

Handout A: Primer on Brown vs. Board and the Little Rock Crisis

Classrooms in the United States changed forever with a historic and at the time, controversial court case, known as *Brown v. Board*. In 1951, Oliver Brown and several other African American parents sued the Board of Education of Topeka Public Schools after their children were barred from attending all-white schools. Schools were allowed to separate students by race, or segregate them, due to the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case established the doctrine of “separate but equal” meaning segregation was constitutional as long as black and white students received the same quality of education, resources, and facilities.

By 1954, more people from all over the country joined the *Brown* lawsuit and it reached the highest court in the land---the Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall, the lawyer that represented Brown and the others, argued that segregation made it impossible for African American children to receive an equal education. The Supreme Court agreed and unanimously voted to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The Court ruled that the segregation of public education violated the 14th Amendment, which guarantees “equal protection of the laws” to anyone in the United States. Schools were no longer allowed to be segregated.

Aware that such a sudden reversal to the law might lead to outrage and violence, the Supreme Court allowed states with segregated schools to make the change gradually. The NAACP disagreed, stating that any delay violated the constitutional rights of African Americans. In a second round of arguments, the Supreme Court again unanimously voted, this time declaring that desegregation must be done with “all deliberate speed,” despite the objections of states such as Arkansas.

Reading Comprehension Questions:

1. What was the outcome of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896?
2. According to the reading, why was *Plessy v. Ferguson* overturned?
3. What did the Supreme Court try to do to help segregated states accept the *Brown v. Board* decision?

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In 1954, states began the process of implementing desegregation established by *Brown v. Board*. The school board of Little Rock, Arkansas adopted the Blossom plan to gradually integrate their schools starting in September of 1957. By the spring of 1957, nine eligible African American students had been chosen to attend Little Rock Central High School. Opposition to integration grew as the deadline drew closer.

- September 3, 1957: Federal Judge Davies orders Gov. Faubus to begin the desegregation of the high school to comply with the *Brown v. Board* ruling.
- September 4, 1957: The Little Rock Nine are prevented from entering the school by the Arkansas National Guard, which had been ordered there by the Governor on Sept 2.
- September 20, 1957: Judge Davies rejects Gov. Faubus claim that the National Guard was necessary to preserve law and order and demands that the Guard be removed. The Guardsmen leave and are replaced by local police.
- September 23, 1957: A crowd of over 1,000 white segregationists gather in front of the school as the nine students are brought into the building through a side door. The situation worsens and police evacuate the nine, fearing a loss of control over the mob.
- September 24, 1957: President Eisenhower responds by sending in 1200 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division to restore and maintain order. The Arkansas National Guard is federalized by the President, removing them from the governor's control.
- September 25, 1957: Escorted by the Army paratroopers, the Little Rock Nine attend their first full day of classes.
- September 26, 1957-1972: African American students continue to face harassment and discrimination from segregationists. Students who visibly supported the Nine were ostracized or harassed as well. The governor closed the school and threatened to end public education. Teachers in favor of or sympathetic to integration were fired or disciplined.
- Desegregation, as outlined by the original Blossom Plan, was finally achieved by 1972.