The 50-Year Lesson: Equality is Hard

In July, it will have been 228 years since the Second Continental Congress declared the “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal.” On May 17, 50 years ago, the Supreme Court decided Brown v. Board of Education, clarifying what that self-evident assertion meant.

On that day, the Court concluded that the Constitution’s assurance of equal protection promised the “opportunity of an education” without racially segregated schools. Brown thus ended the rule of legally imposed racial separation in America. It also began a social and legal experiment in racial integration as the means by which we sought to achieve through law an equality that Thomas Jefferson saw endowed only by the Creator.

How do we assess, 50 years later, whether that experiment worked? That question is not easy to answer.

It was never the case that the impact of segregation was all bad, that integration was desired by all people of African descent, or that the rule of law after Brown produced only good outcomes. Some conditions before 1954, such as the growth and development of black institutions and businesses, favored the success of black people in America. After 1954, many of these businesses and institutions have suffered in ways they never had before 1954. It also is hard to imagine any person of color wanting to go back to the humiliation of “Jim Crow” segregation.

So what do we say about Brown with 50 years of experience under our belts? It is not just a question of deciding what or who to blame. It is deciding what specifically we want. Having trod the path of compelled separation, we came to a destination 50 years ago we decided we did not want to be. Having followed the course of racial integration as a focus of social policy for 50 years, are we today still satisfied with its offerings and its promise that we want to continue down that path?
This Exhibit invites you to reflect what has transpired both before and after Brown to ask of our time the hard questions explored in Brown of its time. Has integration worked to produce an equality we want? If not, do we need another idea? And, what idea is that? You decide.

The Exhibition

On the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, this exhibition explores the events preceding and following the decision. It also provides a context for assessing the impact of the decision through a comparison of education and life in Baltimore City in the years immediately before 1954 and the years immediately before 2004.

Case 1: Promises of Brown – Baltimore as a case study. Brown held promises for the future that should flow from an integrated education. This case explores some measures of integration and its promised impact in Baltimore.

Case 2: Pre-Brown Environment Separate but equal was the law of the land. This case looks at some of the NAACP’s early success at challenging separate but equal and introduces some other voices on the desirability of integration.

Case 3

The Decision - What did the decision say and how was it to be implemented? What were the discernible stages related to an integration remedy?

Case 4: 1950’s - Early 1960’s – Resistance to Brown and Tokenism Integration met with resistance in the form of riots, angry mobs and school closures. How did the country move beyond this initial reaction?

Case 5: Late 1960’s - 1970’s - Accelerating Deliberate Speed

What form did this acceleration take, who were the players and what was the effect?

Case 6: 1980’s - 1990’s - Toward Re-segregation

As we look at the trend – What turned society towards re-segregation?
Case 7: Questions and Reflections

You are invited to think about how the society achieves equality and the role integration should play. Please share your thoughts in our Brown reflections book located at the end of the exhibit.

Recommended Resources on Brown

There are a wealth of books and web sites to further your knowledge around the issues raised by Brown v. Board of Education.

Books used in our research:


Web Sites:


Videos & Films: (Eisenhower Library)

(Civil Rights in general)


Acknowledgments and special thanks to:

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Gerald Rasheed, President; Wunmi Aibana, Vice-President

Reception Speakers:
John Morris - Attorney, writer on race and the law.
Dale Robinson - Retired teacher and official from National Education Association (NEA); Lecturer

_Brown @ 50_  
Evolution of the Idea that Equality Requires Integration

An Exhibition of Reflection:  
On the Fiftieth Anniversary of  
_Brown v. Board of Education_

Sponsored by The Johns Hopkins University Black Faculty and Staff Association

http://www.jhu.edu/~bfsa/index.htm

. . .we cannot turn the clock back to 1868 when the Amendment was adopted, or even to 1896 when _Plessy v. Ferguson_ was written. We must consider public education in the light of its full development and its present place in American life throughout the Nation. Only in this way can it be determined if segregation in public schools deprives these plaintiffs of the equal protection of the laws.