Civil Rights Movement

Rowland Scherman for USIA, Photographer. Courtesy of U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

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ABOUT THE MOVEMENT
The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's came about out of the need and desire for equality and freedom for African Americans and other people of color. Nearly one hundred years after slavery was abolished, there was widespread segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement and racially motivated violence that permeated all personal and structural aspects of life for black people. “Jim Crow” laws at the local and state levels barred African Americans from classrooms and bathrooms, from theaters and train cars, from juries and legislatures.

During this period of time, there was a huge surge of activism taking place to reverse this discrimination and injustice. Activists worked together and used non-violent protest and specific acts of targeted civil disobedience, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Greensboro Woolworth Sit-Ins, in order to bring about change. Much of this organizing and activism took place in the Southern part of the United States; however, people from all over the country—of all races and religions—joined activists to proclaim their support and commitment to freedom and equality. For example, on August 28, 1963, 250,000 Americans came to Washington, D.C. for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. They came to have their voices heard and listen to speeches by many civil rights leaders, especially Martin Luther King, Jr., who delivered what would become one of the most influential speeches in history.

Between 1954 and 1968, civil rights legislation was passed. Fundamental and lasting change was made during this relatively short period of time and its impact can be seen in a myriad of ways in our society today. However, civil rights issues such as immigration, racial disparities in the criminal justice system, the perpetual segregation of our nation’s schools—to name just a few—remain and are in need of ongoing work.

Landmark and Sweeping Civil Rights Legislation

1954
The Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, ruled that schools could no longer be segregated and that state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students were unconstitutional.

1964

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities and made employment discrimination illegal based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The document was the most sweeping civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.

1965

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed. This legislation protected minority voting rights, barring states from passing laws that would discriminate against minority voters and requiring certain state and local governments with a history of voting discrimination to get approval from the federal government before making any changes to their voting laws or procedures.

1968

Finally, the Civil Rights Act of 1968, commonly known as the “Fair Housing Act,” provided equal housing opportunities regardless of race, creed or national origin and made it illegal to interfere with housing rights and opportunities.

**BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION**

“We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

These celebrated words from the *Brown v. Board of Education* Majority Opinion ushered in an unprecedented era of civil rights and school restructuring in the United States. In 1954, when this judgment was written, not a single black student attended a majority white public school in the American South.
The Road to *Brown*

In 1892, Homer Plessy, an African-American man, refused to give up his seat to a white man on a train in New Orleans, as he was required to do by Louisiana state law. For this action he was arrested. Plessy, contending that the Louisiana law separating blacks from whites on trains violated the “equal protection clause” of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, decided to fight his arrest in court. In 1896, his case was presented to the United States Supreme Court. By a vote of 8-1, the Supreme Court ruled against *Plessy*. With this ruling, racial segregation was permitted under the guise of “separate but equal” and racially segregated schools were made legal. Despite the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Plessy* and similar cases, many people continued to press for the abolition of Jim Crow and other racially discriminatory laws.

In 1952, five separate cases came before the U.S. District Court concerning the issue of segregation in public schools. These cases were *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Kansas), *Briggs v. Elliot* (South Carolina), *Davis v. Board of*
Education of Prince Edward County (Virginia), Boiling v. Sharpe (District of Columbia) and Gebhart v. Ethel (Delaware). While the facts of each case are different, the main issue in each was the constitutionality of state-sponsored segregation in public schools. Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund handled these cases. A three-judge panel at the U.S. District Court heard the cases and ruled in favor of the school boards. The plaintiffs then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

When the cases came before the Supreme Court in 1952, the Court consolidated all five cases under the name of Brown v. Board of Education. Thurgood Marshall personally argued the case before the Court. Although he raised a variety of legal issues on appeal, the most common one was that separate school systems for blacks and whites were inherently unequal, and thus violate the “equal protection clause” of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Unable to come to a solution by June 1953 (the end of the Court's 1952–1953 term), the Court decided to rehear the case in December 1953. Finally, all of the Justices agreed to support a unanimous decision.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court delivered the unanimous ruling declaring state-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th Amendment and was therefore unconstitutional.

Related Teaching Resources

LESSON PLAN

Looking Back Reaching Forward: Exploring the Promise of Brown v. Board of Education in Contemporary Times

HIGH SCHOOL

This curriculum unit commemorates the 60th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education. Developed for high school students, this unit explores the history of school desegregation in the United States and examines current patterns of resegregation in public schools.
MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL

Teach students about the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and analyze the modern day “school-to-prison pipeline” and the opportunity gap that exist in our public schools.

**LESSON PLAN**

**60 Years Later: The Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education**

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**CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964**
The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson fifty years ago on July 2, 1964. The Act banned discrimination in public facilities including private companies offering public services like lunch counters, hotels and theaters; provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities and made employment discrimination illegal based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. The document was the most sweeping civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.

Despite the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 that school segregation was unconstitutional, in the 1960s, in many communities in the United States, African American and white people were still segregated in schools, public transportation and restaurants. Discrimination prevented many African Americans from receiving equal consideration for employment and education. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 sought to legally prohibit and punish these injustices. And while many leaders at that time reminded the public that laws alone cannot shape “the hearts and minds” of people, the power of government through laws is a critical step to bring about change.

The road to passing the Civil Rights Act was a bumpy one. For decades after Reconstruction, Congress did not pass a single civil rights act. With protests throughout the south including one in Birmingham where police tried to suppress nonviolent demonstrators with dogs and fire hoses, President John F. Kennedy decided to act. In June 1963, he proposed the most far reaching civil rights legislation to date, saying the U.S. “will not be fully free until all of its citizens are free.”

Following Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. continued to press for the bill as did newly inaugurated President Lyndon B. Johnson. The House approved the bill with bipartisan support but when it moved to the Senate, a seventy-five day filibuster ensued. Finally, the Senate voted 73–27 in favor of the bill and President Johnson signed the bill into law on July 2, 1964. Upon signing it, he said, “Americans of every race and color have died in battle to
Americans of every race and color have worked to build a nation of widening opportunities. Now our generation of Americans has been called on to continue the unending search for justice within our own borders. We believe that all men are created equal. Yet many are denied equal treatment.”

Related Teaching Resources

**LESSON PLAN**

**Civil Rights Act of 1964: 7 Ways to Commemorate the Anniversary**

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL**

Seven ideas for teaching about the Civil Rights Act in your classroom to commemorate the anniversary.

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**VOTING RIGHTS ACT (VRA)**

**History of the VRA**

In March 1965, on a bridge outside Selma, Alabama, a second phase of the revolution was born. Civil and human rights activists, including many young people, took to the streets in a peaceful protest for voting rights for African-Americans. They were met with clubs and violence. Many were beaten and severely injured, including a young activist named John Lewis, who now serves as
Congressman for Georgia's 5th District. But the activists did not face attacks on their march in vain. Television brought this conflict of angry violence against peaceful, moral protest into living rooms across America.

Five days later, President Johnson announced to a joint session of Congress that he would bring them an effective voting rights bill. Echoing the spiritual anthem of the civil rights movement, he said simply, “We Shall Overcome.”

He—and we—did overcome. On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act, hailed by many as the most effective civil rights law ever.

The VRA

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was designed to address the disenfranchisement of people of color, especially African Americans, from voting. It prohibits discrimination based on race, and requires certain jurisdictions to provide bilingual assistance to language minority voters. Section 2 of the Act, which bars
the use of voting practices or procedures that discriminate against minority voters, has been used successfully to attack discrimination in voting including restrictive voter registration requirements, districting plans that dilute minority voting strength, discriminatory annexations, and the location of polling places at sites inaccessible to minority voters.

Section 5 of the Act requires federal “preclearance” before covered jurisdictions (i.e., specified jurisdictions with a history of practices that restrict minority voting rights) may make changes in existing voting practices or procedures. The Act also provides the Department of Justice with the authority to appoint federal observers and examiners to monitor elections to ensure that they are conducted fairly. Initial enforcement efforts targeted, among other things, literacy tests, poll taxes, and discriminatory registration practices.

In 1975, the Voting Rights Act was amended to address the voting rights of language minority groups. Sections 4 and 203 of the Act apply in jurisdictions with significant numbers of voters with limited or no English proficiency and require such jurisdictions to provide voting materials and assistance in relevant languages in addition to English.

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Related Teaching Resources

LESSON PLAN

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Civil Rights: Relevancy for Today

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL

How far do we still need to go in order to achieve equality and full civil rights in the United States? Use this multi-grade curriculum unit to help students examine civil rights in the United States past and present.
LESSON PLAN

The Selma to Montgomery March for Voting Rights

HIGH SCHOOL

High school students explore voting restrictions today and gain insight into what can be done to preserve the right to vote as they learn about the historical struggle for voting rights and the Selma to Montgomery March.

Peter Pettus, photographer. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-08102
In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson failed to persuade Congress to pass a civil rights bill with a fair housing provision. The assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., generated the support needed to pass the bill two years later.

On April 11, 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1968—popularly known as the **Fair Housing Act**—which prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of dwellings based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. It also contained anti-riot provisions and protected persons exercising specific rights—such as attending school or serving on a jury—
as well as civil rights workers urging others to exercise these rights. It included the Indian Bill of Rights to extend constitutional protections to Native Americans not covered by the Bill of Rights.

When originally passed in 1968, the Act only covered four protective classes: race, color, religion, and national origin. Sex was added as a protective class in 1974. In 1988, disability and familial status were included as protective classes as well.

**TEACHER LESSON PLANS AND RESOURCES**

Brown v. Board of Education

**LESSON PLAN**

60 Years Later: The Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education

MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL

Teach students about the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and analyze the modern day “school-to-prison pipeline” and the opportunity gap that exist in our public schools.

![Image](image-url)  
*Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration*

**LESSON PLAN**

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Image Donated by Corbis - Bettmann

**LESSON PLAN**

*A Time for Sight: The Debate over Color Blindness and Race-Consciousness in School Integration Policy*

HIGH SCHOOL

In light of the 2007 Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, this four-part high school lesson examines the debate over school integration within the broader context of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 and the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, AK in 1957.

Image Donated by Corbis - Bettmann
Civil Rights Act of 1964

Free webinar provides a legal overview of the released guidance, trends in school discipline today and educational best practices for addressing bias related issues in schools.

WEBINARS

Fulfilling the Promise of Brown: School Discipline, Education Equity and the Achievement Gap

Free webinar provides a legal overview of the released guidance, trends in school discipline today and educational best practices for addressing bias related issues in schools.

Civil Rights Act of 1964

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TOOLS AND STRATEGIES

**ADL Honors the Life and Achievements of Rosa Parks (1913-2005)**

Teach about the life, challenges and accomplishments of Rosa Parks, important social activist during the Civil Rights Movement.
Sixty years after Brown v. Board of Education the promise of equal access to quality education remains unfulfilled. School expulsions and suspensions are among the best predictors...

Library of Congress

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**Children's Literature**

The Best Kid Lit on Bias, Diversity and Social Justice.

**Voting Rights Act (VRA)**

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Peter Pettus, photographer. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ppmsca-08102
This lesson provides an opportunity for high school students to explore the difference between the right to vote and the ability to vote, learn more about the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and reflect on some of the current day threats to voting rights and what can be done about it.