

BLACK/WHITE & BROWN:  
Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka  
Teacher Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND:

Brown vs. the Board of Education helped break the silence and open the doors for future civil rights laws. While it was a very important aspect of our history, it is only one of many that teachers have to address in the classroom. This guide is presented to help the teacher review the issues and determine how to create the best learning experience for students.

Oliver L. Brown, et al v. Board of Education, Topeka – Kansas

When this case was brought before the U.S. District Court in Kansas, it was on behalf of thirteen plaintiffs whose children were refused admission to white elementary schools. Later, when the Supreme Court agreed to review the case, it was combined with four other cases:

Briggs v. Elliott – South Carolina – substandard school buildings

Belton (Bulah) v. Gebhart – Delaware – black high school and a one-room elementary school were inferior quality.

Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County – Virginia – 100 students went on strike over crowded and inadequate facilities.

Bolling v. Sharpe – District of Columbia – junior high students refused admission to school reserved for whites.

All the cases focused on similar issues – segregation and substandard education. Since they wanted all the cases under one heading, conjecture is they chose the Brown case because it took the issue out of the “north and south” context since Kansas was not a southern state.

Black/White & Brown takes a closer look at the times and events leading up to this landmark decision. It offers exclusive insights and interviews from many of the participants and tells the stories of the individuals associated with this case (many of whom are deceased) through conversations with relatives who are most familiar with their experiences.

This momentous Supreme Court decision has become one of the pivotal events in the history of the civil rights movement. It continues to serve as a landmark ruling to which many lawyers and social activists refer as they present arguments in support of various issues associated with matters of cultural diversity and racial equity.

CURRICULUM STANDARDS:

Kansas State standards for Social Studies

National Council for Social Studies – Standards for Excellence

Because of the length and number of curriculum standards that involve knowledge of the Brown v. Board of Education case, they have been listed at the end of this Teacher guide.

## TERMS:

To help students better understand this documentary, the following terms should be defined prior to viewing.

- Class Action Suit
- Desegregate
- Discrimination
- Integrate
- Jim Crow laws
- Plaintiff
- Racism
- Segregate
- “Separate but equal”

## PEOPLE:

The following are just a few of the important people who played a role in Brown v. Board. Students may want to investigate their role in the country’s reform movements, write short biographies, or develop a time line of their work. While these people had an impact on the Brown decision, there were many other people and events nationwide that relate to civil rights. (For example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rosa Parks, JoAnn Robinson, Jim Crow laws.) If your scope of study goes beyond the Brown decision, you may want to add names from your state to this list for a broader base of study.

- NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
- Langston Hughes – poet
- Dwight D. Eisenhower – President, 1953-1961
- Harry S. Truman – President, 1945-1953
- McKinley Burnett – NAACP Chairman in Topeka
- Elijah Scott – attorney
- Lucinda Todd – teacher and assistant at NAACP in Topeka
- C. F. Menninger, Will Menninger and Carl Menninger -- advocates
- Robert L. Carter – attorney with NAACP, Federal Judge in New York
- Thurgood Marshall – attorney and Supreme Court Justice
- Earl Warren – Chief Justice of the Supreme Court

## TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1879	Kansas law said that only cities of a certain size (15,000 or more) could have segregated schools and then only elementary schools.
1890s	Southern states began enacting Jim Crow laws that enforced separate facilities for blacks and whites.

- 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson  
The Supreme Court ruled separate facilities for white and colored people were permissible as long as they were equal.
- 1942 Dr. Kenneth McFarland appointed new Superintendent of Schools in Topeka. He supported the status quo.
- 1948 President Truman advocates equality. Issues orders to desegregate federal government and the armed forces.
- 1948-50 McKinley Burnett tries to get changes made in Topeka by attending every school board meeting.
- 1950 Class action suit begins in Topeka, Kansas.
- 1951 Oliver L. Brown, et al versus the Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas.  
August 3 – the U. S. District Court in Kansas upheld the right to maintain segregated schools in Topeka.
- 1954 May 17 – Supreme Court ruled on Brown v Board.
- 1955 A year after the ruling, the Supreme Court called all the parties back to the court to review desegregation plans. Sometimes referred to as “Brown Two”, the wording gave no specific date for ending segregation.
- 1956 In March, the Southern Manifesto was made public.
- 1957 Resistance continues in some areas. Troops were sent to Little Rock, Arkansas, to assist in school integration.

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**SUMMARY OF SEGMENTS**

This documentary is approximately 60 minutes long. Since most class periods are not long enough to show the entire program in one setting, the following is a summary of the different segments that make up BWB and the length of each. It is recommended that the entire documentary be shown (through more than 1 class period) as sections build on each other and continuity is lost if students begin in the middle. Each section has an identifying title on the video. The time into the program (00:00) and the length of each segment (4:11 minutes) have been added to help identify stopping points.

Introduction (01:00) (4:11 minutes)

President Eisenhower's Freedom Speech and an introduction to the issue in Topeka, Kansas.

"everything wasn't just right" (05:11) (8:30 minutes)

In the 1950s in Topeka, Kansas, the elementary schools were segregated so even though children might live in integrated neighborhoods, they attended separate schools. Students didn't have to walk very far to their schools like they did in many schools in the south. The high schools were not segregated, however all social activities and the basketball teams were.

"a rallying cry" (13:41) (7:01 minutes)

President Truman advocates equality by desegregating the national government and the military. Black veterans were the first to express a desire to see change and felt it could start in the school system. McKinley Burnett, Topeka NAACP chairman, issued a rallying cry, attending school board meetings for two years but never able to get on the agenda.

"The plaintiffs" (21:42) (4:32 minutes)

In 1950, the NAACP recruited thirteen families, which included twenty children, and got them to volunteer to try and enroll their children in the white school nearest their home and report back as to what happened. They then took this information and filed a class action suit. This section discusses who these people were and what they did. Only one of the original parents is alive today; the others are descendants of the original petitioners.

"Federal District Court" (26:14) (8:10 minutes)

August 3, 1951. The U.S. District Court of Kansas upheld the right to maintain segregated schools, but the opinion was written in such a way that other questions were raised. What started out as an issue of "separate but equal" became more an issue of whether it was psychologically damaging for children to be separated because of race. Some said it impaired or retarded their educational development.

"The Supreme Court" (34:24) (6:06 minutes)

The *Brown v. Board of Education* case was appealed to the Supreme Court. At that time there were four other cases in front of the Supreme Court with similar issues. (See teacher guide introduction.) The Court used the name on the *Brown* case as a collective term for all five cases, perhaps because it took the issue out of the context of "north and south", since the other four cases were in southern states. The question was raised whether *Plessy v. Ferguson* ("separate but equal") really fulfilled the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment's guarantee of "equal protection under the law."

"Hearts and Minds" (40:30) ( 5:13 minutes)

Segregation became a national security issue. It was questioned how the United States could present itself to the world as a moral voice and yet when black ambassadors to the UN (which was on US soil) came over here, they had to ride on segregated transportation. The Supreme Court ruling came on May 17, 1954 and was delivered by Chief Justice Earl Warren, who said in essence that segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race was depriving those children of equal educational opportunity.

“all deliberate speed” (45:43) (4:41 minutes)

The Supreme Court ruling was made, but not implemented. It didn't give a timeframe for integration to occur, and some southerners immediately tried to overturn the ruling, believing the Court ruling was a “clear abuse of power.” Many signed the Southern Manifesto, which basically stated that rights such as segregation were reserved for the state and the people. By 1957, the President began sending troops to cities to help with desegregation.

“this wonderful little story” (50:24) (5:22 minutes)

Brown v. Board of Education broke the silence, but there was much more to the story than ever gets told. People who signed petitions lost jobs and were run out of their homes. It is more than just the story about one little girl wanting to go to school with her friends but she couldn't because she was black.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Your discussion of the documentary Black/White & Brown will depend largely on your class and the information, values and ideals you want them to learn. There are many lessons from this event in our history that go beyond race. Your students may view this video and wonder why Kansas was even involved, considering their elementary schools had highly educated teachers and nice facilities and supplies. However, the fact remains that there were disparaging laws that affected Kansans as well as Americans across the country. Your discussion does not need to be confined to civil rights, but from this program can branch out to regional values and beliefs, the role of government, and how the United States is viewed on the world front.

The information listed after each discussion question is only a suggestion and need not limit the discussion.

**Black/White & Brown brought out some of the disparaging factors with regard to race in our culture at that time. What were some things that separated blacks from the rest of society?**

- \*They had to stay in black people's homes instead of hotels
- \*They had to sit in only one corner of the theater
- \*Separate restrooms, water fountains, restaurants, and transportation
- \*Separate elementary schools for black and white students

**Even though Kansas's high schools were integrated, what were some things that still kept the races separate?**

- \*They had separate basketball teams in high school
- \*They had separate social activities in high school

**Were other races treated the same way as the blacks?**

- \* No, the Hispanics were not segregated.

**The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment states “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.”**

**What does “equal protection of the laws” mean?**

**Does Plessy v. Ferguson, which states that “separate but equal” is lawful, really satisfy this amendment? Why or why not?**

\* These questions are opened ended and students should be able to defend their opinions.

**In the documentary, it is mentioned that racism and segregation became a national security issue. Why? Do you feel the Soviet Union at that time was correct in its assessment? Why or why not?**

\*The 1950s was the beginning of the Cold War and the United States was “fighting” with the Soviet Union over whether countries should be democratic or communist. It was difficult for the U.S. to promise freedom and equality to other countries when there was racial discrimination within our own boundaries.

\*It could be brought out that the U.S. had fairly liberal immigration laws and that we were considered “the land of the free.”

**The plaintiffs tried to enroll in segregated schools but were turned away. What could you do to try and step beyond your boundaries? (The answer to this may depend on the age of your students.) Why would you want to do this? How could testing the laws in this area create an open door through which others could follow?**

- \* Enroll in college
- \* Get into a restricted club
- \* Enter the military
- \* Run for office

**What kind of “separate but equal” entities do we have today?**

\* Title IX – “No person in the U.S. shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal aid.” When this went into effect in 1972, it wasn’t so much created so that women could play on football teams, but for women to have equal opportunities as men on a whole, not on an individual basis.

- \* Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts

**What kinds of barriers have people overcome during your lifetime?**

- \*Girls wrestling in high school and playing on football teams
- \*Women governors
- \*People with disabilities becoming involved in areas not previously open to them (e.g. blind actors/actresses)

**Discrimination – is it only race? In what other ways have people been discriminated against? (This question doesn’t have to be confined to the present, but can look at other historic time periods.) Are there now laws that help keep people from being discriminated against?**

- \* Gender
- \* Age

- \* Race (ethnic origins that include more than Afro-American such as Hispanic or Native American.)
- \* Professions (blue collar workers; professional people). How are people treated differently according to the way they dress and/or act or the jobs they do?
- \* Disabilities
- \* Religion
- \* Economic status – poverty; homelessness; country club patrons
- \* IQ – fast track schools; magnet schools; pulling students for special education

**Beyond the classroom:**

**Take the discussion of human rights beyond the schools and beyond the borders of the United States. Discuss issues around the world where human rights are involved. This should not be a discussion about the morality of the issue, but rather to awaken students to issues similar and yet different from those the U.S. has experienced. There are many factors including social, religious and moral that affect the culture of a society and what one society believes does not necessarily make it right in another culture. Do students feel the U.S. has the right to tell other countries how to treat their people? In looking at parallel issues, are changes occurring or do they need to occur? If so, has change been brought about peacefully or through violence; through the courts or through government overthrows?**

- \* Women's rights in Muslim countries
- \* Japanese educational system – attending a vocational high school might mean non-entrance to college.

ACTIVITY – Compare & Contrast

There have been many important conflicts/confrontations throughout United States history. Here is an opportunity for students to look at the past and see if “history repeats itself” or if each conflict is indeed different.

This activity can be done in small groups or individually. The chart below gives you ideas that can go in the categories, but it is not complete. A separate blank chart follows that you can duplicate for students.

Class discussion: Draw the chart on the chalkboard and put in the headings. As a class, brainstorm the events they feel are major conflicts/confrontations in US history. (They may want to add the world wars, although they did not take place in the United States.) Discuss what could be put under each column heading, but do not complete the chart for each conflict. This is what the small groups or individual will do.

Dates	Event	1. What was/is the issue? 2. What was a key starting point?	Where do the issues fall?	What methods were used to promote &/or resolve the conflict?
	War for Independence  War of 1812  Civil War (War Between the States)  The U.S. Mexican War  Suffrage  Prohibition  Civil Rights  Women’s Movement	          1.Rights of Black Americans 2. Brown v. Board of Ed.	Economic  Moral  Social  Geographic  Cultural	Written documents  Marches/rallies  War  Laws  Sit-ins  Demonstrations

Example:

1970’s -- Women’s Movement -- involved women’s rights to fair wages, non-discrimination in the workplace, health issues, etc. Some may see this as a moral issue (in the case of abortion) while it could also be considered an economic one because women were not getting paid the same wage as men for doing the same job. A third possibility is that it is a social issue when looking at traditional male-female roles in our society.

**Compare and Contrast:**

Take two events in US history and complete the chart below for each. Then answer the questions that follow.

Dates	Event	1. What was/is the main issue? 2. What was a key starting point?	Where do the issues fall?	What methods were used to promote &/or resolve the conflict?

How are these two events similar? \_\_\_\_\_

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How are these two events different? \_\_\_\_\_

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What conclusions can you draw? Could looking at the earlier event more carefully have helped us prevent the later event? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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## RESOURCES

The Brown Foundation – <http://www.brownvboard.org>

National Council for the Social Studies; 8555 Sixteenth Street, Suite 500; Silver Spring, Maryland 20910. Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence.  
<http://www.ncss.org>

Kansas Department of Education – <http://www.ksbe.state.ks.us>  
Curriculum Standards – <http://www.ksde.org/standards.htm>

This guide has been written to give an overview of the documentary and offer suggestions for topics of discussion. If there are other projects, discussion questions and/or activities that you feel should be added to this resource guide, please send that information to [KTWU-comments@lists.washburn.edu](mailto:KTWU-comments@lists.washburn.edu)

## SPECIAL THANKS:

A special thank you goes to the National Council for the Social Studies for their help with the national curriculum standards for social studies.