

Handout A: Jim Crow Laws and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1953)–Case Background

After the Civil War, the Fourteenth Amendment was passed to grant citizenship to former slaves and protect them from civil rights violations in their home states. Public schools were relatively rare throughout the United States, but were often segregated by race where they existed. The same Congress that passed the Fourteenth Amendment created racially segregated schools for the District of Columbia.

Beginning in 1877, many states passed “Jim Crow” laws requiring segregation in public places. Jim Crow laws were adopted in every southern state as well as some in the North. Louisiana’s policy requiring that blacks sit in separate railcars from whites was challenged and upheld in the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). The Court held that

there was nothing inherently unequal—nor anything unconstitutional—about separate accommodations for races.

In the twentieth century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) began a litigation campaign designed to bring an end to state mandated segregation, calling attention to the shabby accommodations provided for blacks, as well as arguing the damaging psychological effects that segregation had on black school children. One case was brought on behalf of Linda Brown, a third-grader from Topeka, Kansas. Several additional school segregation cases were combined into one, known as *Brown v. Board of Education*. This case reached the Supreme Court in 1953.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What were “Jim Crow” laws? How did they relate to *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education*?
2. What had been the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)?