Popular Response to *Brown*

**NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS**

The following documents provide a national cross-section of editorial opinion in response to the 1954 *Brown* decision. While clearly reflecting the views of the individual editors and editorial boards that crafted them, these editorials necessarily sought in part to represent the moods and reactions of their constituencies. It is useful to consider these documents as rhetorical efforts aimed at communicating general understandings within specific communities: cultural and journalistic communities on one hand and national, regional, and local communities on the other. In this case, editorial authority derived in part from how well these writers both responded to and represented the prevailing climate of opinion.

These editorials were all cited in the *New York Times*, the acknowledged newspaper of record and thus the most powerful editorial voice in the nation. Various other journalistic worlds are represented. The Atlanta *Daily World*, Pittsburgh *Courier*, and Chicago *Defender* are black newspapers. The Washington *Post and Times Herald*, Atlanta *Constitution*, Jackson (Mississippi) *Daily News*, and Arkansas *Gazette* are southern white newspapers. In addition to the *New York Times*, the *Boston Herald*, *Los Angeles Times*, and Chicago *Sun-Times* are white newspapers outside the South. Finally, white student editorial opinion is represented by newspapers from the University of Virginia and the University of Mississippi.

Do you detect any recognizable patterns—for instance, regional, big city versus small city, black versus white—in the editorials? Do you see a central concern, or primary argument, running through them? Are there salient similarities and differences? What kind of impact do you think these editorials had at the time? How do you assess their viability as historical evidence?
The Supreme Court took a long and careful time to arrive at the unanimous decision read yesterday by Chief Justice Warren that "segregation of children in the public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprives the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities." But the decision reached was inevitable in the year 1954 regardless of what may have been the case in 1868, when the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted, or in 1896, when the "separate but equal" doctrine was laid down in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson.

In the cases under consideration the facilities offered to Negro children appeared to be equal, or were to be made equal, "with respect to buildings, curricula, qualifications and salaries of teachers and other 'tangible' factors," to those available to white children. The question, therefore, was more fundamental than in any previous case. It was whether Negro children segregated solely on the basis of race, even though offered equal facilities, were thereby deprived of equal educational opportunities. The court holds that such segregation does have "a detrimental effect upon the colored children," that it had "a tendency to retard [their] educational and mental development . . . and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system."

The court, speaking through Chief Justice Warren, therefore concludes that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated "are by reason of the segregation complained of deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment." The due process clause is not involved. It is not needed.

What the court is saying, in its formal but not complicated style, is a part of what Eugene O'Neill said in a play called All God's Chillun Got Wings. It is true, of course, that the court is not talking of that sort of "equality" which produces interracial marriages. It is not talking of a social system at all. It is talking of a system of human rights which is foreshadowed in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, which stated "that all men are created equal." Mr. Jefferson and the others who were responsible for the Declaration did not intend to say that all men are equally intelligent, equally good or equal in height or weight.