

# Everyone is treated equally under the law

The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1868, granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the U.S. — including former enslaved people — and guaranteed all citizens “equal protection of the laws.” Shortly after the 14th Amendment was ratified, state and local laws enforcing racial segregation, also known as Jim Crow laws, were created across the American south. The following case, involving a young student, was an important step toward dismantling the “separate but equal” doctrine.

## Brown v. Board (1954)

Linda Brown was a seven-year old Black girl who lived five blocks from a local elementary school. She was denied enrollment in that school and was required to attend a school 21 blocks across town which was exclusively for students of color. Her father sued the board of education to allow her to attend the school closest to their home. Their suit was ultimately combined with other similar cases involving Black students also denied access to certain public schools because of race and was heard by the Supreme Court.

The Court was asked to decide if segregation of students in public education based solely on race violates the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court ruled unanimously that education was perhaps the most vital function of state and local governments, and racial segregation of any kind deprived African Americans of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment.

Chief Justice Warren wrote, *“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. ... Any language contrary to this finding is rejected. We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”*

For many the *Brown v. Board (1954)* decision signaled the start of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the continued fight for equal justice under the law.

**Newspaper Activities:** In print or online, look for news about groups or individuals seeking equal treatment. Share your findings as a class. Compare and contrast with Linda Brown.

Look through the news for important issues in education today, such as school violence, equal access to technology, standardized testing, etc. Select one and, as a class, brainstorm possible solutions.

Next installment: **Everyone is held accountable to the same laws**

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