



## The Past Half Century: Achieving Equality

In the 1950s, Americans were deeply divided over the issue of racial equality. African Americans pressed to have the *Brown* decision enforced, and many people were unprepared for the intensity of resistance among white southerners. Likewise, defenders of the “Southern way of life” underestimated the determination of their black neighbors.

The African American freedom struggle soon spread across the country. The original battle for school desegregation became part of broader campaigns for social justice. Fifty years after the *Brown* decision, the movement came to include not only racial and ethnic minorities, but also women, people with disabilities, and other groups who felt a gap between the promise of equal opportunity and the reality.

Since the 1960s, equal educational opportunity has come to mean many different things to many different people. Americans have put their hopes in different and sometimes conflicting approaches to education—further integration, a return to racially separate schools, neighborhood choice, school vouchers, multicultural teaching, or an end to multicultural programs.



**FAR LEFT:** *The Problem We All Live With*, by Norman Rockwell. 1964

SI Collections

**LEFT:** This cartoon was created by Bill Mauldin, and printed in the *St. Louis Dispatch* on December 1, 1960.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Some students and parents believe that race-conscious programs to achieve equal opportunity are not consistent with the original ideals of the Civil Rights Movement, while others argue that the goals of the movement have been undermined and abandoned by recent court decisions. Most people agree that the America of the 21st century will be a very diverse nation where there will likely be no majority race. In this society, an education that exposes students to people of many different backgrounds will be of paramount value.

### ▷ Lesson Plan Six: The Past Half Century: Achieving Equality

**To the Teacher:** This activity examines the immediate reaction to the decision and provides links to related civil rights issues of the latter 20th century up to today.

**Grade Level:** 4th through 6th grade; 7th through 12th grade

**Objectives:** At the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify and analyze the range of reactions to the 1954 decision, and the ways in which the Court's mandates were enacted or blocked. Students will also be able to connect a more recent civil rights or education issue to the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

**Time:** 1 to 2 class periods

People showing their support for affirmative action at the Supreme Court, April 2003

Courtesy of William E. Lee/  
Real Life Photos



**Materials:** *On the CD:* Teacher Briefing Sheet: Lesson Plan Six; Student Handout: Civil Rights and Education Research Topics; three political cartoons and four copies of letters to the editor both in favor of and against the Supreme Court ruling; Object photo: Rockwell print.

**National History Standards:** Era 9 4A

**Teacher Introduction:** Explain to students that the *Brown* decision was met with a wide range of responses, from enthusiastic support to vehement denunciation. Discuss why people would have different feelings about the decision.

### **Student Activity – Primary Source Analysis: Political Cartoons and Letters to the Editor**

Divide the class into seven groups. Give each group either one of the three political cartoons or one of the four letters to the editor located on the CD.

Ask them to answer the following questions:

- Describe what is happening in the political cartoons.
- What is the author's or illustrator's response to the Supreme Court's decision?
- What word best describes the author's or illustrator's opinion?
- What beliefs, attitudes, or customs are held by each author or artist?
- What other political or social events of the time are referred to in the letter or cartoon? Why?
- Where and when do you suppose this item was first published?
- What effect do you think articles, editorials, and cartoons like this one had on people's opinions?

**Summary Discussion:** Have student groups report back to the class on their primary source. Have students locate on a map where their cartoon or editorial was published. What questions do the students have about their primary sources? How might they research the answer? At your local library, have your students research editorials, letters to the editor, and political cartoons dealing with the *Brown* decision in their local papers. How was the decision received in your community? Why do you think members of the community responded in this way?

**For Teachers of Younger Students:** As an alternate activity, analyze with students the print by Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We all Live With*, featuring Ruby Bridges going to school in New Orleans, Louisiana, some six years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. For those students who completed the activity in Unit 5 on the photograph of Nettie Hunt and her daughter, explain that the event in this picture took place six years later.

Ask students:

- What's happening in the picture?
- What might the little girl be thinking? Why?
- Why did the artist entitle this picture, *The Problem We All Live With*?
- How might students describe the real girl, Ruby Bridges, pictured here? How old does one have to be to have courage?

Discuss with students what Ruby's experience would be today. Students may research what has happened in her city since Norman Rockwell created this print.

### **Summative Project: Continuing the Fight for Equality and The Legacy of Brown**

The battle for equal opportunity in America did not end on May 17, 1954. Encourage students to examine a civil rights or education issue that has taken place or become prominent in the past 50 years through the creation of a poster, video, play, Web site presentation, radio broadcast, or essay. Possible topics for study include the Little Rock School Desegregation Crisis (1957) the sit-in at the Greensboro, N.C. Woolworth's lunch counter (1960), Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington (1963), the Boston school busing crisis (1974) school vouchers, bilingual/multicultural education, affirmative action (University of Michigan Case, 2003), and the impact of integration in your community. On the CD you will find a handout with a more detailed list of possible research topics.