

## 65 years since Brown v. Board of Ed, school segregation persists

"One of the reasons we've returned to such high levels of segregation is we refuse to believe that separate is inherently unequal."



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By **Janelle Richards, Rehema Ellis and Elissa Candiotti**

Elementary schools in Topeka, Kansas, that were once segregated are now landmark sites. That's because the city was at the center of the fight for equal access to education 65 years ago in the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

Back then, the Supreme Court declared that school segregation was unequal and unconstitutional. But today, many fear that the promise of the ruling has not been fulfilled.

Katherine Sawyer was the only child to testify in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case. She told NBC News that she would give integration in America's public schools a "C" grade because "we haven't gone far enough."

*Brown v. Board of Education* came at a time when Jim Crow laws were dominating the South. Oliver Brown's 7-year old daughter, Linda, had to travel two miles to school each day in Topeka because she was not allowed to attend the all-white school in her neighborhood. Brown joined other families from three other states and the District of Columbia in a battle to desegregate schools. The ruling propelled America into a new chapter, one in which the doors of schools across the country were now legally open to black families.

In 2015, 87 percent of African Americans had [high school diplomas](#), according to the Census Bureau, and researchers have found that the [enrollment numbers](#) of African American students in colleges and universities have increased since the late 20th century.

Sawyer doesn't remember being afraid to share her story at the time about how she had to take a crowded city bus to her school across town. She said she told them all about the bus ride and the walk to the bus stop.

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"About every maybe half a block or so we would have to go to the side and scrape the mud off of our boots so that we could continue on till we got up to where the bus was going to be," she recalled.

At the time, Sawyer was worried about what would happen to black teachers. "Were they going to lose their jobs, you know, when they integrated the school?"

[Researchers found](#) that 38,000 black administrators and teachers in the South did end up losing their jobs after the Supreme Court decision. [Education Week reports](#) that 65 years later, the absence of black teachers is still felt in classrooms.

Sawyer attended Topeka High School years after Brown v. Board was passed. The school is now more diverse, with 43 percent white, 38 percent Hispanic and 17 percent African American, according to district information.

"This school values tradition and diversity in a way I had never experienced before I came here," Principal Rebecca Morrissey said. "I have students who are white or Hispanic or black who choose and want to come here because of that diversity."

Cristina De La Isla is a sophomore at Topeka High.

"I learn many different things from other types of people – like sexual orientation, race, gender, everything," said De La Isla.

Dr. Tiffany Anderson, the first African American female superintendent of Topeka Public Schools, wants the district to continue to support diversity.

"You know, one of the things that legislation will do is to change laws, but it doesn't change hearts and minds," Anderson said. "Topeka has made great progress in fulfilling the promise to integrate schools, but Topeka, like many cities, still has a long way to go. We just have to have the courage to walk in our calling."

Nonetheless, a [study](#) released last week by the UCLA Civil Rights Project reported that there is "no cause for celebration." By 2016, 40 percent of all black students were in schools with 90 percent or more students of color. New York, California, Illinois and Maryland are the four states in which a majority of black students attend 90-100 percent nonwhite schools. In fact, segregation for black students has expanded in all regions of the country, except for the Midwest.

"The sad thing honestly is here, 60 years after Brown v. Board, so many Black, Latino, poor kids are in schools that are as highly segregated as was true 10 years after Brown v. Board," said Noliwe Rooks, professor of Africana Studies at Cornell University. "One of the reasons we've returned to such high levels of segregation is we refuse to believe that separate is inherently unequal."

As a great-grandmother of five, Katherine Sawyer says her family gives her hope that the next generation will make more progress.

"I think we have time," said Sawyer. "My children have time, my grandchildren have time and maybe my great-grandchildren have the time. I don't have the time, and so I see things in them that I think can change."



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