

Public School Segregation by State, 1954

Student Worksheet

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.

Vocabulary

“separate but equal”

doctrine

Plessy v. Ferguson

federalism

segregated

landmark

Brown v. Board of Education

unconstitutional

overturned

repeal

Map Activity

To do this activity, you will need a blank outline map and access to the “Public School Segregation by State, 1954” digital map. You may not remember the exact answers for all the parts of the activity, but complete them as best you can remember from your previous study of this topic. Turn off all layers of the digital map but the “States” and “Ocean” layers, and as indicated in the following instructions, fill in your map, and complete the following:

1. Outline or color the general regions (Northeast, South, West, Midwest) where segregation was required by law.
2. Next, turn on “Required by law” layer. Check accuracy of their maps and make any necessary changes.
3. Use another color to outline or color the regions that prohibited school segregation.
4. Next, turn on the “Prohibited by law” layer. Check the accuracy of their maps and make any necessary changes.
5. 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.
6. Next, turn on the “Determined by local option” layer and the “Not legislated” layer. Check the accuracy of your map and make any necessary changes.
7. Discuss the following with the whole class and your teacher:
 - 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?

Assessment

Imagine that you are a resident of either a Southern state, a Northeastern state, or a Western state in 1954. Write a letter to the editor of your local paper either supporting or criticizing the *Brown* decision.