

Brown versus Board of Education

1954

The legal tradition of “separate but equal” dates to the nineteenth century and the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. The case centered on a mixed-race man, Homer Plessy. He was one-eighth black and seven-eighths white, but he was considered to be a black person in the South. In 1896 Plessy was arrested when he refused to leave a whites-only train car. He was tried and convicted for violating Louisiana’s segregation laws. The Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized segregation in the United States. Legal segregation was the law in the South for the next fifty years until the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling changed everything.

That year, Linda Brown, a 9-year-old, lived in the partially segregated town of Topeka, Kansas. Brown lived in an integrated neighborhood. She was friends with children of all races there. The elementary schools in Topeka were the only schools that were segregated. Because she was black, Brown had to go to a different school than the white children in her neighborhood. Brown had a long walk to school every day. First, she would walk several blocks and then pass through a railroad yard. Finally, she would have to cross busy streets to catch a bus two miles from where she lived. On journeys to school, Brown would often cry; and on some days the weather was so cold the tears would freeze to her face. Sometimes she would not be able to go to school.

Linda Brown’s father, Oliver Brown, was an outspoken Topeka preacher. He disliked his daughter traveling so far to school. Brown especially disliked that she had to attend a school that was so far away, even though there was a good elementary school, reserved for white children, only blocks from their home. Brown tried to enroll his daughter in that school, but the school’s principal denied Linda admittance. Brown met with McKinley Burnett, the head of the Topeka branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP was delighted to help the Browns and to end segregation in Topeka’s local schools. NAACP attorneys knew the case would be challenging; but when the news spread, blacks proudly joined the cause.

The case went to trial in district court in June 1951. The NAACP argued that school segregation made black children feel inferior to white students, thus making the schools, “separate and *not* equal.” The Board of Education argued that segregation in schools prepared black children to face impending segregation in adulthood. It also argued that segregation in schools was not harmful to black students, and many successful black leaders had attended segregated schools as children. The court deliberated and came to a quick decision. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* precedent helped the court to rule in favor of the Board of Education. The court maintained that the school was “separate but equal.”

The NAACP appealed to the Supreme Court in October 1951. From there, NAACP branches from South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware joined the cause. After a number of court appearances, the high court made a decision. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, the Browns. The ruling stated that schools around the United States must be integrated. The ruling did not initially end segregation, but it was a great start. It also did not require a time limit for the integration of all U.S. schools. Nevertheless, it was a huge step forward in the Civil Rights Movement.

After completing the Guided Reading, answer the following questions. Be sure to include textual evidence to support your responses.

- 1. What was the significance of the Plessy v. Ferguson case?***
- 2. Describe Linda Brown's daily trip to school.***
- 3. What was the NAACP's argument in the initial 1951 trial?***
- 4. What was the Board of Education's argument in the initial 1951 trial?***
- 5. What was the result of the Supreme Court's final decision in May 1954?***

1. What was the significance of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case?

This ruling made segregation, provided it was “separate but equal,” legal in the United States. Segregation would remain the law in the South for the next fifty years.

2. Describe Linda Brown’s daily trip to school.

She would walk several blocks, sometimes in the cold, to a railroad yard. She then would cross through the railroad yard; from there she would cross busy streets to catch a bus that would take her the rest of the way to school.

3. What was the NAACP’s argument in the initial 1951 trial?

The NAACP argued that segregation in the schools made black children feel inferior to white students, thus making the schools, “separate and not equal.”

4. What was the Board of Education’s argument in the initial 1951 trial?

The Board of Education argued that segregation in schools prepared black children to face impending segregation in their adulthood. It also argued that segregation in schools was not harmful to black students, and many successful black leaders attended segregated schools as children.

5. What was the result of the Supreme Court’s final decision in May 1954?

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Browns. The ruling stated that schools in the United States must be integrated. The ruling initially did not end segregation, but it was a great start. It also did not require a time limit for the integration of all U.S. schools, but it was a huge step forward in the Civil Rights Movement.