

Exploring School Desegregation in Connecticut

NEH Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshops for School Teachers

Long Road to Brown: School Desegregation in VA, July 2015

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Introduction

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled that state laws providing for separate school facilities for black and white students were unconstitutional. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision asserted that, “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal”, thus overturning the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling, which allowed for “separate, but equal” educational institutions. In the years – and eventually decades – that followed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, school districts across the nation began to legally “desegregate”.

Often, the civil rights movement and the issue of segregation are viewed as solely “southern issues”. In this lesson, students will explore the effects of legal and de facto racial segregation on Connecticut public schools and will consider how efforts to integrate schools continue even today.

Guiding Questions

- How did the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954) affect public schools in Connecticut?
- Is there a difference between desegregation and integration of public schools?

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Explore the legal requirements and practical effects of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision on public schools in Connecticut and across the nation.
- Analyze primary and secondary source documents to evaluate multiple perspectives on school segregation – and eventual desegregation – of public schools.

Connections to Standards

Common Core ELA Standards

Students will be able to:

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1.a](#) - Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.



- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1.b](#) - Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.8](#)
Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.9](#)
Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CT Social Studies Frameworks (2014)

Students will be able to:

- Gather relevant information from multiple sources while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- Evaluate the credibility of a source by determining its relevance and intended use.
- Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources to support claims, noting evidentiary limitations.
- Develop claims and counterclaims while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both.
- Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.
- Evaluate the extent to which human actions, behaviors, culture, and decisions are shaped by interconnections with other people.

Background

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision denounced “separate but equal” facilities based on race and declared that laws allowing for racially segregated educational institutions were unconstitutional. School districts across the nation reacted differently to the landmark decision. While some districts willingly opened their schools, others resisted. Although most schools in the state of Connecticut did not openly resist the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and ended legal segregation of schools, de facto segregation continued as a result of Connecticut’s longtime districting plan, which divided school districts based on town lines. Thus, many of Connecticut’s schools remained racially and economically divided long after the 1954 Supreme Court decision.

In 1989, the parents of eighteen Hartford, Connecticut school children led a civil action suit against the State of Connecticut and Governor William O’Neill arguing that the students were being denied fundamental rights to education and equal protection under law because the state spent fewer resources on schools in areas with majority black and Latino populations than on schools in areas with majority white populations. In July 1996, the



Connecticut Supreme Court ruled that, “students in the Hartford public schools were racially, ethnically and economically isolated”. As a result, they argued, “Hartford public school students had not been provided a substantially equal educational opportunity under the state constitution”. The Court stated that the town-based districting plan, which was created in 1909 and established town boundaries as the dividing line between all school districts in the state, was the “single most important factor contributing to the present concentration of racial and ethnic minorities in the Hartford public school system.” Over the past two decades, the state of Connecticut has continued to work to meet the requirements of this 1996 decision. As recently as 2008, a second settlement required the establishment of new magnet schools in the greater Hartford area and allowed for expanding the number of openings for Hartford students to attend suburban public schools.

Preparation and Resources

- *Handout 1:* [“60 Years After Brown v. Board of Education Case, Segregation Still a Fight in Connecticut”](#) (New Haven Register, 2014)
- *Handout 2:* [“Do Now!” sheet](#)
- *Handout 2:* [“Written Document Analysis Worksheet”](#) (National Archives)
- *Handout 3:* Final Assessment: Writing an Editorial
- *Handout 4:* [Final Assessment Rubric \(Portland Secondary Schools Rubric for Written Expression\)](#)

Lesson Activities

Introduction (15 minutes)

- Students will read, [“60 Years After Brown v. Board of Education Case, Segregation Still a Fight in Connecticut”](#) (New Haven Register, 2014) and will consider the question, “*Is there a difference between ‘integration’ and ‘desegregation’?*” using a think-pair-share discussion paradigm. Students will write their individual answers on their daily [“Do Now!” sheet](#), and then will engage in partner/small group discussion before evaluating the issue as a full class.

Activity: Exploring Historical Perspective (60 minutes)

- Students will consider the concept of historical perspective using the [spinning dancer](#) illusion as a visual representation of the idea that individuals interpret events differently. When the illusion is shown to a class of students, about half will see the dancer spinning clockwise, while the other half will see her spinning counterclockwise. If the students study the image, they are often able to see the “other perspective” (the dancer spinning the opposite direction). This visual representation will prompt a discussion about how individuals viewing or experiencing the same situation can interpret the event very differently. (10 minutes)



- Students will work in pairs to examine primary sources that highlight different perspectives on school integration on a state and national level. Each pair will work together to complete the National Archives Written Document Analysis Worksheet for one source. (25 minutes)
 - [“Letter from Mrs. Sumner Bernstein to Boston Public Schools Superintendent Leary Regarding her Daughter’s Experience at Boston English”](#)
 - [“Governor Almond Addresses the State of Virginia” \(1959\)](#)
 - [“Petition from Students at Lane High School, Charlottesville, Virginia”](#)
 - [Connecticut Supreme Court Decision, Sheff v. O’Neill \(1999\)](#)
 - [Map of School Bussing in Connecticut, 1966](#)

- At the conclusion of the partner work, students will participate in a jigsaw activity, during which pairs will work with other students who examined different sources. At the conclusion of the jigsaw activity, the students will have been exposed to all five sources and will be able to identify several different perspectives on school desegregation. (25 minutes)

Closure (15 minutes)

- Students will complete a virtual exit slip answering the question, “*In 2015, are Connecticut’s public schools ‘integrated’ or ‘desegregated’?*” The virtual exit slip can be created using any web-based response platform. This activity could also be completed using a paper-and-pencil exit slip asking the same question.

Assessment

Students will complete the following assignment → When we consider the Civil Rights movement, we often think of it as solely a “southern issue”. Write an op-ed newspaper article answering the question, “*Was resistance to desegregation solely a ‘southern issue’?*” Be sure to cite evidence from the primary and secondary sources you examined to support your position. Students will be graded in accordance with the Portland Public Schools Rubric for Written Expression. (See Handout 3 on Page 6)

Extending the Lesson

Students will explore the lives of specific individuals involved in the civil rights movement and the fight for school desegregation on the local, state, and national level. They will evaluate how monuments are used to remember historic events and individuals and will design and illustrate a monument highlighting the accomplishments of a selected individual related to school desegregation during the post-Brown era.



THE BASICS

Subject Areas

- History and Social Studies > State History
- History and Social Studies > U.S. > Civil Rights Movement
- History and Social Studies > Themes > Segregation and Desegregation

Skills

- Critical thinking
- Evaluating arguments and multiple perspectives
- Argumentative writing
- Textual analysis
- Using primary and secondary sources

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RESOURCES

- [“Letter from Mrs. Sumner Bernstein to Boston Public Schools Superintendent Leary Regarding her Daughter’s Experience at Boston English”](#) (National Archives)
- [“Governor Almond Addresses the State of Virginia \(1959\)”](#) (Virginia State Library)
- [“Petition from Students at Lane High School, Charlottesville, Virginia”](#) (Virginia State Library)
- [Connecticut Supreme Court Decision, Sheff v. O’Neill \(1999\)](#)
- [Sheff Movement: Quality Integrated Education for All Children](#)
- [Map of School Bussing in Connecticut, 1966](#) (CT Humanities)
- [“60 Years After Brown v. Board of Education Case, Segregation Still a Fight in Connecticut”](#) (New Haven Register, 2014)
- [“Written Document Analysis Worksheet”](#) (National Archives)
- [ReadWriteThink.Org](#)
- [Portland Secondary Schools Rubric for Written Expression](#) (Portland Public Schools, CT)



STEP 2: Once you have gathered your ideas, organize your argument using the Persuasion Map at http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/persuasion_map/. When you have completed your Persuasion Map, you will use this tool to write your editorial.

STEP 3: Write your editorial! Be sure to use the primary and secondary sources you examined to support your arguments throughout your writing. Your editorial will be graded in accordance with the [Portland Secondary Schools rubric for Written Expression](#)

