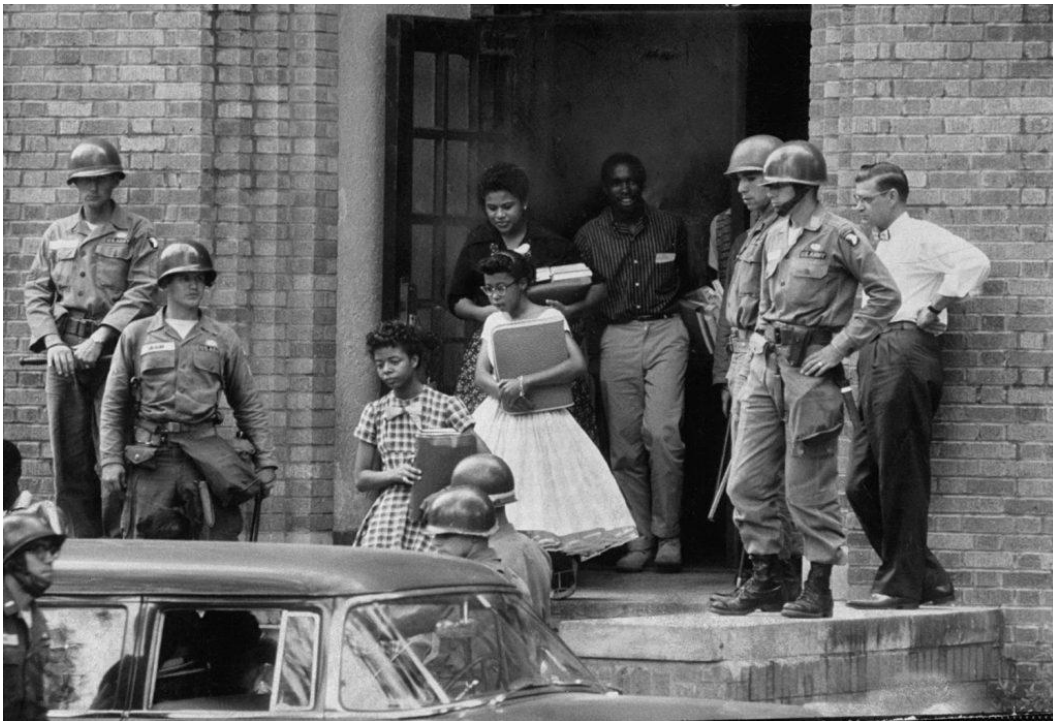


Photo by George Silk/Life Pictures/Shutterstock



Give students a few moments to study the photographs and then share what they notice. Teachers can also use these guided questions to continue the conversation:

- Is there anything surprising about the way the Black students are walking to and from school?
- Who do you think are the people surrounding the students?
- How do you think the individuals in the photographs felt in these moments?

For Older Kids:

Invite older students to explore more photographs and background information on the Little Rock Nine in the article “Brave Hearts: The Little Rock Nine” from *Life* magazine:

<https://www.life.com/history/little-rock-nine-1957-photos/>.

Share with students that the first photograph is of Elizabeth Eckford surrounded by an angry mob of white residents who opposed her going to school. Ask students: how would you feel if you were in Elizabeth’s shoes?

Explain that the students in the second photograph are being escorted out of the school by soldiers in the U.S. Army. The Little Rock Nine faced such anger and violence for simply trying to go to school that the president of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, ordered the U.S. Army to escort the students to all of their classes. Although the students did attend school and many of the Little Rock Nine eventually graduated, they faced ongoing abuse from their classmates and from the community. Ask students to consider: What would it be like to have to attend school with U.S. Army soldiers at your side?

PUPPETRY & BRINGING THE STORY TO LIFE

A note from Matthew Lish, the Puppet Designer for Constellation's production of Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical!

Hey you! Person reading this program right now!

Puppetry is an incredibly unique artform that dates back around 4,000 years, allowing characters to come to life in a way that would not be possible with human performers alone. Coming from a background building puppets for Sesame Street, Disney, for Broadway shows, and commercials, there were a few key questions I asked when looking at the brilliant book and lyrics for *Polkadots* and thinking about how to translate it to a puppet-based show:

How could puppets enhance the storytelling and message of the show without coming across as a novelty? What things could the puppets do (like have a head that is shaped completely like a square that humans couldn't do? And what would make an interesting and compelling character that audiences could connect with?

To begin to answer those questions, in winter 2024 we started with lots of sketches to explore colors, shapes, and features. Should Lily Polkadot have pink, purple, or blonde hair? Should Sky Square wear a green or orange shirt? After many rounds of sketches and adjustments, an added freckle here, a few less polkadots there, everyone was translated from a 2D sketch to patterns that could be used to make 3D foam structures for the actual bases of the puppets. Fleeces and faux furs were hand dyed to



The first sketch of Lily Polkadot (left) and the final sketch that was built.



Lily Polkadot with her eyes and nose pinned in place.

specific colors for skin and hair, noses were meticulously carved to their assorted shapes, and fabric was draped and patterned to make dresses, sweaters, and shirts. Nearly 400 hours of work later, we have a colorful cast of puppets ready to take the stage! Enjoy the show!



Activity Idea:

Share the design concept for the puppets in *Polkadots* with your class. Can your students identify the characters based on what they know so far about the show? Put students in small groups (about five students per group) and give each student a sheet of paper. Ask the groups to take on the role of puppet designers and assign a character from the musical to each student in each group. How would they design their puppets? As time allows, invite students to bring their puppet designs to life using paper bags, socks, or any other materials on hand. Finally, ask students to create a short dialogue that they can perform with the characters in their groups.

I AM ONE: A BOOK OF ACTION READ ALOUD

Share with students that the freedom we enjoy today to attend school together with classmates of all skin colors and backgrounds would not be possible without kids like the Little Rock Nine. Grownups wrote the laws that made segregation in schools illegal, but it was the children who first integrated those schools who made change a reality in their communities. Their story is proof that kids can make a difference!

Read the book *I Am One: A Book of Action* by Susan Verde with your class. See if the book is available in your school's library or listen to the book with its pictures on YouTube at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx1tzi_QuXo.

Before You Read:

Ask students to listen for or jot down every verb or action word they hear in the story.

After You Read:

Invite students to recall the action words from the story and write them on the board. Students will hear these words: start, speak, use, perform, share, light, lead, make, and inspire. Ask students to choose one word from the board and use it to start a sentence about how kids—just like them!—could do something in your school or in their community that would make a positive change toward equality. Offer time for students to compose their sentences (younger students might draw pictures of their action sentences) and then share them with the class.

End the activity by reminding students that they are **cool** kids. They can be the first to make a difference, too, just like Lily Polkadot and the Little Rock Nine!

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

We hope that your students enjoyed their trip to Constellation to see *Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical*, and we hope that the show sparks engaging conversations in your classroom. Consider continuing the conversation with the following discussion questions and extension activities now that students have seen the show!

- How does Lily Polkadot’s character help you **empathize** with the story and experiences of the Little Rock Nine? Empathy means understanding or feeling what someone else is feeling. How would you feel if you were prevented from attending school? How does Lily handle bullying from Penelope and others? How does she demonstrate bravery and resilience?

- Real-life stories like that of the Little Rock Nine, as well as fictional stories like Lily Polkadot's, highlight the important role that youth have played in social and political movements. Write a short essay on the importance of children's activism. You might consider responding to the following prompts:
 - What role have children played in changing history?
 - Why is it important for society to listen to the voices of its children?
 - What impact did the Little Rock Nine making their voices known have on American history?
- Listen to all or part of the following National Public Radio interview from 2007 with three of the Little Rock Nine: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/14656178>. In the interview, Elizabeth Eckford (the girl being harassed on her walk to school in one of the photo analysis activities from earlier in this study guide) recalls connecting with Hazel Bryan Massery, the white girl seen shouting at Elizabeth in the photo, years after the events in 1957. Eventually, Hazel called Elizabeth to apologize for her behavior. How does *Polkadots* portray a similar resolution between Lily Polkadot and Penelope Square? Why is it important to admit when we are wrong? What is the power of an apology?
- In *Polkadots*, Ms. Square helps Lily feel better by asking her to think about all of the "firsts" in history: the first astronaut, the first woman to become a teacher (like Ms. Square), etc. Do some research on other "firsts" in history. Complete a profile on someone who was the first to accomplish something in their field of work or in their community. Share that person's story with the class.
- Sky tells Lily, "I don't want to pretend you have squares all over. I like your dots." Why is it important that Sky tells this to Lily? What do his words communicate to her about celebrating our differences?

SUGGESTED READING

Child of the Civil Rights Movement by Paula Young Shelton

Linda Brown, You Are Not Alone: The Brown v. Board of Education Decision by Joyce Carol Thomas

The Power of One: Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine by Dennis Brindell Fradin

Cracking the Wall: The Struggles of the Little Rock Nine (On My Own History) by Eileen Lucas

The Little Rock Nine Challenges Segregation: Courageous Kids of the Civil Rights Movement by Myra Faye Turner (graphic novel)

This is Your Time by Ruby Bridges

Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation

The Little Rock Nine: A Primary Source Exploration of the Battle for School Integration by Brian Krumm

I Am One: A Book of Action by Susan Verde Art by Peter H. Reynolds

RESOURCES & REFERENCES

"Brave Hearts: The Little Rock Nine" *Life Magazine* |

<https://www.life.com/history/little-rock-nine-1957-photos/>.

Britannica Kids, "Segregation" |

<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/segregation/632620>

"Kids Read Aloud: I Am One" by Susan Verde |

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx1tzi_QuXo

"Walking to Class, Into the History Books" NPR |

<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/14656178>

"What Happened Here" Commemorating Courage: 40th Anniversary of Desegregation of Central High |

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PPP-1997-book2/pdf/PPP-1997-book2-doc-pg1233.pdf>