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Focus on Freedom

BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION

The Fourteenth Amendment was passed to end discrimination, especially when based on race. Yet in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), the Supreme Court denied non-whites access to certain train cars by holding that "separate but equal" facilities did not discriminate. In 1954 the Court reversed this decision in the historic case of Brown v. Board of Education. The Court ruled:

In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. . . .

The effect of this separation on their educational opportunities was well stated by a finding in the Kansas case by a court which nevertheless felt compelled to rule against the Negro plaintiffs:

"Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn.

Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [prevent] the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system."

We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. . . .

—CHIEF JUSTICE EARL WARREN, 1954

Examining the Document

Reviewing Facts

1. Explain why the Court believed education to be a right of citizens.
2. Discuss the "detrimental effect" that the Court believed segregated education had on those who were denied the opportunity to go to an integrated school.

Critical Thinking Skills

3. Analyzing Information How were society's beliefs about race important in influencing the Supreme Court's decisions in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education*?