School Desegregation

Can schools be “separate but equal”? 

The right to an education has long been a bedrock American assumption. However, while laws guarantee equal access to public schools in practice, the nation has not always achieved the ideal. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which was created to provide for the future of the nation's western territories, set aside one square mile in each township (36 square miles in total) to support public schools. Very early in its frontier days, Iowa pioneers set up schools to educate their children.

Bedrock of Racial Discrimination in Iowa

Early Iowa laws tried to discourage blacks from moving into the state and imposed penalties and restrictions on them. Because there were very few black families in the early population, racial integration in public schools was not a big issue and was handled on a local basis. As the slavery question became more contentious as the nation drifted toward the Civil War and free blacks and runaway slaves began appearing more often, the future of race relations became more important. In Ringgold County along the Missouri border, black children whose family had fled slavery attended a one-room school. In Grinnell, however, a mob protested vigorously when the school was opened to black children, and a race riot followed.

Alexander Clark, Jr., was a prominent African American in Muscatine. He was denied entry into the university law school because of his race, but he was determined to open opportunities for his children. In 1867, he filed a lawsuit when his daughter was not allowed to attend public school in Muscatine where a separate school had been set aside for black children. The Iowa Supreme Court ruled in his favor, declaring that schools could not bar children because of their race.

Prominent U.S. Supreme Court Cases

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson ruled that states could allow racial segregation as long as the facilities were “separate but equal.” In practice, however, facilities for black children were almost never equal but almost always inferior. In southern states, segregation was nearly universal and imbedded in the law. In the north, including Iowa, local customs varied but in practice, blacks were often barred from hotels and restaurants and often forced into separate facilities on trains, buses and sometimes schools. The few African Americans who attended public universities in Iowa were prohibited from living in school dormitories and were forced to find their own housing.

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed its “separate but equal” position and declared in Brown v. the Board of Education that the segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and must end. This caused huge protests across the south. President Dwight Eisenhower had to call on federal troops to enforce school integration.

Legal but not Equal - Struggles of Desegregation

Legal segregation had ended, but true equality had not been achieved. Because blacks and whites often lived in separate neighborhoods, their local schools continued to reflect the racial divide. In Massachusetts, the legislature required schools to achieve a racial balance in each school district by busing children to achieve proportionate numbers. In Boston through the 1970s and 80s, angry protests erupted from white parents who feared for the safety and educational quality of their children. Even today, because the races in many communities tend to separate themselves into different neighborhoods based on race, our schools are often heavily dominated by one racial group or another.

Taking steps to overcome past discrimination is called affirmative action. Many attempts to provide African Americans, other minorities, women, the physically and mentally impaired, and those with different sexual or gender orientations speak to the American commitment to equality of opportunity. The goal remains, however, a continuing challenge.
Supporting Questions

Is the U.S. Constitution color blind?
- Senator Thomas Martin's Speech on Civil Rights, 1965

How did the “separate but equal” education start, and what did it look like?
- Classroom in the School, Siloam, Georgia, October 1941
- The One-Teacher Negro School in Veazy, Georgia, October 1941

How did the U.S. Supreme Court and Iowa Supreme Court end segregated education?
- Iowa Supreme Court Rules on Equal Access: Portrait of Alexander Clark, 1867
- Distribution of the Colored Population of the United States, 1898
- Distribution of Negro Population by County, 1956
- "Segregation's Citadel Unbreached in 4 Years," 1958

Case Study: Who were the Little Rock Nine and why are they significant?
- Anti-Integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, September 1958
- Rally at State Capitol in Little Rock, Arkansas, August 20, 1959

Case Study: How did Farmville, Virginia handle the issue of desegregation in schools?
- “Free School” in Farmville, Virginia, September 16, 1963
- Obstructions and Delays: Griffin v. County Board of Prince Edward County Draft Ruling, January 6, 1964

How did other people view and act on their view of school segregation?
- Six Years after Brown, Atlanta Citizens Discuss Their Schools, May 27, 1960
- Governor George Wallace Attempting to Block Integration at the University of Alabama, June 11, 1963
- President John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address, June 11, 1963
- "Dark laughter. Now I ain't so sure I wanna get educated," September 21, 1963
- Integration in D.C. Schools, December 15, 1964
- African-American Children Encounter Protesters, September 13, 1965

Instructional Note: After studying these sources topically, ask students to arrange them chronologically. How did one event shape the one after it? How do these images show progress over time?

*Printable Image and Document Guide*
Additional Resources

• Supreme Court Cases

  * **Plessy v. Ferguson**, U.S. Supreme Court, 1896 - A landmark constitutional law case that upheld the state racial segregation laws for public facilities under the doctrine of “separate but equal.”

  * **Brown v Board of Education Case Image**: The image is of Mrs. Nettie Hunt, sitting on steps of U.S. Supreme Court, holding a newspaper, explaining to her daughter Nikie the meaning of the Supreme Court's decision banning school segregation in 1954.

  * **Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1**: In a U.S. Supreme Court ruling from 2006, the Court applied a “strict scrutiny” framework and found a school district's racial tiebreaker plan was unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

• Ruby Bridges

  * **Through My Eyes by Ruby Bridges** - Ruby Bridges was the first black child to desegregate the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in Louisiana during the New Orleans school desegregation crisis in 1960. The book is a firsthand account of Bridges’ experience as a six-year-old girl being thrust into the spotlight as an iconic figure in the civil rights movement.


  * **Collection of images of Ruby Bridges going to school**, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 1960 - Powerful images of Ruby Bridges on her first day at William Frantz Elementary School, as she was escorted into the school by U.S. marshalls for protection.

  * **Ruby Bridges Remembers** - The video interview with Ruby Bridges was for the 50th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education in

• Newspaper Articles

  * “**Mississippi Plans Equalized Schools,**” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1953


  * “**Segregation Aid Seen,**” *The New York Times*, October 31, 1951

• African American Students Entering Central High School - A group of African-American students in Little Rock, Arkansas, known as the “Little Rock Nine,” are being escorted into a desegregated school by troops in 1957.
Senator Thomas Martin’s Speech on Civil Rights, 1965

Description

U.S. Senator Thomas E. Martin explains the current work being done to desegregate schools and ensure equal rights for all races. He delivered these remarks in a speech made in 1965.

Transcript of Senator Martin’s Speech on Civil Rights

Text-Dependent Questions

- According to Sen. Martin, what does the U.S. Constitution have to say about the problem of segregation in schools?
- What do you think Sen. Martin means by, “There is, of course, more than schools to the problem”?

Description
In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court established the idea of “separate but equal” in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson. This same U.S. Supreme Court also decided in 1896 that it was constitutional in Louisiana to require railroads to provide separate coach cars for people based on race.

Transcript of Hopkinsville Kentuckian Article

Printable Image of Hopkinsville Kentuckian Article

Text-Dependent Questions
- In the text, what does constitutional mean?
- How does this court case affect people in Kentucky?

Citation Information
Classroom in the School, Siloam, Georgia, October 1941

Description
Jack Delano, a photographer documenting life in the rural areas of the United States, took these two photographs, “The One-Teacher Negro School in Veazy” and “Classroom in the School.” The photographs were taken in the same county in Georgia in October of 1941.

(Note: This image should be paired with the image, “The One-Teacher Negro School in Veazy.”)

Text-Dependent Questions
• Compare and contrast “Classroom in the School” and “The One-Teacher Negro School in Veazy.”
• Based on these two images, how were the opportunities in education unequal for these kids?

Citation Information
Delano, Jack, Siloam, Greene County, Georgia. Classroom in the school, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, October 1941. Courtesy of Library of Congress
The One-Teacher Negro School in Veazy, Georgia, October 1941

Description
Jack Delano, a photographer, took photos of two schools in the same county for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in October 1941. The one featured was taken in a school designated for black children in Veazy, Georgia. The other photo, “Classroom in a School,” featured a white-only school in Siloam, Georgia.

Text-Dependent Questions
• Compare and contrast the following photographs, “Classroom in the School” and “The One-Teacher Negro School in Veazy.”
• Based on these two images, how were the opportunities in education unequal for these school children?

Citation Information
Iowa Supreme Court Rules on Equal Access: Portrait of Alexander Clark, 1867

Description
On September 12, 1867, 12-year-old Susan Clark was denied admission to Muscatine's Second Ward Common School Number 2 because she was African American. Her father, Alexander Clark, a determined businessman of Muscatine, acted to resist racism and the segregation of Iowa's schools. Clark initiated an Iowa Supreme Court case to allow his daughter to attend the white-only public school. The Iowa Supreme Court affirmed the district court's decision that children of color could not be refused admission to Iowa's district schools.

Transcribed Excerpt from The Iowa Supreme Court Rules on Equal Access to Schools and Common Carriers

Text-Dependent Questions
- What did the Iowa Supreme Court rule in Clark v. the Board of Directors?
- What were the similarities and differences of the Clark family's experience in Muscatine, Iowa, in 1867 to other stories that you've studied?

Citation Information
Distribution of the Colored Population of the United States, 1898

Description
A statistical atlas of the United States that is based on the results of the 11th census, completed in 1890, shows the distribution of the colored population of the country. As can be seen in the distribution map, members of the targeted population predominantly resided in the southeast.

Text-Dependent Questions
- Infer as to why the densest population of African Americans was along major rivers in the South?
- Compare this map to the "Distribution of Negro Population by County 1950" map. What are the similarities and differences?

Citation Information

![Image of attorneys congratulating each other after the Supreme Court's decision in Brown v. Board of Education]


**Description**
The U.S. Supreme Court case, Brown v. Board of Education, was bundled with four related cases and a decision was rendered on May 17, 1954. Three lawyers, Thurgood Marshall (center), chief counsel for the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund and lead attorney on the Briggs case, with George E. C. Hayes (left) and James M. Nabrit (right), attorneys for the Bolling case, are shown standing on the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court congratulating each other after the Court's decision declaring segregation unconstitutional.

**Text-Dependent Questions**
- The phrase “equal justice under law” is featured in this photograph. It was proposed by the architects planning the U.S. Supreme Court building and then approved by the justices in 1932. What does “equal justice under law” mean?
- Since this court case happened in the U.S. Supreme Court, how many students in the United States does it impact?

**Citation Information**
“George E. C. Hayes, Thurgood Marshall, and James M. Nabrit congratulating each other on the Brown decision,” Associated Press, 17 May 1954. [Courtesy of Library of Congress](https://www.loc.gov/item/2001676055/)
Distribution of Negro Population by County, 1956

Description
A statistical atlas by Samuel Fitzsimmons shows the distribution of the “Negro population” by each county in 1950. The counties used in the map had a black population of 500 or more residents.

Text-Dependent Questions
- Compare this map to the “Distribution of the Colored Population of the United States” map. What are the similarities and differences? How has the population of Iowa changed?
- What do you notice about the pink and purple counties (the most densely African-American populated counties)? Are they urban or rural?

Citation Information
“Segregation’s Citadel Unbreached in 4 Years,” May 11, 1958

Description
The 1958 article from the Washington Observer observed the effects of the U.S. Supreme Court decision for Brown v. Board of Education. At the time of the May 1954 ruling, 17 states and Washington, D.C., had laws enforcing school segregation. By 1958, only seven states — Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi and Louisiana — maintained public school segregation. The article highlights the immediate pushback within the states at the time of the ruling and how even four years later, a number of states continued to refuse to desegregate school districts. **Excerpt from Article**

Transcript of “Segregation’s Citadel Unbreached in 4 Years”

Text-Dependent Questions
- According to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, what foundational document forbids school segregation?
- In 1896, the Supreme Court used that same document to establish the practice of “separate but equal.” What might have caused that complete opposite change?
- According to the map, 17 states and Washington, D.C., had laws enforcing school segregation in 1954. By 1958, how many states still had school segregation laws?

Citation Information

Description
Daisy Bates, civil rights activist, journalist and lecturer, wrote a letter on December 17, 1957, to then-NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins. The letter focused on the treatment of the nine African-American children, known as the “Little Rock Nine” at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. These students were the first to be enrolled at the school after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional to segregate public schools. She describes how the treatment of the children by peers, educators and protestors was getting steadily worse, and they have endured a number of abuses, such as being spit on, kicked and heckled.

Transcript of Daisy Bates’ Letter

Text-Dependent Questions
- What kind of treatment is the Little Rock Nine experiencing from other students in the school? From teachers, administrators and officials?
- How did the NAACP support journalist Daisy Bates and the “Little Rock Nine?”

Citation Information
Anti-Integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, September 1958

Description
Even after the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, some states were adamantly against the integration of schools. This photograph shows an almost-empty hallway at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September of 1958. The school district chose to close its doors to students rather than integrate its classrooms. The school also was known as the location of the “Little Rock Nine” - where nine African-American students were integrated into the school and were subjected to horrific levels of abuse from classmates, teachers and the local community.

Text-Dependent Questions
• Describe what is not happening in the hallway of this school. What is happening in the hallways of most high schools in September of each year?
• If the school was closed because of safety concerns, infer what kinds of events might have been happening in Little Rock, Arkansas, at the time the nine students who were black decided to enroll at Central High School, a formerly all-white high school, from Horace Mann High School, an all-black high school.

Citation Information
Rally at State Capitol in Little Rock, Arkansas, August 20, 1959

Description
As the “Little Rock Nine,” a group of nine African-American students, enrolled in Little Rock Central High School in 1957, their enrollment was followed by angry gatherings of individuals who wanted to prevent the students from entering the racially-segregated school. This photograph from August 20, 1959, shows a group of people, one holding a Confederate flag, surrounding speakers and the National Guard, and are protesting the admission of the African-American students and the integration of their public schools in Arkansas.

Text-Dependent Questions
- One of the flags in the background of the photograph is from the Confederate States of America. Why is it significant? What does it likely represent to the protesters?
- Infer why the police officer and National Guard member are there. Why is it important that the U.S. Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech for all?

Citation Information
"Free School" in Farmville, Virginia, September 16, 1963

Description
Prince Edward County, Virginia, closed all of its schools in 1959 rather than integrate in accordance with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. The white citizens in the county formed a private all-white academy where their children could continue their education. African-American students were not provided public education until 1963. The Reverend Leslie Francis Griffin, a member of the NAACP and the chairman of the Moton High School P.T.A., petitioned President John F. Kennedy for support from the federal government to prepare the African-American students for re-entering the public schools. As a result, the Prince Edward County Free School System was created. Shown are students entering entering the “free school,” Mary E. Branch School, in Farmville, Va., in 1963.

Text-Dependent Question
• How did citizens in Virginia stand up for school integration and the right to an equal education?

Citation Information
Obstructions and Delays: Griffin v. County Board of Prince Edward County Draft Ruling, January 6, 1964

Description
The diehard segregationist campaign of “massive resistance” took many forms. In Virginia's Prince Edward County, location of one of the original school-segregation cases, local authorities evaded court-ordered integration by closing the public schools and supporting new, white-only, private schools. The U.S. Supreme Court reviewed these actions in 1964. This handwritten draft ruling by Justice William O. Douglas indicates his frustration with “over a decade” of delays since Brown v. Board of Education: “Afterward numerous opinions were written by the District Court and the Court of Appeals but our mandate in the Brown case has never been implemented.”

Transcript of Griffin v. County Board of Prince Edward County Ruling

Text-Dependent Questions
- How did the county of Prince Edward, Va., attempt to evade compliance with the U.S. Supreme Court’s ban on segregated schools?
- Describe the tone of Justice Douglas' ruling. Why do you think he used such strong language? What was Justice Douglas trying to communicate?

Citation Information
Six Years after Brown, Atlanta Citizens Discuss Their Schools, May 27, 1960

Description
In response to the Brown v. Board decision, Georgia passed legislation requiring the closing of public schools that had been forced to integrate by court orders and their conversion to private schools. After a federal judge ordered the Atlanta School Board to submit a desegregation plan, Governor Ernest Vandiver established a committee to hold public forums on the issue. The March 1960 hearings in Atlanta, portions of which were broadcast nationally on “CBS Reports: Who Speaks for the South?” on May 27, 1960, drew a large crowd and speakers with diverse opinions. In 1961, the Georgia legislature revoked its school segregation law. A court-ordered desegregation plan did not take effect, however, for another decade.

Text-Dependent Questions
- Thomas J. Wesley, Jr., leader of the Metropolitan Association to Continue Segregated Education, said that blacks should not go “into places where they are not suited.” What do you think he means by that statement?
- Are more people in this video supporting desegregation or continuing segregation? What reasons do they give?

Citation Information
Governor George Wallace Attempting to Block Integration at the University of Alabama, June 11, 1963

Description
Known as the “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door,” Alabama Governor George Wallace stood in front of Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama on June 11, 1963, to stop the enrollment of black students Vivian Malone and James Hood. He was being confronted by Deputy U.S. Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach. Wallace desperately wanted to preserve segregation, but his action was in vain. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy’s administration ordered the U.S. Army’s 2nd Infantry Division from Ft. Benning, Georgia, to be prepared to enforce the racial integration of the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, which they were able to do.

Text-Dependent Questions
- Describe what is happening in the image. What are the governor, police officers and press nonverbally communicating?
- What does it communicate to voters that the governor of Alabama would personally block students from entering the University of Alabama?
- Using this source and others you have already analyzed in this text set, reflect on the way southern state governments reacted to calls for desegregation.

Citation Information
President John F. Kennedy’s Civil Rights Address, June 11, 1963

Description
The excerpt highlights President John F. Kennedy's broadcasted speech announcing he would soon ask the U.S. Congress to enact landmark civil rights legislation. The speech and the legislation was in part a reaction to the actions of Alabama Gov. George Wallace, who attempted to refuse entry of African-American students to the University of Alabama. Kennedy delivered his speech to the nation on June 11, 1963. Martin Luther King, Jr., called the speech “one of the most eloquent, profound and unequivocal pleas for justice and freedom of all men ever made by any president.”

Text-Dependent Questions
• What does President John F. Kennedy mean when he says that the U.S. Constitution should be color blind?
• If this speech was broadcast to the entire nation over radio and television on June 11, 1963, what does that say about how important these ideas are to President Kennedy? In other words, how big of a deal was this?

Citation Information
“Dark laughter. Now I aint so sure I wanna get educated,”
September 21, 1963

Description
Political cartoonist Oliver Harrington published this cartoon in 1963 that depicts two African-American boys dressed for school who are running from a crowd of angry people. Harrington created the piece as a form of social commentary on the protests occurring of individuals wanting to preserve segregation, even as the U.S. Supreme Court and federal government continued to push for integration of public schools.

Text-Dependent Questions

- The job of a political cartoonist is to address important issues by bringing attention, and often humor, to the situation. They tend to exaggerate certain aspects in order to entertain their audiences, but there are usually strong undertones of truth. What message was political cartoonist Oliver Harrington trying to say in this cartoon?
- How does the fact that this cartoon was published in Pittsburgh, Penn., shape its meaning?
- Imagine that the student on the left is saying to the student on the right the words featured on the cartoon. Why would they say that? What evidence from the rest of the cartoon supports your thoughts.

Citation Information
Integration in D.C. Schools, December 15, 1964

After the Brown v. Board of Education decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, integration of public school classrooms was still a work in progress. This photo, taken 10 years after the Supreme Court ruling, showed a class in Washington, D.C., in 1964 that has both black and white students in the same classroom.

**Text-Dependent Questions**

Compare and contrast this photo to “African American Children Encounter Protesters” along with previous sources.

- Why did white adults protest school desegregation? What were some reasons that white adults did not think that their children should go to school with black children?
- Does it appear that the children in this image are learning? How does this image show progress in the fight to desegregate public schools?

**Citation Information**

African-American Children Encounter Protesters, September 13, 1965

Description
Even as the integration of public schools in the United States increased, some Americans fought to keep schools segregated. Pictured are African-American children in New York on their way to Public School 204. As they attempt to enter school, the children have to pass mothers protesting the busing of African-American children to achieve integration.

Text-Dependent Questions
• Based on the reactions of the adults in this photo, how do you think the students felt?
• What and why do you think the mothers were protesting?

Citation Information