

The Brown v. Board of Education Cases: An Education Unit on the Cases Comprising the Landmark 1954 School Desegregation Decision

By Liza R. Rognas

Overview

The purpose of this unit is to acquaint high school students and college undergraduates with the legal history of segregation. Divided into four chronological sections, the unit contains documents from the four early court cases that comprised the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision in 1954, and other material representing responses to that decision. Questions corresponding to the documents under the heading "Teaching Activities" are provided to help generate classroom discussion.

Historic context for the Education Unit documents is supplied in the introduction and first two chapters of the thesis of which this unit is Chapter Three. Educators will find that the unit functions best when used in the classroom during sections on civil rights, modern American history, and legal or constitutional history, and in concert with the following reference material: Copies of the U.S. Constitution, especially the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, known as the Reconstruction Amendments; a legal dictionary; a standard dictionary, and the jimcrowhistory.org online encyclopedia.

Curriculum Standards

As defined by the NCSS National Curriculum Thematic Strands, this lesson addresses the following themes:

- Culture: cultural concepts such as adaptation, assimilation, acculturation, diffusion, and dissonance
- Time, Continuity, and Change: analysis and reconstruction of the past, examining its relationship to the present
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions: understanding the paradigms and traditions that undergird social and political institutions

Time Required

Depending on whether teachers use in part or as a whole, this unit can take anywhere from two days to two weeks time.

Materials Needed

- All the primary source documents are provided here
- jimcrowhistory.org online **Encyclopedia**
- Copies of the U.S. Constitution, especially the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments
- A legal dictionary
- A standard dictionary

The Unit

The unit is divided based on the examination of different primary source material. Follow the links below for each individual section:

"To Secure These Rights": An examination of the 1947 Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights. Findings include racial discrimination in regards to health, health services, economic disparity, education, and housing.

Sweatt v. Painter. Students examine the petition of *Sweatt v. Painter*, then create a mock education plan for their own school curriculum to discover other inequities present in a segregated education system besides materials such as books and paper.

Briggs v. Elliott. Students examine and recreate the Clark psychological study that showed the social, emotional effects of segregation on both black and white children.

Davis v. Prince Edward County: Students review the defense redirection of focus of this case away from the central issue of segregation and toward the credibility of the expert witness, Dr. Kenneth Clark. This is an excellent study of litigation tactics.

Belton v. Gebhart. Students look at court artifacts entered in this Delaware case that gave the plaintiffs their first big victory against school segregation.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka: Students study the documents in the case that led to the desegregation of a Topeka, Kansas high school.

The Reaction: This lesson serves to wrap up the education unit on the cases involved in *Brown v. Board of Education*, focusing on the sentiments that would carry both sides through to the civil rights movement of the 60s.

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