

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) Name: _____

Different Races, Different Schools

In 1950 and 1951, black parents and students in several states got tired of laws that required children of color to attend separate schools from white children. For decades, many states had kept blacks and whites **segregated**, or separated from each other based on their race. In 1896 in a case called *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court had said this segregation was constitutional as long as the separate facilities for blacks and whites were equal.

In some places, schools for black children were run-down and lacked things like gyms or cafeterias. In many places, there were school buses for whites but not for blacks. Parents had to send their kids across town to school when there were schools right in their own neighborhoods. But the closer schools were for whites only.



Parents and kids protest segregation

With the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), parents and students decided to challenge the *Plessy* decision. In Topeka, Kansas, Oliver Brown and several other parents tried to enroll their children in the closer, whites-only schools. They were rejected. In the other states, peoples' efforts to get better facilities for black school were ignored.

ISSUE

Is it constitutional to make children of color attend different schools from white children, even if the school facilities are equal?

DECISION

No, because segregation sends a message that children of color are inferior.

The Argument

Brown and the others argued that segregated public schools are not "equal" and cannot be made equal because keeping black and white students separate sends a message that the black students are inferior. Therefore, the very act of separating black and white students violates the **14th Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees equal protection of the laws.

The Decision

The Supreme Court agreed. In a complete reversal from its decision in the *Plessy* case, the Court said that the "separate but equal" doctrine "has no place" in public education. Separating children just because of race "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." Segregation therefore deprived black students of equal protection of the laws under the 14th Amendment.



So What?

The court's decision rejected the "separate but equal" doctrine the court had approved 58 years earlier in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Now, all-white schools could no longer reject black students. Although the Court's decision was aimed at K-12 public schools, the decision was also applied to colleges and universities. But not everyone was happy with the decision in *Brown*. In 1963, Alabama governor George Wallace spoke out against letting black students attend the University of Alabama. He stood in the doorway to block two black students from being able to register. The conflict ended when President Kennedy ordered the Alabama National Guard to the scene.



Governor Wallace makes his stand in the door of the University of Alabama.