

Brown v. Board of Education

The past is prologue

Faces now individuals

Although *Brown v. Board* addressed de jure segregation of schools in the South, de facto segregation ruled in the North. Perhaps encouraged by the U.S. Supreme Court decision, some African American parents in North Philadelphia began exercising school choice by transferring their children to schools in Germantown.

The resulting increase of black students at Roosevelt Junior High had the ripple effect of raising concern among white parents at my school, Fitler, which fed Roosevelt. Meetings were held, transfers were sought, and when I graduated from sixth grade in January 1958, only 10 members of my 25-member class went on to our neighborhood junior high.

My parents stood firm in sending me there, despite panicked reports of regular locker-room robberies and the like. The mass of brown faces I encountered on my first day at Roosevelt morphed to a homeroom class that elected me president, and then to

individuals who later became an opera singer, a church musician and French teacher, a playwright, a psychology professor, and a flutist/social worker — maid of honor at my wedding.

One of the few other white elementary school classmates who made the trek to Roosevelt eventually became the Oscar-winning co-producer of the movie *Mississippi Burning*. Perhaps instead of using me as a sacrificial lamb for social justice, my parents might simply have wanted to provide me with positive role models, a superb instrumental and vocal music program, and an opportunity to develop lifelong friendships. The professor, now dean at a branch of California State University, and I will be celebrating our 40th high school reunion next Saturday.

Barbara McDowell Dowdall

Department head,
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High-quality schools

Today, there is still a substantial achievement gap between black and white students. Here in Pennsylvania, the list of failing schools is made up almost entirely of schools with a minority population.

Because of housing patterns, particularly in urban centers, fully integrated schools are often not possible. Yet our goal should be to make all schools into quality schools, regardless of the ethnicity of the surrounding neighborhood or the students or the teachers.

Although segregated schools in the South 50 years ago, before the Supreme Court decision, shortchanged black students in almost every area, some positives shone through. One was the closeness and mentoring of teachers to their students

In honor of the 50th anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision to end segregated public education, *The Inquirer* presents a special collection of reader memories.

On this page, Philadelphians share their experiences with pre- and post-*Brown* school systems. Letters from regional readers appear on Page L1 of the South Jersey and Pennsylvania suburban editions of today's paper.

Elsewhere in this section:

- Constitutional lawyer Gregory J. Sullivan argues that *Brown v. Board* opened the door to modern judicial activism.
- Educator Dianne Gordon-McGrath suggests that student support systems have more to do with success than mere integration.
- "Center Square" columnist Chris Satullo laments that the "sacred precedent" of *Brown v. Board* has tempted advocates to overvalue lawsuits and underrate democratic persuasion.
- Three local college students consider why informal segregation still rules the social life of America's schools.

and teachers' commitment to raise those students to high levels of academic excellence. Within black communities, education was a priority. Individuals sacrificed so that their limited resources could be used to enable children to learn and achieve. These are lost elements that we should strive to recapture.

The promise of *Brown* has yet to be achieved. It is still an illusion. It is up to us to make it a reality.

State Rep. James R. Roebuck

Democratic chairman,
House Education Committee

Still no equal access

I began my teaching career in 1957 in Philadelphia at Walton Elementary School in Strawberry Mansion. The neighborhood had recently changed. Black families from the South and from other segregated neighborhoods replaced white families fleeing to the suburbs and Northeast Philadelphia. Walton, an old school, was so overcrowded that we taught in shifts — 8 a.m. to noon and noon to 4 p.m., with two teachers and two classes in each classroom.

Many
black

teachers, such as me, had just been hired.

My second school was Elverson Elementary School in an impoverished neighborhood in North Philadelphia. The principal insisted that African American studies be integrated into the curriculum. Teachers had to buy their own supplementary materials. All the books at that time showed only Caucasian people in suburban settings.

My first teaching experience in an integrated school was at Houston School in Mount Airy. I transferred there as part of a plan to integrate school staffs. By the time I arrived in 1966, the environment was friendly. But the black students and teachers who arrived before me were said to have felt unwelcome.

In 1970, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission filed a complaint against the School District of Philadelphia for operating a segregated school system. During the 1970s, more emphasis was placed on inclusion, affective education and innovative ideas for learning and teaching. In 1982, a voluntary desegregation plan was initiated and I was forced to transfer to Solis-Cohen School in the Northeast, where I taught for 14 years.

During the 1980s, African American neighborhoods and their schools deteriorated. Factories and businesses continued to

close down or move from the city. The illegal drug trade infiltrated communities. Massive cuts in educational and social programs increased. Formerly vibrant neighborhoods looked like Europe after World War II.

In 1994, a year after I retired, Judge Doris Smith ordered the state to provide \$45 million to upgrade schools in poor and racially isolated neighborhoods. The state did not comply. Officials had another idea — privatization. Now, 50 years after *Brown v. Board*, thousands of Philadelphia students still do not have equal access to quality education.

Rosita B. Johnson
Germantown

Finally, a capitulation

Integration began when I was a sophomore at the University of Texas. Austin was segregated, but things were about to change.

The Texas Theater, a movie house directly across from the main campus, showed arty films. Students and faculty members were the most frequent patrons — as long as they were white. A group of us decided that it was time to desegregate the movie house. However, desegregation was new to the country and absolutely unheard of in Austin, and we didn't want to cause too much of a commotion.

We had a plan. We decided to get into the queue and ask for tickets. We interspersed ourselves with African Americans so that there was no question that we were there to integrate the theater. We also were there to get as much publicity as possible.

There were two windows in the box office. We decided to line up at one window only, allowing the other window to be used for "legitimate" purchases by regular movie patrons. So, the two-line system took effect: one line requesting tickets and being turned down because the movie house didn't sell tickets to African Americans, and the other line being used for those who really wanted to see a movie.

We got lots of publicity. Television and the newspapers came by regularly. We kept our lines going nightly for about a year. The theater functioned with very little disruption and we made our point — that integration was coming and this theater would have to integrate.

Then, without a lot of fanfare, they capitulated. Management, with prodding from some politicians and university officials, decided that it was time to sell us tickets from "our" window. And thus, the first demonstration for integration in Austin, Texas, came to a successful conclusion.

Al Barkan
Spring Garden

Fighting for freedom

I was born in Detroit in March 1954, the youngest of three brothers. My family was part of that historic migration of African Americans who left the South to find better living conditions and employment in the big factories of the North.

I was born into a world that was hostile to black people. Nearly all of Africa was under European colonial rule, and in America a black man couldn't even vote in some states. White supremacy was an established norm. That world was about to change about 10 weeks later with the *Brown v. Board* decision. It set the legal precedents to challenge Jim Crow segregation laws.

By the time the '60s came along, many nations in Africa were being created and imperialist domination was beginning to fade. Here in the U.S., African American nationality was on the move. Then, there were the assassination of Malcolm X, the bombing of churches, the bloody attack on marchers in Selma, Ala.

My first experience with integration came when my family moved to New York City during the summer of 1966, into a neighborhood that was 90 percent white. I must have terrorized my school's white male student population pretty good because, before I could finish the year, the school board kicked me out.

During the summer of 1969 my brothers and I went to the Woodstock music festival. At no time did I ever have to get into a confrontation. I said to myself: "Hey, these people are not so bad, after all."

It wasn't until I reached college that I became politically involved. I saw myself as a black nationalist freedom fighter, and I was elected a leader of my branch of the NAACP and its youth coordinator. I also was elected to the student government of City University of New York.

By 1974, race relations in the U.S. were not going very well. In Boston, racist white mobs were attacking black children who were riding school buses to carry out the *Brown* decision. A Haitian man there was assaulted with an American flag attached to a pole.

The NAACP and many other organizations went into action to rally support for Boston's isolated black community. The battleground had changed from South to North. At age 20 I boarded a bus to help fight racism. As I stood atop Bunker Hill, the assembly point for the demonstration, I thought of Crispus Attucks, a slave and a seaman. He died at the Boston Massacre in the fight for freedom against British colonialism. Once more, I realized that I was standing on the shoulders of many fighters who had come before me.

Chako Bendela
Mount Airy

"Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. ... It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. 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 ... deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. ...

The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy ... is

usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, this finding is amply supported by modern authority. Any language

in *Plessy v. Ferguson* contrary to this finding is rejected.

We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place."

Chief Justice Earl Warren

writing for the court, *Brown v. Board of Education*
May 17, 1954

