

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)

Argued: December 9–11, 1952

Reargued: December 7–9, 1953

Decided: May 17, 1954

Background

In 1868, the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in the wake of the Civil War. It says that states must give people equal protection of the laws and empowered Congress to pass laws to enforce the provisions of the Amendment. Although Congress attempted to outlaw racial segregation in places like hotels and theaters with the Civil Rights Act of 1875, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that law unconstitutional because it regulated private conduct. A few years later, the Supreme Court affirmed the legality of segregation in public facilities in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. There, the justices said that as long as segregated facilities were of equal quality, segregation did not violate the U.S. Constitution. This concept was known as “separate but equal” and provided the legal foundation for Jim Crow segregation. In *Plessy*, the Supreme Court said that segregation was a matter of social equality, not legal equality; therefore, the justice system could not interfere. “If one race be inferior to the other socially, the constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane.”

By the 1950s, many public facilities had been segregated by race for decades, including many schools across the country. This case is about whether such racial segregation violates the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

Facts

In the early 1950s, Linda Brown was a young African American student in Topeka, Kansas. Every day she and her sister, Terry Lynn, had to walk through the Rock Island Railroad Switchyard to get to the bus stop for the ride to the all-Black Monroe School. Linda Brown tried to gain admission to the Sumner School, which was closer to her house, but her application was denied by the Board of Education of Topeka because of her race. The Sumner School was for White children only.

At the time of the Brown case, a Kansas statute permitted, but did not require, cities of more than 15,000 people to maintain separate school facilities for Black and White students. On that basis, the Board of Education of Topeka elected to establish segregated elementary schools.

The Browns felt that the decision of the Board violated the Constitution. They and a group of parents of students denied permission to White-only schools sued the Board of Education of Topeka, alleging that the segregated school system deprived Linda Brown of the equal protection of the laws required under the 14th Amendment.

The federal district court decided that segregation in public education had a detrimental (harmful) effect upon Black children, but the court denied that there was any violation of Brown's rights because of the "separate but equal" doctrine established in *Plessy*. The court said that the schools were substantially equal with respect to buildings, transportation, curricula, and educational qualifications of teachers. The Browns asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review that decision, and it agreed to do so. The Court combined the Brown's case with similar cases from South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware.

Issue

Does segregation of public schools by race violate the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment?

Constitutional Amendment and Supreme Court Precedents

- **14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution**

"No State shall...deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws."

- ***Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)***

A Louisiana law required railroad companies to provide equal but separate facilities for White and Black passengers. A mixed-race customer named Homer Plessy rode in the Whites-only car and was arrested. Plessy argued that the Louisiana law violated the 14th Amendment by treating Black passengers as inferior to White passengers. The Supreme Court declared that segregation was legal as long as facilities provided to each race were equal. The justices reasoned that the legal separation of the races did not automatically imply that African Americans were inferior and that legislation and court rulings could not overcome social prejudices. Justice Harlan wrote a strong dissent, arguing that segregation violated the Constitution because it permitted and enforced inequality among people of different races.

- ***Sweatt v. Painter (1950)***

Herman Sweatt was rejected from the University of Texas School of Law because he was African American. He sued school officials alleging a violation of the 14th Amendment. The Supreme Court examined the educational opportunities at the University of Texas School of Law and the Texas State University for Negroes' new law school and determined that the facilities, curricula, faculty, and other tangible factors were not equal. Therefore, they ruled that Sweatt's rights had been violated. In addition to the more straightforward criteria the justices examined at the two schools, they reasoned that other factors, such as the reputation of the faculty and influence of the alumni, could not be equalized.

Arguments for Brown (petitioner)

- The 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause promises equal protection of the laws. That means that states cannot treat people differently based on their race without an extremely good reason. There is not a good reason to keep Black children and White children from attending the same schools.
- Racial segregation in public schools reduces the benefits of education to Black children, solely based on their race. Schools for Black children are often inadequate and have less money and other resources than schools for White children.
- Even if states were ordered by courts to “equalize” their segregated schools, the problems would not go away. State-sponsored segregation creates and reinforces feelings of superiority among White students and inferiority among Black students. Segregation places a badge of inferiority on the Black students, perpetuates a system of separation beyond school, and gives unequal benefits to White students as a result of their informal contacts with one another. It undermines Black students’ motivation to seek educational opportunities and damages identity formation.
- At least two of the high schools in Topeka, Kansas, were already desegregated with no negative effects. The policy should be consistent in all of Topeka’s public primary and secondary schools.
- Segregation is morally wrong.

Arguments for Board of Education of Topeka (respondent)

- The 14th Amendment states that people should be treated equally; it does not state that people should be treated the same. Treating people equally means giving them what they need. This could include providing an educational environment in which they are most comfortable learning. White students are probably more comfortable learning with other White students; Black students are probably more comfortable learning with other Black students. These students do not have to attend the same schools to be treated equally under the law; they must simply be given an equal environment for learning.
- In Topeka, unlike in *Sweatt v. Painter*, the schools for Black and White students have similar, equal facilities.
- The United States has a federal system of government that leaves educational decision-making to state and local legislatures. States and local school boards should make decisions about the best environments for school-aged children.
- Housing and schooling have become interdependent. Segregated housing has led to and reinforced segregated schools. Students might need to travel far away from their local school to attend an integrated school. This places a heavy burden on local government to deal with the changes.

Decision

The Supreme Court ruled for Linda Brown and the other students; the decision was unanimous. Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the opinion of the Court, ruling that segregation in public schools violates the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.

The Court noted that public education was central to American life. Calling it “the very foundation of good citizenship,” they acknowledged that public education was not only necessary to prepare children for their future professions and to enable them to actively participate in the democratic process, but that it was also “a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values” present in their communities. The justices found it very unlikely that a child would be able to succeed in life without a good education. Access to such an education was thus “a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.”

The justices then compared the facilities that the Board of Education of Topeka provided for the education of Black children against those provided for White children. Ruling that they were substantially equal in “tangible factors” that could be measured easily (such as “buildings, curricula, and qualifications and salaries of teachers”), they concluded that the Court must instead examine the more subtle, intangible effect of segregation on the system of public education. The justices then said that separating children solely on the basis of race created a feeling of inferiority in the “hearts and minds” of African American children. Segregating children in public education created and perpetuated the idea that Black children held a lower status in the community than White children, even if their separate educational facilities were substantially equal in “tangible” factors. This deprived Black children of some of the benefits they would receive in an integrated school. The opinion said, “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place.” Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. This ruling was a clear departure from the reasoning in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and, in many ways, it echoed aspects of Justice Harlan’s dissent in that earlier case.

Impact

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was a single decision signed by all nine Justices. The Court acknowledged the importance and potential controversy of this decision, so they acted uniformly to try to lessen dissent in society. The decision that ordered the desegregation of public schools was praised by many Americans who supported the civil rights movement.

One year after the decision, the Court addressed the implementation of its decision in a case known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka II*. Chief Justice Warren once again wrote an opinion for the unanimous Court. The Court acknowledged that desegregating public schools would take place in various ways, depending on the unique problems faced by individual school districts. After charging local school authorities with the responsibility for solving these problems, the Court instructed federal trial courts to oversee the process and determine whether local authorities were desegregating schools in good faith, mandating that desegregation take place with “with all deliberate speed.”

That language proved unfortunate, as it gave the Southern states an incentive to delay compliance with the Court's mandate.

Many White people fought the implementation of the decision. In Little Rock, Arkansas, the school board agreed to desegregate its schools. But when nine African American students tried to enter Little Rock Central High School, those who still supported segregation, along with the Arkansas National Guard, physically blocked the African American students from entering the school. President Eisenhower quickly deployed the U.S. Army to enforce the integration decision by providing an armed escort to the African American students.

Resistance to integration led to further litigation. In *Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (1964), the Court stated that “[t]he time for mere ‘deliberate speed’ has run out, and that phrase can no longer justify denying . . . school children their constitutional rights.”

Today all segregation by law (*de jure* segregation) in public education is unconstitutional. However, many schools are still largely made up of students from a single racial or ethnic group because enrollment is assigned based on neighborhoods. This is called *de facto* segregation because it occurs in practice without a law mandating it.

Additional information about *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, including background at three reading levels, opinion quotes and summaries, teaching activities, and additional resources, can be found at <https://www.landmarkcases.org/>.