

## Is Separate Unequal?

On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the decision that sparked the civil rights movement. In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the Court reversed its earlier 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In *Plessy*, the Court had said that segregation was acceptable if the separate facilities were equal. Here are key parts of the Court's *Brown* decision.

**Directions:** Read this excerpt and then answer the questions that follow.

To separate [schoolchildren] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their 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. The effect of this separation on their educational opportunities was well stated by a finding in a Kansas case. . . :

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system.

We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.



1. Compare this decision with *Plessy v. Ferguson*.
  - (a) What was the basis of the Court's reasoning in *Plessy*?
  - (b) What was the basis of the Court's reasoning in *Brown*?
  - (c) What accounts for the change in the Court's reasoning?
2. Read the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Based on that, and the Supreme Court's reasoning in the *Plessy* and *Brown* cases, write your own decision on the equal protection of the laws question as it applies to segregation of the races.

