
Brown v. Board of Education

Date of Decision: May 17, 1954

Summary of case

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka was a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in which the Court ruled that state laws upholding racial segregation in public schools are unconstitutional. In a unanimous decision on May 17, 1954, written by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Court stated that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” and therefore violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The Browns, an African-American family from Topeka, Kansas, had sued their local public school district for making their daughter ride a bus to a black-only school rather than enrolling her in the school closer to their home. The district court had ruled for the school board based on the Supreme Court’s precedent in the 1896 case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which held that racial segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause if the facilities in question were otherwise equal. This idea had come to be known as “separate but equal.”

Summary of opinion

Chief Justice Earl Warren’s unanimous opinion for the Court stated that all children had a right to a good education. According to Street Law, “The justices found it very unlikely that a child would be able to succeed in life without a good education. Access to such an education was thus ‘a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.’” Although the segregated schools in this case were considered equal in quality, the justices considered the “more subtle, intangible effect of segregation” on public education:

[S]eparating children solely on the basis of race created a feeling of inferiority in the “hearts and minds” of African American children. Segregating children in public education created and perpetuated the idea that African American children held a lower status in the community than white children, even if their separate educational facilities were substantially equal in “tangible” factors. This feeling of inferiority reduced the desire to learn and achieve in African American children and had “a tendency to retard their educational and mental development and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system.”

The Court partially overruled its earlier *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and declared that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional for American public schools and educational facilities. The Court ruled that segregation denied African-American children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by

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the Fourteenth Amendment. Because few court decisions could serve as precedent, Warren based much of the opinion on social science studies. This decision, a major civil rights victory, affirmed the necessity of integration, and served as a model for many later court decisions.

Landmark Cases of the Supreme Court. (n.d.). Brown v. Board of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.landmarkcases.org/cases/brown-v-board-of-education>

Street Law, Inc. (n.d.) Street Law case summary: Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. 1954.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1). (n.d.). Oyez. Retrieved February 6, 2020, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1940-1955/347us483>