

## Public School Segregation by State, 1954

### Teacher Pages

#### Overview

This activity is designed to reinforce and expand students' prior knowledge of school segregation in the United States in 1954. Students should have already read about segregation in schools and public facilities from the 19th century up through the middle of the 20th century; you may want to review this information with students before beginning the activity. Students identify the states and regions that required segregation, those that prohibited it, and those that let the residents decide or didn't legislate it at all. They then discuss why segregation might have differed by region and conclude by discussing the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

#### Time Required

30–50 minutes

#### National History Standards

Historical Thinking Standard 2: Historical comprehension  
Historical Thinking Standard 3: Historical analysis and interpretation  
United States Era 9, Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and the extension of civil liberties

#### National Geography Standards

Standard 1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective  
Standard 2. How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context

#### Enduring Understanding

School segregation policies varied widely by state and region before the *Brown* decision in 1954.

#### Essential Question

Before the *Brown* decision in 1954, what policies did different states and general regions have regarding school segregation?

## Procedure

**Note:** The following directions are for doing this lesson as a whole-class activity. If you wish, you may instead use the student handout and have students work individually or in groups on the activity.

1. Read the “Historical Context” section to the class to set the stage for the activity. Make sure students understand the concepts of federalism, racial segregation, and the impact of both *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education*.
2. Using a whiteboard, projector, or another display device, show the class the “School Segregation by State, 1954” map, but with all layers except the “States” and “Ocean” layers turned off.
3. Distribute the outline version of the map to students, and have them work either individually or in small groups. Let them know that they should complete the following to the best of their recollection:
  - a. Have students outline or color the regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, West) where school segregation was required by law.
  - b. Next, turn on “Required by law” layer. Have students check accuracy of their maps and make any necessary changes.
  - c. Have students use another color to outline or color the regions that prohibited school segregation.
  - d. Next, turn on the “Prohibited by law” layer. Have students check the accuracy of their maps and make any necessary changes.
  - e. Now, have students use a third color to outline or color the regions that either allowed school segregation to be determined by local law or didn’t pass any laws concerning it.
  - f. Next, turn on the “Determined by local option” layer and the “Not legislated” layer. Have students check the accuracy of their maps and make any necessary changes.
4. Discuss the following with students:
  - a. What region had the most states requiring school segregation? Why do you think this was?
  - b. What region had the most states prohibiting school segregation? Why do you think this was?
  - c. What region had the most states leaving the decision on school segregation to state residents or not passing any legislation on it at all? Why do you think this was?

## Historical Context

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court established the “**separate but equal**” doctrine in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This ruling permitted states to establish separate public facilities for African Americans and whites (such as restrooms, drinking fountains, and schools) as long as the facilities were equal in terms of access and conditions. Under the system of **federalism**, state legislatures have the power to pass laws of their own as long as they don’t violate the U.S. Constitution. The *Plessy* ruling allowed many state legislatures, especially in the South, to pass

laws that **segregated** public facilities—including schools—in an attempt to prohibit African Americans from mixing with whites. While the African American schools were separate from white schools, they were seldom, if ever, equal. School facilities for whites were nearly always in better condition, had more supplies, and better teachers. Segregation also gave African Americans the impression that they were always “less than” whites. However, in 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its **landmark** decision in the case of ***Brown v. Board of Education***. This ruling made it **unconstitutional** for states to maintain separate schools for African American children and white children. This case **overturned** the 1896 “separate but equal” doctrine established in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. After 1954, states had to **repeal** any segregation laws and pass new ones stating it was unlawful for public facilities—including schools—to be segregated.

### Assessment

Have students imagine that they are a resident of either a Southern state, a Northeastern state, or a Western state in 1954. Have them write a letter to the editor of their local paper either supporting or criticizing the *Brown* decision.

### Extensions

1. Have students do some extended research on the impact of the *Brown* decision and the challenges faced by both African Americans and whites as this ruling was implemented in public schools. They should look at the difficulties faced at Little Rock Central High School and colleges and universities in the Deep South such as the University of Mississippi and the University of Alabama.
2. Have students create an exhibit for a civil rights museum that explains the impact of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Their display should include their version of the map of public school segregation in 1954, along with primary sources such as photos, newspaper or magazine articles, artwork, pictures of objects, etc. (You may want to assign specific topics to individual students or student groups.) Have students write a brief paragraph to go with their exhibits commenting on the impact of the *Brown* decision on states that had required segregation, and what steps these states had to take in order to comply with the ruling.