Questions About Brown v. Board and The Civil Rights Movement…


WEB SITES

National Public Radio: Brown 50  
www.npr.org/news_specials/brown50

Supreme Court Landmark Cases.  
www.landmarkcases.org/brown

Brown v. Board Activity Book  
www.brownvboard.org/activitybk/cover.htm

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 1954 was the year of the Brown v. Board Ruling. What was the outcome of the ruling? Who was the US President at the time? Who was The Vice-President?

2. What is the "Plessy vs. Ferguson" ruling?

3. What is the origin of the name Jim Crow and what was the "Jim Crow Era" of history?

4. What right does the Fourteenth Amendment give citizens?

5. Who is Thurgood Marshall and how did the Brown v. Board court case foreshadow his career?

6. Why was the appointment of Justice Earl Warren important to the outcome of the Brown v. Board case?

PUBLICATIONS ABOUT BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION


VOCABULARY WORDS

1. In Brown v. Board the Supreme Court of the United States declared the notion of "separate but equal" schooling unconstitutional. The court said separate was inherently unequal. In 1954 the U.S. President was Dwight D. Eisenhower, the U.S. Vice President was Richard M. Nixon. Gas cost 29 cents/gallon, minimum wage was 75 cents/hour.

2. The Supreme Court’s "Plessy vs. Ferguson" decision in 1896 required railroads to provide "separate but equal" accommodations for black and white citizens. Plessy vs. Ferguson led to more than just separate railroad cars. Schools, restaurants, courthouses, bathrooms and even drinking fountains were also segregated. The law influenced most kinds of interaction between blacks and whites.

3. The term Jim Crow is believed to have originated around 1830 when a white, minstrel show performer blackened his face with charcoal paste and danced a ridiculous jig while singing the lyrics to the song, "Jump Jim Crow." By the 1850s the "Jim Crow" character had become a standard part of the minstrel show scene in America. On the eve of the Civil War, the Jim Crow idea was one of many stereotypical images of black inferiority in the popular culture of the day. The word “Jim Crow” became a racial slur in the vocabulary of many whites; and by the end of the century, acts of racial discrimination toward blacks were often referred to as Jim Crow laws and practices. The Jim Crow era in American history dates from the late 1890s, when southern states began systematically to make laws and state constitutional provisions to enforce the subordinate position of African Americans in society. Most of these legal steps were aimed at separating the races in public spaces (public schools, parks, accommodations, and transportation) and preventing adult black males from exercising the right to vote.

4. The Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution states: All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

5. Thurgood Marshall served as legal director of the NAACP. His tenure, from 1940 to 1961, was a pivotal time for the organization, as overturning racial segregation was one of its prime directives. Marshall, along with his mentor Charles Hamilton (who was the first Black lawyer to win a case before the Supreme Court), developed a long-term strategy for eradicating segregation in schools. They first concentrated on graduate and professional schools, believing that White judges would be more likely to sympathize with the ambitious young Blacks in those settings. As the team won more and more cases, they turned toward elementary and high schools. This culminated in the landmark 1954 decision "Brown v The Board of Education” which declared segregation of public schools illegal. By this time, Marshall was an experienced Supreme Court advocate, having already presented many cases before them, including challenges against white-only primary elections and restrictive covenants. He presented each of his cases in what would become his hallmark style: straight forward and plain-spoken. When asked for a definition of "equal" by Justice Frankfurter, Marshall replied, "Equal means getting the same thing, at the same time and in the same place." Thurgood Marshall is one of the most well-known figures in the history of civil rights in America and after "Brown v. Board of Education, Marshall went on to become the first Black Supreme Court Justice. He served on the Court for 24 years.

6. Justice Fred Vinson died before the Brown v. Board case was reargued in 1953. It is believed that he would have voted to uphold the Plessy v. Ferguson (separate but equal) ruling. Justice Earl Warren, a civil rights advocate and champion of Brown v. Board was appointed to Vinson’s seat. This dramatic, sudden change in events and positions set the course for Brown’s victory.

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In the case of Brown v. Board of Education, the federal district court even cited the injurious effects of segregation on black children, but held that "separate but equal" was still not a violation of the Constitution. It was clear to those involved that the only effective route to terminating segregation in public schools was going to be through the United States Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall, one of the lead attorneys for the plaintiffs (he argued the Briggs case), and his fellow lawyers provided testimony from more than 30 social scientists affirming the deleterious effects of segregation on blacks and whites. These arguments were