

Education and the Civil Rights Movement

1. **What** did the Supreme Court do to segregated education?

The landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, contested in 1954, marked the beginning of the education-focused civil rights movement. At its core, this case challenged the "separate but equal" doctrine established by the earlier *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896. The case consolidated multiple lawsuits from different states, with the central argument being that racially segregated public schools were inherently unequal and thus violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. The unanimous decision, delivered by Chief Justice Earl Warren, declared that segregated schools were indeed unequal and, therefore, unconstitutional.



Desegregation: in 1954, the Supreme Court banned segregation in public schools.

This ruling set a precedent that sparked significant changes in the American educational landscape. It not only invalidated segregation policies but also paved the way for subsequent legal challenges to segregation in various other areas, making education a central focal point for the civil rights movement. Following the initial *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the Supreme Court faced the daunting task of implementing desegregation. In *Brown II* (handed down in 1955), the Court issued a clarifying decree that urged states to desegregate "with all deliberate speed". While this phrase left room for interpretation and allowed for delays, it still signalled the Court's commitment to ending segregation. Consequently, this decision played a crucial role in keeping education at the forefront of the civil rights movement.

2. **How** was the desegregation of education enforced?

Little Rock Nine: a crucial test of the two Supreme Court rulings on *Brown* came in 1957 at Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas, where the desegregation of Central High School was met with fierce opposition from both state authorities and white citizens. Nine African American students, known as the "Little Rock Nine", were chosen to integrate the school but faced threats, intimidation, and violence. The crisis in Little Rock prompted President Dwight D. Eisenhower to intervene, deploying federal troops to ensure the safety of the students and enforce the court-ordered desegregation. The events at Little Rock revealed the harsh realities of racial segregation and discrimination to the world. The nation watched in horror as these brave teenagers faced violent mobs, racial slurs, and even the Arkansas National Guard, which was initially deployed to block their entry. This display of racism shocked many Americans, leading to increased support for the civil rights movement. What is more, the Little Rock Nine's determination to receive an education and the eventual intervention of President Dwight D. Eisenhower underscored the federal government's commitment to enforcing desegregation. This marked a significant shift in federal policy and set a precedent for future civil rights actions. The protest at Little Rock served as a catalyst for the broader civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Enrollment of James Meredith at Ole Miss: in 1961, James Meredith chose to apply to a postgraduate course at the University of Mississippi (popularly known as "Ole Miss") in a deliberate ploy to challenge the racial segregation and discrimination that was still quite common in schools and universities across many cities in the southern states of the US. Meredith's protest was not just a personal endeavour but a strategic move to break down barriers and set a precedent for desegregation in higher education. His actions were met with fierce opposition from white supremacists and state authorities, culminating in a violent confrontation between federal authorities. The day after this riot, on 1 October 1962, James Meredith became the first black student to be admitted to the University of Mississippi.



Federal protection: James Meredith is escorted to class at Ole Miss.

3. **Why** was the desegregation of education so important?

Symbols of desegregation: the integration of schools was seen as a symbolic and practical step towards a more just society. Advocates argued that desegregated classrooms would promote racial understanding, tolerance, and equality among younger generations, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious society. The fight for educational integration, therefore, transcended the classroom and represented a broader vision of a racially integrated America. This focus on education in the civil rights movement faced staunch opposition from segregationist politicians, particularly in the southern states.

Massive resistance: under the banner of "massive resistance," many Southern leaders openly defied federal desegregation orders and sought to maintain racial segregation in schools. This resistance took various forms, including the closure of public schools, the establishment of private "segregation academies", and legal challenges to integration efforts. These actions not only highlighted the entrenched resistance to change but also emphasised the significance of education as a battleground where the struggle for civil rights was fiercely contested. These actions made education a fundamental element of the broader civil rights agenda.

James Thinks

The period between 1952 and 1962 marked a pivotal phase in the US civil rights movement, during which the area of education emerged on the frontline in the battle for racial equality. The struggle for civil rights in the United States was characterised by various key events and figures, such as the landmark Supreme Court cases of *Brown v. Board of Education* (in 1954 and 1955), the tumultuous events involving the Little Rock Nine in Arkansas, and the courageous actions of James Meredith in Mississippi. In sum, in the critical period from 1952 to 1961, education became the forefront battleground in the US civil rights movement. Landmark cases like *Brown v. Board of Education* shattered "separate but equal," sparking a revolution. The resistance in Little Rock, Arkansas, and James Meredith's historic enrollment at the University of Mississippi highlighted the arduous struggle for desegregation. Education transcended classrooms, symbolising a more just society. Yet, "massive resistance" by Southern leaders underscored the relentless fight against change. In conclusion, this era transformed education into a pivotal element of the civil rights agenda with tremendous emotional and symbolic importance for the American public.

