

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (I) / Summary of Decision

In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Browns. The Court found the practice of segregation in public schools unconstitutional and refused to apply its decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* to “the field of public education.” Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote the opinion for the unanimous Court.

The Court noted that public education was central to American life. They acknowledged that public education was necessary to prepare children for their future professions and to enable them to participate in the democratic process. In their own words, public education was also “a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values” present in their communities. 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.”

The justices then assessed the equality of the facilities that the Board of Education of Topeka provided for the education of Black children against those provided for White children. Ruling that they were substantially equal in “tangible factors” that could be measured easily (such as “buildings, curricula, and qualifications and salaries of teachers”), they concluded that the Court must examine the subtle effects of segregation on public education.

Changing from the Court’s earlier reasoning in *Plessy*, the justices now argued that separating children only on the basis of race created a feeling of inferiority in African American children. Segregating children in public education perpetuated the idea that Black children held a lower status in the community than White children, even if their separate educational facilities were substantially equal. This feeling of inferiority reduced their desire to learn and achieve 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.” Concluding that separate education facilities are unequal, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public education denied African American children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.

One year later, the Court addressed how its decision would be implemented in a case known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (II)*. Chief Justice Warren once again wrote an opinion for the unanimous Court. The Court acknowledged that desegregating public schools would take place in various ways, depending on the unique problems faced by individual school districts. After charging local school authorities with the responsibility for solving these problems, the Court instructed federal trial courts to oversee the process and determine whether local authorities were desegregating schools in good faith. They mandated that desegregation take place with “with all deliberate speed.”