

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka / Background •—Answer Key

As you read the background summary of the case below, look for the **important vocabulary terms**. You can find definitions for these terms on the separate vocabulary handout.

In the early 1950s, many students went to different schools because of their race. White children went to one school, and Black children went to a different school. This system was called **segregation**. During this time, segregation was **legal**. Many other public **facilities** were also segregated.

Segregation was legal because of past court decisions called **precedents**. In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States decided a case called *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In this case, the Court said that segregation was legal when the facilities for both races (trains, bathrooms, restaurants, etc.) were similar in quality.

Under segregation, all-White and all-Black schools sometimes had similar buildings, busses, and teachers. Sometimes, the buildings, busses, and teachers for the all-Black schools were lower in quality. Often, Black children had to travel far to get to their school. In Topeka, Kansas, a Black student named Linda Brown had to walk through a dangerous railroad to get to her all-Black school. Her family believed that segregated schools should be illegal.

The Brown family **sued** the school system (Board of Education of Topeka). The **district court** said that segregation hurt Black children. However, the district court also said the schools were equal. Therefore, the segregation was legal.

The Browns disagreed with the decision. They believed that the segregated school system did violate the Constitution. They thought that the system violated the 14th Amendment guaranteeing that people will be treated equally under the law.

No State shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

— *Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution*

The Browns **appealed** the case to a higher court. The Supreme Court of the United States agreed to hear the case.

Questions to Consider

1. What does it mean to have segregated schools?
For schools to be segregated means children are separated on the basis of some characteristic. In this case, that characteristic was race.
2. What right does the 14th Amendment give citizens?
The 14th Amendment gives people the right to "equal protection of the laws." This means that the state governments must treat people equally.
3. How did the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) affect segregation?
Plessy v. Ferguson set the precedent that separate facilities for different races were allowed under the 14th Amendment as long as the facilities were equal in quality. *Plessy* gave legal backing to the widespread practice of segregation of public facilities. In other words, the Supreme Court's ruling made the legal case for maintaining segregation stronger.
4. It is important for this case to determine what "equal" means. What do you think equality means to the Browns? What do you think equality means to the Board of Education of Topeka?
For the Browns, education cannot be equal unless students of different races attend school together, sharing the same educational experiences and facilities. The Board of Education of Topeka believes that education can be equal in separate facilities for different races as long as those facilities are roughly equal. The Board of Education of Topeka was focused on the equality of the tangible elements of education (school buildings, transportation, teachers, etc.), while the Browns are more concerned with the intangible elements of education, for instance the social stigma that comes with a separation of children based on race.