

Women as Girls and School Integration: In June, 2019, during the first Democratic presidential candidate primary debate for America's 2020 presidential election, candidate California Senator Kamala Harris asserted she was one of the little black girls to integrate Berkley, California's white schools via busing during the second wave of school desegregation in the 1970s, twenty years after the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* U.S. Supreme Court case ruled racial separate but equal education in public schools unconstitutional.

In making its ruling, the Court concluded it had to consider American public education in light of its past, its development, and its current important function of local, state, and federal governments nationwide, as accommodations for black students in public schools although cited as separate but equal, historically were substandard. Court considerations included:

- 1619 black people enslaved by whites, with literacy for blacks forbidden
- 1865 Black Code laws enacted the year the Civil War ended basically re-enslaved freed men, women and children, and barred black children from public schools
- 1885 laws in most southern states required separate schools for black and white children
- 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson*: U.S. Supreme Court ruled all black and white children and adults in the south be separate in all public places, including schools.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded in 1909 had been litigating cases across the country since the 1930s in hopes that one would eventually make it to the Supreme Court to persuade the government to rectify racial disparities between schools.

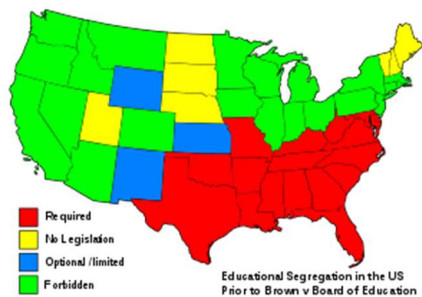
The *Brown* case began in 1951 when the NAACP filed a class action suit in a Kansas district court against the board of education of the city of Topeka, Kansas. The plaintiffs were thirteen Topeka parents in five separate cases on behalf of their 20 children. Each had attempted to enroll their children in the closest neighborhood school, each was refused enrollment and directed to a farther away segregated black school.



Oliver Brown, father of Linda Brown, was chosen to be the lead plaintiff to have a man at the head of the roster as the other twelve plaintiffs were women: Darlene Brown, Lena Carper, Sadie Emmanuel, Marguerite Emerson, Shirley Fleming, Zelma Henderson, Shirley Hodison, Maude Lawton, Alma Lewis, Iona Richardson, and Lucinda Todd.

The Kansas district court ruled in favor of the school board. The case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which agreed to hear it. There it was combined with four similar cases from across the south: *Briggs v. Elliott* (South Carolina), *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (Virginia), *Gebhart v. Belton* (Delaware), and *Bolling v. Sharpe* (D.C.).

The main issue questioned in each case was the constitutionality of state-sponsored segregation in public schools. At the time, seventeen states mandated segregation, four other states allowed segregation but did not require it, the remaining twenty-seven (Alaska and Hawaii not yet states) either had laws prohibiting segregation or no laws regarding segregation. This ruling would affect about 9 million white and 2.3 million black public school children.



Following the *Brown* ruling, it would be up to children in public schools to integrate classrooms in America’s white supremacist culture entrenched in enslavement, mores, and laws for more than 335 continuous years but with no legislative mandate from the Court as to how.



Enforcement of *Brown* was difficult. Noncompliance arose in school districts across the country. White legislators, community leaders, and families were finding ways to maintain exclusive white-only schools.



In Virginia via “massive resistance” the state government shut down public schools to prevent integration. Eleven southern states enacted resolutions interfering with, nullifying or protesting school desegregation.

Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus made resistance to desegregation a central part of his successful 1956 reelection campaign. In 1963, Alabama Gov. George Wallace blocked a door at the University of Alabama to prevent the enrollment of two black students, personally backing the policy he stated in his inaugural address: "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." Wallace moved aside only when confronted by General Henry Graham of the Alabama National Guard, ordered to intervene by President John F. Kennedy.

In 1971 twenty years after the *Brown* case began, the Supreme Court decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* gave federal courts the authority to use busing as a tool for integration efforts.

Harris's comment stimulated a national conversation concerning busing in particular and school integration in general. But it was her reference to herself as a little black girl actually integrating a staunchly established white school, that placed in my consciousness a potent picture of facts I had known for many decades. It awakened in me a deeper awareness of the children, who were deployed and who courageously walked into, staunchly segregated public schools, via exploratory government programs managed by fragile guidance lacking experience as to how.



On behalf of all the children, boys and girls, who integrated America's schools, this month's column and several to follow offer overdue respect, appreciation and thanks by highlighting a few women who as little girls walked into staunchly segregated schools to rectify racial public school disparities.

Sources: <https://www.aauw.org/2018/05/17/still-separate-still-unequal/>

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- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_v._Board_of_Education
- <http://northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/swann-v-charlotte-mecklenburg-board-of-education/>
- <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-2020-kamala-harris-berkeley-busing-20190701-story.html>