

SCHOOL SEGREGATION: NOT JUST A SOUTHERN PROBLEM



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What were the central issues of the civil rights movement? How did challenges to school segregation energize the movement?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define *movement* and *civil rights movement*.
- Identify some of the central issues of the civil rights movement.
- Discuss the importance of *Brown v. Board of Education*.
- Interpret primary source documents to understand the problem of school segregation in the North and how activists mobilized in response.
- Analyze a graph showing current school segregation levels and discuss why integration is important today.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

115 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment for playing audio/video clips and projecting a handout
- *Civil Rights Movement Issues* handout (one per student)
- *1964 School Boycott Flier* handout (one per student)
- *Mae Mallory: Challenging Segregation* handout (one per student)
- *School Segregation Today* handout (one copy to project)



VOCABULARY

boycott	civil rights movement	Jim Crow
<i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>	desegregate	movement
civil rights	discrimination	segregate/segregation
Civil Rights Act of 1964	integrate/integration	Voting Rights Act of 1965

Procedures

PART 1

The Problems the Civil Rights Movement Aimed to Solve (40 mins.)

- 1 Post the word *movement*. Have students engage in a quick write or think-pair-share in response to the following prompt: “What is a *movement* for rights or equality? What does this word mean and what are some examples of *movements*?” Allow pairs to share their meanings and examples. Introduce the following definition:

movement: an organized effort to achieve a goal or set of goals; a group of people with a shared purpose who create change together

- 2 If students have not mentioned it, note that the African American *civil rights movement* is an example of an important movement in U.S. history. Share the following definition:

civil rights movement: the struggle to eliminate discrimination and secure equal rights for Black Americans that took place mainly in the 1950s and 1960s

- 3 Project or distribute the handout *Civil Rights Movement Issues*. In pairs or small groups, have students observe the photo and note their answers to the question on the handout: “What were some of the problems that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s aimed to solve?” Encourage students to not only record what they see in the photo, but to use it as a springboard to brainstorm additional issues. Allow groups to share their ideas and create a class list of issues central to the civil rights movement. Examples that can be gleaned from the photo include:

- An end to Jim Crow segregation and U.S. funding for segregated establishments
- Being treated as equal citizens

NOTE

Make sure students understand that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was not an isolated effort, but part of a long struggle that includes earlier organizing (e.g., the abolitionist and anti-lynching movements) and more current activism (e.g., Black Lives Matter, Moral Mondays).

- Educational opportunity/no segregation in schools
- Good housing/no discrimination in housing
- Better jobs/equality in employment (the sign that says “An FEPC law now” refers to the Fair Employment Practices Committee, created in 1941 to prevent discrimination in defense and government jobs)

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Play the *Black History in Two Minutes (or So) video, The Civil Rights Movement* [3:07]: <https://bit.ly/3wl2FT8>. As students watch, have them note facts to add to the class list started in step 3. After the video, record their additions and discuss some of the following questions:

- The video says that a century after the end of enslavement, Black Americans were still fighting for basic rights. What were some of those basic rights, enjoyed by most Americans but not most African Americans?
- What “deliberate act of resistance” did Rosa Parks engage in? What impact did this have on the movement?
- What was the importance of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act?
- How do you interpret Kimberlé Crenshaw’s statement that a barrier to equal rights is “those who claim to care about equality losing their own resolve” [determination]?

PART 2

School Segregation in the North—A Case Study (75 mins.)

5

Point out that the video briefly mentioned *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ask students what they know about this court case and why—as stated in the video—it “stoked the fervor” of the nation. Provide the following background as needed, and highlight the critical importance of the case in energizing the civil rights movement.

In 1951, Oliver Brown filed a lawsuit against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, after his daughter, Linda, was refused admission to the all-white elementary schools in their town. The case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court and was grouped with four other school segregation cases under the name Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. On May 17, 1954, the Court ruled 9-0 that school segregation was unconstitutional. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, “...In the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no

place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The ruling reversed the principle of "separate but equal" set forth in the 1896 case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which said that racially segregated facilities were legal as long as they were equal. In 1955, the Court directed school districts across the country to desegregate "with all deliberate speed." The decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was a tremendous victory in the long struggle against school segregation and Jim Crow, and fueled the growing civil rights movement.

6 Share that a decade after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, many school districts still had not taken steps to desegregate their schools. Tell the class that they will examine a case study of one community's response to this inaction. Distribute copies of the handout *1964 School Boycott Flier* and review the directions with students. In pairs or small groups, direct them to complete the document analysis.

7 As a class, review the evidence students found regarding the reasons for the boycott and the desired changes. Discuss the questions they articulated and their thoughts on where the boycott occurred. Reveal that the boycott took place in New York City and ask students if they are surprised by this. Share that the 1964 boycott was the largest civil rights protest of the 1960s, with more than 460,000 students (about 45 percent of all New York City students) staying home from school. Emphasize that while segregation is most-often associated with the Deep South, it was actually a nationwide problem, and was widespread in many Northern communities as well.

8 Distribute the handout *Mae Mallory: Challenging Segregation*, and read the introduction together. Tell students they will listen to part of a podcast featuring Mallory's experiences, and they should sketch and take notes that capture key ideas about school segregation and inequality during the civil rights era. Play the following audio clip from 12:06–18:50: *Nice White Parents*, Episode 2: 'I Still Believe in It,' <https://bit.ly/35JwGWP>. After, allow students to share their sketches/notes in pairs. Discuss some of the following questions as a class:

- What stood out to you about the school conditions described by Mallory? Were you surprised by this? Explain.
- What were the effects of inequality on Mallory's children and other students attending segregated schools?

NOTE

The source for the handout is: Queens College Civil Rights Archives. "New York City school boycott flier." January 1964. City Wide Committee for Integrated Schools. <https://bit.ly/2TZzFlg>.

NOTE

If time allows, show students the WSB-TV news clip (<https://bit.ly/3j0xyOI>, 1:26) of New Yorkers protesting school segregation during a second boycott in March 1964, and featuring comments by Malcolm X.

- What was your reaction to the story of the boy who was hit by a truck and killed during recess?
- In response to the fact that New York didn't have any official Jim Crow laws, Mallory asked, "What's the difference?" Why did she react this way?
- Where segregation exists, do you think it matters whether it's an official law or not? Explain.
- How did the lawsuit won by the "Harlem Nine" change things? What were its limitations?
- Why, to this day, do you think many districts across the U.S. have never enacted a desegregation plan?

NOTE

Desegregation is the elimination of laws and practices that require separation, while *integration* is the incorporation of people from different backgrounds as equals in a community. Beyond simply placing various groups together, integration involves structural and cultural change by addressing existing prejudices and hierarchies. Help students to understand these differences as they think about the importance of integration in today's schools.

9

Project the handout *School Segregation Today*. Review the graph with students and discuss the questions at the bottom: "Why is it important for schools to be integrated? How does integration benefit *all* children?" Emphasize some of the following ideas:

Students in integrated schools:⁹

- have higher average test scores and are more likely to enroll in college
- have more access to equitable resources
- are less likely to have or act on racial biases and stereotypes
- are more prepared to succeed in diverse colleges and workplaces
- earn more as adults, have improved health outcomes, and are less likely to be incarcerated

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Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the next page.

⁹ The Century Foundation. "The Benefits of Socioeconomically and Racially Integrated Schools and Classrooms." April 29, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3h2qfDo>.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Why was the civil rights movement necessary a century after the end of slavery?
- 2 What were some of the central issues and goals of the civil rights movement?
- 3 Why was *Brown v. Board of Education* so important, not just for school children but for the whole movement?
- 4 Were you surprised to learn that segregation was deep-rooted in the North? Explain.
- 5 Why do you think segregation is still a big problem in U.S. schools today?
- 6 Has Dr. King's dream for Black and white children to "join hands as sisters and brothers" come true? Explain.
- 7 Why is it important that the movement continue today? What civil rights challenges do Black Americans face today?

Lesson Extensions

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Brooklyn Deep. *School Colors* podcast. <https://www.school-colorspodcast.com>.
- + DPLA. Primary Source Sets: Voting Rights Act of 1965, <https://bit.ly/3x2NHXB>; Fannie Lou Hamer and the Civil Rights Movement in Rural Mississippi, <https://bit.ly/3w14WZn>.
- + Jessop, Miranda. "No More: The Children of Birmingham 1963 and the Turning Point of the Civil Rights Movement." June 17, 2013. YouTube video, 10:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hCxE6i_Szo-Q&t=26s.
- + PBS Learning Media. "Brown vs. Board of Education: A More or Less Perfect Union." <https://bit.ly/3dcHPn9>.
- + Sanchez, Adam. "The Largest Civil Rights Protest You've Never Heard Of: Teaching the 1964 New York City school boycott." *Rethinking Schools*. <https://bit.ly/35SQIOx>.
- + Theoharis, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021.

- Show students the PBS Learning Media video, *The Murder of Emmett Till* (<https://bit.ly/3xOwJMZ>, 5:59). Discuss how the death of Till and the acquittal of his murderers galvanized the civil rights movement. Help students see the connections between Till's murder and other pivotal events of the time. For example, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (May 1954) intensified racial violence in the South (such as Till's murder (August 1955), and outrage over Till fueled the desire for change that led to the Montgomery bus boycott (December 1955).
- As a class, read the KQED article or watch the video, *Why Are American Public Schools Still So Segregated?* (<https://bit.ly/2TTCB-pD>). Assign students to research levels of segregation in their own neighborhood schools and create a chart or graph reflecting their findings. Students who wish to dig deeper may research and write a report on why some families prefer neighborhood schools that are segregated as opposed to sending their children to more distant integrated schools.
- Assign students to write an essay on "civil rights then and now." Have them choose a civil rights issue from the 1950s/1960s and one from today. After reading at least two articles on each, students should summarize the issues, discuss how they are connected and reflect on how the movement for equality has affected their lives.



Civil Rights Movement Issues

What were some of the problems the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s aimed to solve?



This photograph shows leaders of the civil rights movement among a crowd of about 250,000 at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The plan called for 10 of the main organizers to lead the march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial for a mass rally. Each of the leaders would later deliver a speech as part of the program.

SOURCE: "Roy Wilkins with a few of the 250,000 participants on the Mall heading for the Lincoln Memorial in the NAACP march on Washington." August 28, 1963. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002699546>.



1964 School Boycott Flier

3-2-1 ANNOTATION

Mark up the text with evidence as directed below.

- 3 Underline three reasons why this group called for a school boycott.
- 2 Circle two changes or actions the group demanded.
- 1 Write one question that you have after analyzing this document.

Where do you think this boycott might have taken place? Why?

Many parents have wondered why the civil rights groups have called for a school boycott FEBRUARY 3rd... no parent who really has the interest of his child at heart would keep that child out of school without sound reasons.

Our goal is two-fold; OUR CHILDREN MUST BE GIVEN QUALITY EDUCATION IN A DE-SEGREGATED SCHOOL SYSTEM AND WE MUST KNOW WHEN THEY ARE TO BEGIN RECEIVING IT. We cannot accept any more vague [unclear] promises of some sort of action sometime in the future.

We are not asking the impossible as some have claimed. We believe that every child... is entitled to the same opportunity to develop his natural abilities.

We are not demanding indiscriminate [random] busing. To achieve what we want there need be little more busing of children than presently exists. We do, however, feel that in a public school system, where busing is required, both Negro and white children should share the experience.

We are not calling for the destruction of the so-called neighborhood school — except where the boundaries of such a school contribute to a pattern of racial segregation.

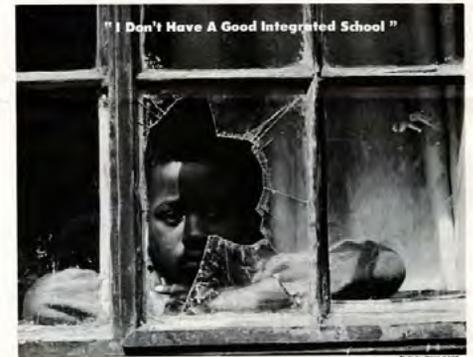
But, why a boycott? Isn't there any other way to force the necessary changes?

Again, our reasons are two-fold. A full-scale boycott will show, as will nothing else, how much Negro parents are willing to sacrifice for their children. The moral impact will be such that no person in authority will ever again fail to consider the determination behind our fight for equality of educational opportunities.

Our second reason is more tangible. We have found that one of the quickest ways to destroy inequality and segregation is to hit it in the pocketbook. Financial aid to the school system is based upon pupil attendance.

No pupils — no money. It's as simple as that.

**SCHOOL
BOYCOTT!**
FREEDOM DAY FEBRUARY 3, 1964



HANDOUT



Mae Mallory: Challenging Segregation

As you listen to the podcast clip, sketch elements of the school Mallory describes. Add notes on what inequality looked like in segregated New York City schools in the 1950s.

Mae Mallory was born in 1927 and grew up in Macon, Georgia. In 1939, her family joined the Great Migration North in search of greater safety and opportunity. In 1957, Mallory was a parent living in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem. Three years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, she was angry about the segregation and poor conditions that continued in her local schools. She organized eight other mothers, and together they filed a lawsuit against the New York City Board of Education. The “Harlem Nine” argued that zoning policies controlling which children went to which schools were unfair. They staged a boycott of several Harlem schools. The “Harlem Nine” won their case, and the right to transfer their children to schools outside their district. However, the New York City school system has never put into action a desegregation plan for all students.



Mallory and her daughter, Patricia. *New York Times*, July 18, 1957.





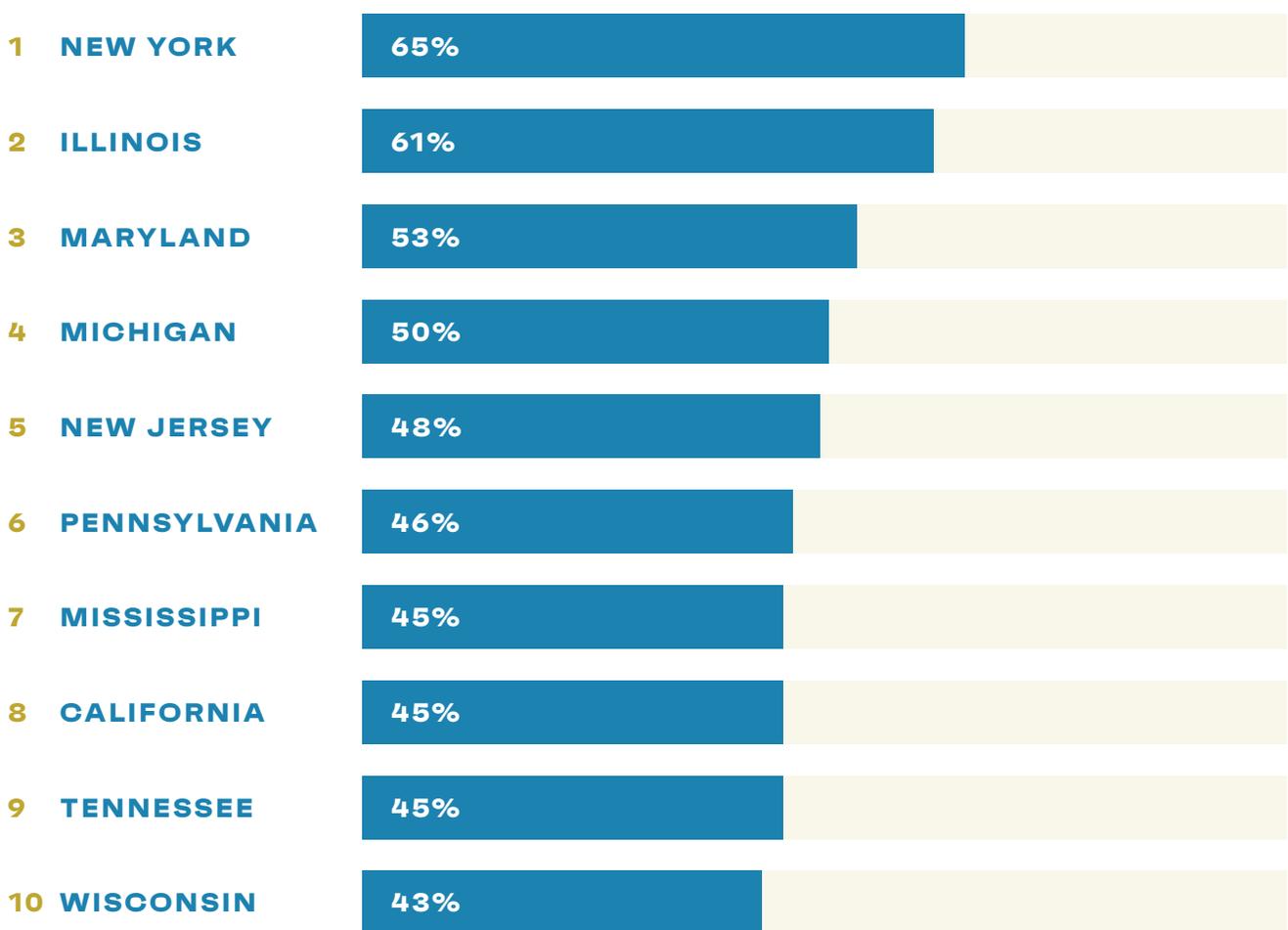
School Segregation Today

Today, many U.S. schools are just as segregated as they were in the 1960s.

This graph shows the percentage of each state's Black students in schools that are more than 90 percent non-white. For example, in New York, 65 percent of Black students attend a school where at least 90 percent of students are people of color.

According to data collected in 2011–2012, the 10 U.S. states with the most segregated schools are mostly in the North.

Why is it important for schools to be integrated? How does integration benefit *all* children?



SOURCES: Frankenberg, Erica; Ee, Jongyeon; Ayscue, Jennifer B.; and Orfield, Gary. "Harming our Common Future: America's Segregated Schools 65 Years after Brown." University of California Civil Rights Project, May 10, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2U0h66r>; Sanchez, Adam. "What Caused the 1964 New York City School Boycott?" <https://bit.ly/3d69ZAq>.