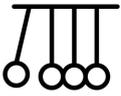


The Impact of Brown v. Board of Education on Ending Racial Segregation in Schools

LAW

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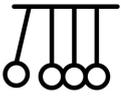
Introduction

For much of United States history, racial segregation shaped the structure of public education. Laws and social practices separated students based on race, creating unequal learning environments that limited opportunities for African American children. This system was reinforced by court decisions and segregation laws that claimed separate facilities could still be equal. Over time, African American families, activists, and lawyers challenged these inequalities through legal action and public protest. These efforts eventually led to the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The decision marked a turning point in the struggle for educational equality and became a major catalyst for the broader Civil Rights Movement.

Segregation Before *Brown v. Board of Education*

For more than a century, African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups have sought to ensure access to equal educational opportunity. Religion, education, and community have proven to be the cornerstones of self-determination on the part of African Americans. One of the most prominent examples of this cornerstone concept can be found in the early and unrelenting legal challenges to segregated public schools.

In the early 1840s, African American parents in Boston began publicly expressing resentment because they were taxed to support schools that their children were not allowed to attend. They began petition drives to close down the segregated schools. They petitioned in 1845, and again in 1846 and 1848, without success. The final effort was undertaken in 1849 under the legal leadership of attorneys Charles Sumner, who went on to become a U.S. senator, and Robert Morris, an African American activist who shared the title of “abolitionist” with his colleagues. The case became known as *Roberts v. The City of Boston*. In their petition to the Massachusetts Supreme Court, attorneys for the African American parents outlined the circumstances they believed to be unlawful. Parents explained how their children had been denied enrollment in all Boston schools except the segregated Smith School. The *Roberts* case was unsuccessful because authorities reasoned that special provisions had been made for “colored” students to have a school.



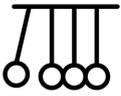
In 1892, an African American man named Homer Plessy refused to give up his seat to a white man on a train in New Orleans, as he was required to do by the state law of Louisiana. Plessy was then arrested and decided to contest the arrest in court. He contended that the law of Louisiana separating the black people from the white people on trains violated the “equal protection” clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. By the year 1896, his case had made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court. By 8 votes against and 1 in favor of Plessy, the court ruled against him. In the case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Justice Henry Billings Brown, writing the majority’s opinion, state that “The object of the amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of the things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to endorse social, as distinguished from political, equality...If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane.”

Moreover, before the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, cases such as *Pearson v. Murray*, *Missouri ex rel Gaines v. Canada*, *Sweatt v. Painter*, and *McLaurin v. The Oklahoma Board of Regents of Higher Education* all impacted upon it and made the case even more noticeable among people.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* Decision

On May 17, 1954, a decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case declared the “separate but equal” doctrine unconstitutional. The landmark *Brown v. Board* decision gave LDF its most celebrated victory in a long, storied history of fighting for civil rights and marked a defining moment in US history. The decision in *Brown v. Board* remains a defining moment in U.S. history.

Despite two unanimous decisions and careful, if vague, wording, there was considerable resistance to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. In addition to the obvious disapproving segregationists, there were some constitutional scholars who felt that the decision went against legal tradition by relying heavily on data supplied by social scientists rather than precedent or established law. Supporters of judicial restraint believed the Court had overstepped its constitutional powers by essentially writing new law. However, minority groups and members of the civil rights movement were buoyed by the *Brown* decision even without specific directions for implementation. Proponents of judicial



activism believed the Supreme Court had appropriately used its position to adapt the basis of the Constitution to address new problems in new times. The Warren Court stayed this course for the next 15 years, deciding cases that significantly affected not only race relations but also the administration of criminal justice, the operation of the political process, and the separation of church and state.

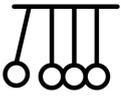
The Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* occurred after a hard-fought, multi-year campaign to persuade all nine justices to overturn the "separate but equal" doctrine that their predecessors had endorsed in the Court's infamous 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. This campaign was conceived in the 1930s by Charles Hamilton Houston, then Dean of Howard Law School, and brilliantly executed in a series of cases over the next two decades by his star pupil, Thurgood Marshall—the man who became Legal Defense Fund's first Director-Counsel and a Supreme Court Justice.

Brown v. Board of Education itself was not a single case, but rather a coordinated group of five lawsuits against school districts in Kansas, South Carolina, Delaware, Virginia, and the District of Columbia.

Immediate Impact on Schools

The legal victory in *Brown* did not transform the country overnight, and much work remains. But striking down segregation in the nation's public schools provided a major catalyst for the civil rights movement, making possible advances in desegregating housing, public accommodations, and institutions of higher education. The decision gave hope to millions of Americans by permanently discrediting the legal rationale underpinning the racial caste system that had been endorsed or accepted by governments at all levels since the end of the nineteenth century. And its impact has been felt by every American.

The courts still resisted implementing the rules after the *Brown* case. However, *Brown II*, issued in 1955, decreed that the dismantling of separate school systems for Black and white students could proceed with "all deliberate speed," a phrase that pleased neither supporters nor opponents of integration. Unintentionally, it opened the way for various strategies of resistance to the decision.



Long-Term Effects on Civil Rights

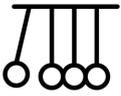
Seventy years later, educators across the nation are focused on making sure every student- regardless of race or place- has access to an education that encourages them to learn, grow and find success. In Florida, providing a free, world-class education is enshrined in our constitution. And each day, Florida educators and education staff professionals are committed to that goal. Today, the work to fulfill the promise made by *Brown v. Board* continues.

Schools with a majority of non-white students can still face systemic issues when it comes to the resources available to them. Fewer resources, limited course options, a higher likelihood of teacher shortages, and overall, less funding continue to challenge the learning and teaching experience in schools.

Florida has become more diverse over the last 70 years, but segregation in the modern day has become more complicated. Systematic racism has created a cycle that widens the gap between different socio-economic levels and their access to resources. People in lower-income communities can become stuck there, with many children in the same communities attending schools that aren't provided with the same resources as those in higher socio-economic communities. These unequal learning environments disproportionately affect students of color and often, an unequal education can be lifelong.

Conclusion

The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* transformed the legal landscape of American education by challenging the long-standing "separate but equal" doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Although the decision did not immediately eliminate segregation, it laid the foundation for significant progress in civil rights and inspired further efforts to achieve equality in education and other areas of society. The case demonstrated the power of the legal system to confront injustice and provided hope to millions seeking equal opportunities. Even decades later, the legacy of *Brown* continues to influence discussions about educational equity, reminding society that the pursuit of equal access to quality education remains an ongoing challenge.



Resources

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