



The Battleground: Separate and Unequal Education

Education was the main battleground in the movement for equal opportunity. For millions of children, the American public schools movement opened new opportunities. But millions of others were excluded because of their race or ethnicity. Segregated education was designed to confine these children to a subservient role in society and second-class citizenship.

Prior to the Civil War, very little public education existed in the South. After the war, southern states created a dual educational system based on race. The vast majority of southern communities created separate schools for black children. These schools were woefully unequal and offered only minimal educational training.

Yet, the commitment of African American teachers and parents to education never faltered. They established a tradition of educational self-help and were among the first southerners to campaign for universal public education. African American educational institutions were funded by a variety of sources, including black churches, white churches, local community fundraisers, state governments, and northern philanthropists.

Despite the burdens of segregation and racism, some high schools and colleges for black students provided educational opportunities that rivaled those offered to white students. Morehouse College and Tuskegee, Howard, and Fisk Universities have educated African Americans since the late 1800s.

Separate public schools were also often created for Asian Pacific American, Latino and American Indian children. Where there were not enough children of a single racial group to form their own school, they were usually required to attend black institutions. With little money or public support, parents and community leaders argued their cases before white judges and all-white school boards that had little sympathy for their concerns.

**FAR LEFT: One-teacher school,
Vaezy, Greene County, Georgia, 1941**

Courtesy of Library of Congress

**LEFT: Fourth-grade class, Potwin School,
Topeka, Kansas, 1950**

Courtesy of Topeka Shawnee Public Library

▷ Lesson Plan Two: The Battleground: Separate and Unequal Education

To the Teacher: Central to the *Brown v. Board of Education* story is the decision by community leaders and lawyers to use education as the main battleground for ending legal segregation. Through the following activities, students will gain an understanding of the pivotal role that education played in the quest for equal opportunity.

Grade Level: 4th through 12th grade

Objectives: At the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify the purpose and goals of education in American society and explain why African Americans chose to challenge segregated education in their quest for equality.

Time: 1 to 2 class periods

Materials: Paper and writing utensils, blackboard or dry erase board. *On the CD:* photographs of exteriors of white and black schools; photographs of interiors of white and black classrooms

National History Standards: Era 7 3A/C; Era 8 1B; Era 9 4A

Teacher Introduction: Begin by asking students to write down and/or share orally their answers to the following questions:

- ❑ What is the purpose of education?
- ❑ What are the three most important things necessary for a quality education?
- ❑ Encourage students to consider education as both a means of gaining knowledge and skills (such as learning math to get a job in a store) and as a means of gaining the full benefits of citizenship. Ask students to describe what they think an ideal or dream school would look like to support the education goals discussed in the first part of this activity. Throughout the discussion, explore the role that education plays in a diverse society.

RIGHT: Colored school, Paxville, South Carolina, 1940s

Courtesy of South Carolina Department of Archives and History

FAR RIGHT: White school, Paxville, South Carolina, 1940s

Courtesy of South Carolina Department of Archives and History

Student Activity – Primary Source Photograph Analysis: *Teacher Background–Exterior Photographs:* These images show the exteriors of black and white schools in Paxville, South Carolina, in the 1940s. In some southern states, white schools received two to three times more money per student than black schools. Black taxpayers in several states not only bore the entire cost of their own schools, but helped support white schools as well.

Divide students into small groups. Distribute to each group a copy of the photographs of the exteriors of white and black schools from the CD. Ask students to answer the following questions for each photograph in pairs or small subgroups, and then share their answers with their group.

Student Questions:

- Describe the building.
- What is it made of? Describe its size.
- What are the features of the building? Example: entryway.
- In your mind’s eye, divide the photograph into four squares and examine each square closely. What new information can you add to your description?
- Describe the schoolyard.
- What do you think the inside of the building looked like?
- What is the one thing you’d remember about this photograph?

Teacher Background–Interior Photographs: The first image shows the interior of a black classroom in Vaezy, Georgia, in 1941. The second image is of the interior of a white fourth-grade classroom in the Potwin School, Topeka, Kansas, in 1950. These examples are representative of the disparity of white and black schools.

Distribute the photographs of the interiors of each school. Ask students to answer the following in pairs or subgroups, and then share their answers with the group.



Student Questions:

- What's happening in this photograph? How many people are pictured?
- Make a list of the objects in the classroom. How might these support the students' education?
- How do you think the classroom was lighted? Heated? Cooled?
- Now in your mind's eye, divide the image into four squares and examine each one closely. What other information will you add to the description of this classroom?
- What might it be like to be a student in this room? What evidence in the picture makes you think so?

Follow-up Discussion: Discuss students' findings for all photographs as a class. Ask students to consider what the term *integration* really means by looking it up, discussing the dictionary definitions, and applying it to issues of education and multiculturalism.

- Are there problems with segregated education? If so, what are they?
- What is a truly "integrated" education? Is it simply having a diverse group of students in the same room, or is it something more than that?
- Based on the discussions we have had, why do you suppose the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chose to target education as one of the key areas of the Civil Rights Movement?