

Landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case Study *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954

Essential Question of the Case:

Does the segregation of children in public schools only on the basis of race deny the minority children of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment?

Background

In the early 1950s, many students went to different schools because of their race. White children went to one school and black children went to a different school. This system was called segregation. During this time, segregation was legal. Many other public facilities were also segregated.

Segregation was legal because of past court decisions. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court decided a case called *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In this case, the Court said that segregation was legal when the facilities for both races (trains, bathrooms, restaurants, etc.) were similar in quality.

Under segregation, all-white and all-black schools sometimes had similar buildings, buses, and teachers. Sometimes, the buildings, buses, and teachers for the all-black schools were lower in quality. Often, black children had to travel far to get to their school. In Topeka, Kansas, a black student named Linda Brown had to walk through a dangerous railroad to get to her all-black school even though there was an all-white school in her neighborhood. Her family believed that segregated schools were unconstitutional.

The Brown family sued the school system, Board of Education of Topeka. The district court said that segregation hurt black children. However, the district court also said the schools were equal. Therefore, segregation was constitutional. The Browns disagreed with the decision. They believed that the segregated school system did violate the Constitution. They thought that the system violated the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing that people will be treated equally under the law.

Constitutional Principle Related to the Case

14th Amendment (1868)

SECTION. 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

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Decision & Impact

In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Brown. The Court found the practice of segregation unconstitutional and refused to apply its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* to “the field of public education.” Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote the opinion for the Court.

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 necessary to prepare children for their future professions. The justices found it very unlikely that a child would be able to succeed in life without a good education. Access to a good education was “a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.”

Departing from the Court’s earlier decision in *Plessy*, the justices here argued that separating children solely on the basis of race created a feeling of inferiority in the “hearts and minds” of black children. Segregating children in public education created and continued the idea that black children held a lower status in the community than white children, even if their separate educational facilities were basically equal. The Court concluded that “separate education facilities are inherently unequal”, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public education denied black children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

Brown v. Board of Education reversed the decision made in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and had a large impact throughout the United States. It was no longer legal to have segregated schools and the decision led to ending the practice of “separate but equal” in other public places throughout the nation.

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1. What is the essential question of this case?

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2. Using the evidence you found during your reading, summarize the background of this case in three complete sentences.

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3 What is the constitutional principle related to the case? List the principle and summarize the meaning below.

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4. How did the Court answer the essential question? What was the reason for their decision?

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5. What was the impact of this case on society?

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6. Why is this case considered a landmark?

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