

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, decided on May 17, 1954, was one of the most important cases in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court. Linda Brown had been denied admission to an elementary school in Topeka because she was black. Brought together under the Brown designation were companion cases from South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware, all of which involved the same basic question: does the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment prohibit racial segregation in the public schools?

In 1896 the Supreme Court had held in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that racial segregation was permissible as long as equal facilities were provided for both races. Although that decision involved only passenger accommodations on a railroad, the principle of "separate but equal" was applied thereafter to all aspects of public life in states with large black populations.

It was not until the late 1940s that the Court began to insist on equality of treatment, but it did not squarely face the constitutionality of the "separate but equal" doctrine until it decided the *Brown* case. In a brief, unanimous opinion delivered by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Court declared that "separate education facilities are inherently unequal" and that racial segregation violates the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. In a moving passage the chief justice argued that separating children in the schools solely on racial grounds "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." Although the decision did not bring about total integration of blacks in the schools, it resulted in efforts by many school systems to remove the imbalance by busing students. The Court's decision had far-reaching effects, influencing civil rights legislation and the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

By 2004, however—the 50th anniversary of *Brown*—there was widespread dissatisfaction in African American communities about the effects of the landmark decision. Among the complaints were that some black children had to be bused overly long distances from their neighborhoods to attend integrated schools; that in the process of integration, long-established networks of excellent black school administrators and teachers had been disbanded, to the detriment of the schools in black neighborhoods, which were still predominantly black; and, most important, that even with integrated school systems, black children still trailed their white counterparts in achievement.

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