



## FIFTY YEARS: BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION

May 12, 2004

*The America of the 1950s was one where the races did not mix -- not in restaurants, not at drinking fountains and certainly not in schools. But a Supreme Court case called **Brown v. Board of Education**, which turns 50 on Monday, was the first significant step on a long, difficult road to changing that.*

On May 17, 1954, nine Supreme Court justices ruled the "separate but equal" way of life was a violation of the U.S. Constitution. Their decision forced schools to desegregate, forever changing public education.

But the Brown case also played a role in changing America. It laid the foundation for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, an act that made racial discrimination in public places illegal, and required employers to change their hiring practices.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which nullified voting requirements designed to keep African Americans away from the polls, followed and was perhaps the most important civil rights legislation passed by Congress.

That makes Brown v. Board of Education the "Big Bang" of the Civil Rights movement, said historian and commentator Juan Williams. "It led to sit-ins and bus rides and freedom marches. And even today, as we argue about affirmative action in colleges and graduate schools, the power of Brown continues to stir the nation."

### **Linda Brown**

In 1950, third-grader Linda Brown and her little sister, Terry Lynn, walked more than a mile to a bus stop in Topeka, Kan. There, a bus picked them up and took them to an all-black school. An all-white school was seven blocks away from their home, but the girls' father was told he could not enroll them there.

Their story was not unusual, but unlike many families forced to accept their situation, the Browns joined a dozen other families in a lawsuit against the Topeka Board of Education. Theirs was one of five lawsuits in the country that challenged the system of separate but equal.

The lawsuits, paid for by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, came out of a culture almost unimaginable today. School districts in the South threatened to shut down -- and some did -- rather than allow white children to sit in the same classroom with black children.

## **Gains made**

Etta Martin-Lee, a 51-year-old African American teacher, teaches at a racially mixed fourth-grade class in Sacramento, Calif. She says her students will never comprehend what she went through. As a student in the '60s in St. Louis, she entered an all-white school where students' white parents pelted her with bricks and spat tobacco juice on her.

Martin-Lee's students don't feel limited by the color of their skin, she says. "I am supposed to be here working with these children. I am supposed to be here so they know there is something better now."

Although the Brown decision called for desegregation "with all deliberate speed," it would take further rulings and more than a decade to truly take effect. In 1971, a North Carolina court case - *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* -- cleared the way for forced busing plans, which allowed school districts to bus children from different neighborhoods, and classrooms started to become less monochromatic.

As a result of the North Carolina case and others, the number of black students attending mostly white schools in the South rose from 2 percent in the mid-1960s to nearly 45 percent in the late 1980s, the high point of desegregation.

## **Backsliding**

Today, shifts in population and the concept of "neighborhood schools," or those schools closest to where students live, often trump the ideals of Brown.

"White flight" from urban neighborhoods into largely white suburbs has left city public schools predominantly serving minority children. In the largest districts around the country, seven in ten students are not white, making it tough to achieve a color balance. And many other school districts, weary of complicated busing plans designed in the name of integration, have rolled back efforts.

As a result, school segregation levels in some cities are as striking today as they were in 1968, according to the NAACP. Schools are funded through property taxes and schools that serve poor children and their families are also poorly funded.

Even though studies, like those done by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project, show African Americans and Latinos who attended interracial high schools were more successful in college than who went to more segregated schools, the number of truly integrated schools continues to dwindle.

"We honor Brown more in principle than in practice," said Ted Shaw, head of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. "We live in an era now where school desegregation is all but done. We're re-segregating. And no one really seems to care."

Fifty years after the federal government stepped in to desegregate schools, the issue has evolved into a debate decided in individual towns, where local communities and states get to decide for themselves what's more important: integrated or neighborhood schools. Even the NAACP is split, with vocal opinions in both camps.

*By Jule Gardner, Online NewsHour*

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