Making a Change:
The Declaration of Independence

**Teacher:** Elijah Phillips, Milton Elementary School

**Grade Level of Lesson:** Middle School

**Time Required:** Several Class Periods

**Topic:** Declaration of Independence

**Context & Differentiation:** This lesson is designed to give students an opportunity to understand the structure and purpose of the Declaration of Independence, its importance to our country's history, and its relevance today. Before this lesson, students will need time to examine reprints of the Declaration of Independence and make observations about it. After this lesson students will be prepared to investigate the history and significance of other documents, especially the Constitution.

**Content Standards:**

**VT 6.16 Human Rights** - Students examine how their society addresses issues of human interdependence by identifying a current issue related to their own basic human rights.

**VT 1.11 Persuasive Writing** - In persuasive writing, students judge, propose, and persuade. This is evident when students: clearly define a significant problem, issue, topic, or concern; make an assertion or judgment, or propose one or more solutions; and engage the reader by anticipating shared concerns and stressing their importance, discussing the pros and cons of alternatives, and addressing the reader's potential doubts and criticisms.

**Historical Processes:**

**VT 6.1 Being an Historian** - Students initiate inquiry by examining an enduring issue from the Revolutionary War Era, personal liberty, in order to identify a current problem and propose a solution to take action.

**Common Core Standards:**

Reading Standards for Informational Text (Key Ideas and Details 3) - Students will analyze in detail how a key idea, liberty, is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text, the Declaration of Independence.

**Focus Questions:**

1 - How did the Founders attempt to protect their natural rights?

2 - How can the ideas in those attempts affect our lives today?

**Culminating Assessment:**

Students will draft, publish, and share their own declarations. They will compose a document based on complaints they identify, to be sent to the appropriate audience in the hopes of affecting change. These declarations will be scored based on the provided rubric. (Appendix B)
Teaching and Learning Activities:

1) Reference the students’ previous observations about the Declaration to focus them on what it looked like. Have examples of the actual Declaration on display for reference. Next, provide every student with a kid-friendly translation of the Declaration (Appendix A) and tell them that they will now be looking at what it actually says, behind all the “Founders” language. Split children into groups and have each group look at a different section (highlighted in different colors) of the Declaration:

- **Preamble (purple)**: the reasons for writing down the Declaration - What reason(s) did the Founding Fathers give for their decision to write out a declaration?

- **Statement of beliefs (blue)**: specified what the undersigned believed, the philosophy behind the document - What beliefs did the Founding Fathers declare they held?

- **List of complaints (red)**: the offenses that prompted the declaration - What are a few of the complaints? Are any specific events mentioned? If not, is the information given sometimes sufficient to figure out to which events the complaints refer?

- **Statement of prior attempts to redress grievances (orange)**: states how the colonists previously tried to get the king to hear their grievances - In what way(s) did the framers claim to have already tried in addressing the complaints?

- **Declaration of independence (green)**: the part that actually says they are free from British rule - What will change in the colonies as a result of the Declaration?

Have each group summarize what the assigned section says and report to the whole group.

2) Have a class discussion (a “Historian Meeting”, if you will) to discuss the legacy of the Declaration of Independence. Were the efforts of the Founders to protect their rights successful? Do we still have to worry about any of the concerns brought up in the document? Are there new concerns that apply today that didn’t apply back then? Do they have the same concerns (as middle school students) as other groups do (e.g., parents, teachers, and kindergartners)? How can they go about trying to protect their rights?

3) Give the students a short time, in small groups, to list complaints they have about the treatment of young people. The complaints should be specific to them, as middle school students (e.g., recess should be longer and adolescents should be able to stay up later). Collect the lists. Choose complaints to share with the class, and guide the discussion to follow. Save the lists for future reference.

There are moments when all of us are more eager to express what's wrong than we are to think critically about the problem and possible solutions. There is no reason to think people were any different in 1776. It's important to understand the complaints of the colonists as one step in a process involving careful deliberation and attempts to redress grievances.

Ask questions to help your students consider their concerns in a deliberate way. WHO makes the rules they don't like, WHO decides if they are fair or not, HOW does one get them changed, WHAT does it mean to be independent from the rules, and finally, HOW does a group of people declare that they will no longer follow the rules?
4) Ask the students to imagine that, just as the Founders did, they are going to compose a document based on their complaints to be sent to the appropriate audience in the hopes of affecting change. As they begin to compose their documents, they should consider the following questions (coinciding with sections of the Declaration):

- **Preamble**: To whom would you send your complaints? Why? What reasons would you give for your decision to write out your complaints?

- **Statement of Beliefs**: What makes you think your complaints are worthwhile? Aren't there good reasons why things are the way they are? Why should things as they are be changed? Would it be possible to summarize the thinking behind your desire for change in a single sentence?

- **List of Complaints**: Is there anything in particular the reader should notice about your complaints? Is there anything you need to keep in mind to make sure your audience understands and appreciates your complaints? What kinds of events inspired your complaints?

- **Prior Attempts to Redress Grievances**: Have you already tried to make any changes in the treatment of young people? In what way?

- **Declaration of Independence**: Is it possible to say in a single sentence what it is you really want to happen? It would take time to change the system to accommodate all of your complaints. What should happen right away?

- **Signatures**: Who would be willing to sign his/her name to this list of complaints even if it were going to be seen and read by many people?

5) Working in small groups, students draft their own declarations to address the complaints they discussed previously. The Declaration of Independence will serve as a model; student documents should contain the same sections. They should start with their reasons for writing (preamble), as discussed above. Tell students they can model their statement after the Preamble to the Declaration. For example, they can begin with the words "When, in the course of human events...." This will take several class periods of work, depending on time, complexity, and student engagement.

6) The student groups should complete and present their "declarations." If typed on a computer, these can be printed out in an appropriately ornate font. The paper can be stained using tea to give the appearance of age. Students should sign the document on which they worked. For a culminating activity, the documents can be read in class in ceremonial fashion.

**Formative Assessment:**
Students will be formatively assessed based on observations of their discussions and the progress of their declaration drafts. Focusing questions will be asked, as needed. Students will use the actual Declaration of Independence as a model to scaffold their own writing.

**Resources:**

*Primary:*
Declaration of Independence

*Secondary:*
Copies of a kid-friendly translation of the Declaration of Independence

*Materials:*
Paper, pencils, markers, tea (possibly, for staining the paper)
Kid-Friendly Translation of the Declaration of Independence

In 1776, in the middle of the American Revolutionary War, patriots who were leaders of the war got together to write a letter to the King of England. They wanted to explain why they were fighting to be their own country, independent of England. This is what they had to say (but in easier words):

Preamble:
Sometimes one group of people decides to split off from another group, and to become an independent country, as the laws of Nature and of God say that they can. But when this happens, if they want other people to respect them, they should explain why they are splitting off.

Statement of Beliefs:
We think these things are obviously true: that all men are created equal, that all men have some rights given to them by God, and that among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So whenever any government is getting in the way of these rights, people have the right to change the government or get rid of it, and to make a new government, in whatever way seems most likely to make them safe and happy. People should not change their government without a good reason, so people usually suffer as long as they can under the government they have, rather than change it. But when there have been a lot of problems for a long time, it is their right and their duty to throw off that government, and to set up a better government.
List of Complaints:
We here in America have suffered for a very long time, and now we should change our government. The king of England has done many bad things to us - here is a list:

- He won't let us pass laws we need for everybody's good.
- Even when we do pass laws, he won't sign them so they can go into effect.
- He tried to force men to give up their right to make laws.
- He calls men together to make laws in the most inconvenient times and places, so that they won't be able to go discuss the new laws.
- He won't let new settlers come to America, and he won't let the settlers take over new land from the Native Americans.
- He won't let us choose our own judges, and instead he chooses them all himself, so they're all on his side.
- He sends lots of new government officials that we don't want, and he makes us pay for them.
- He sends lots of English soldiers here when there isn't even a war, and makes us let them live in our own houses.
- He tells us these soldiers can do whatever they want and don't have to obey the law.
- He won't let us buy and sell things from wherever we want. We can only buy things from England.
- He makes us pay all kinds of taxes without asking us about it.
- He won't let us have a jury for our trials, only a judge.
- He sends people accused of crimes far away to England for their trials.
- He tries to get people to revolt and tries to get the "Indian Savages" to attack us.

Statement of Prior Attempts to Redress Grievances:
When we ask him to stop, he just keeps doing more bad things. We have tried to talk to the other people who live in England. We asked them to stop these crimes against us, but they have acted as though they were deaf. So we have to separate from England, and they will be our enemies during the war, though we hope they'll be our friends when there is peace.

Declaration of Independence:
So we think that God will see that we are doing the right thing when we declare that the United States are now completely independent of the King of England. We have no more political connection to England at all. And as independent states, we say that each state has the right to make war, to make peace, to make alliances with other countries, trade with other countries, and do everything else that countries do. And we promise that we will fight for our independence with the help of God - we promise by our lives, our property, and our sacred honor.

### Assessment Rubric for Student Declarations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Does Not Meet the Standard (1)</th>
<th>Approaches the Standard (2)</th>
<th>Meets the Standard (3)</th>
<th>Exceeds the Standard (4)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.16 Being a Historian</strong></td>
<td>No connection to the enduring issues found in the Declaration of Independence</td>
<td>Weak connection to the enduring issues found in the Declaration of Independence</td>
<td>Student writing makes a clear and current connection to the enduring issues found in the Declaration of Independence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Looks little or nothing like the original Declaration of Independence; lacks structure; no attempt</td>
<td>Includes some aspects modeled after the Declaration, but is still loosely organized</td>
<td>Easy to see that it was modeled after the Declaration; includes many similarities to the original without a lot of direct copying</td>
<td>Is obviously modeled after the Declaration and may contain similar phrasing, etc, to set it apart from other student work</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6.16 Human Rights</strong></td>
<td>Has little or no connection to the task; no attempt</td>
<td>Vaguely addresses a human rights issue or addresses one that does not directly affect them</td>
<td>Clearly addresses a current issue related to student’s own basic human rights (as a middle school student)</td>
<td>Clearly addresses a human rights issue that directly affects them and expresses why that issue is important to them</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1.11 Persuasive Writing</strong></td>
<td>Has little or no connection to the task; no attempt</td>
<td>Attempts to provide an argument against a perceived injustice, but has some inconsistencies, vagueness, etc</td>
<td>Provides a reasonable, thoughtful argument to an appropriate audience against a perceived injustice</td>
<td>Persuasively and eloquently presents an argument to an authentic and appropriate audience against a perceived injustice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conventions/Neatness</td>
<td>Sloppy and/or full of grammatical and spelling errors</td>
<td>An attempt was made to be neat and edited, but not entirely successful</td>
<td>Reasonably neat with few, if any, errors</td>
<td>Neat and completely error-free</td>
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</tbody>
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