



Case Study: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*



The Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal facilities were unconstitutional in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision.

“In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.”

—From opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954

In 1951, the parents of an eight-year-old African American girl named Linda Brown faced a dilemma. They wanted to enroll Linda in a good school that was just five blocks from their home. School officials, however, said Linda had to attend a school almost two miles away. The closer school was just for whites.

When Linda’s parents protested, the school said they were just following a Supreme Court ruling. This ruling, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) had said that separate public facilities for African Americans and white Americans were acceptable as long as they were equal in quality. Since then, the “separate but equal” rule had been used to justify segregated, or separate, schools.

Eventually, the Browns decided to appeal their case to the Supreme Court. Their lawyer was Thurgood Marshall, an African American lawyer for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The Browns’ case rested on the Fourteenth Amendment, which promised all citizens equal

rights. Segregated schools did not fulfill that promise, they said. African American schools were not as good as white schools. More importantly, the Browns were able to call on experts who explained that segregated schools made African American children *feel* inferior.

The Court heard and read all the arguments in the case. When Chief Justice Earl Warren read the decision in May 1954, he spoke for a unanimous court. To the Court, education was “. . . the most important function of state and local governments.” Although the Fourteenth Amendment did not mention education, it clearly meant that government should extend equal rights and services to all. Thus, the court ruled, “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

This ruling began a long, controversial struggle to desegregate the nation’s schools. It also strengthened the government’s commitment to the civil rights movement.

REVIEW

1. Why were schools segregated before 1954?
2. How does the Fourteenth Amendment show that segregated schools are illegal?
3. How did the *Brown* ruling improve education? Explain your answer.