

Civil Rights Movement- Part 3: Brown v. Board of Education and White Resistance to School Desegregation ^[1]

Civil Rights Movement

by [William S. Powell](#) ^[2] and Allyson C. Criner, 2006

Additional research provided by Scott Matthews, Sally Mullikin, and Wiley J. Williams.

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Part 3: Brown v. Board of Education and White Resistance to School Desegregation



"Opening day for William Campbell, the first to integrate Raleigh City Schools, 1960. Courtesy of the News and Observer Negative Collection, North Carolina State Archives." Available online from the NC Museum of History.

A watershed moment in the modern civil rights movement came on 17 May 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas](#) ^[8], unanimously ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The decision expressly rejected the separate-but-equal doctrine contained in the Court's 1896 [Plessy v. Ferguson](#) ^[9] decision. The 1954 decision declared that separate facilities were inherently unequal and state laws and constitutional provisions upholding segregation denied African American children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed in the [Fourteenth Amendment](#) ^[10].

In North Carolina the winds of change had first been felt in the area of educational segregation in 1951, when the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) ^[11] was ordered by federal courts to admit blacks to its law, medical, and graduate schools. Under this court order, Floyd B. McKissick, Harvey Beech, J. Kenneth Lee, and James Lassiter became the first African Americans admitted to the university's law school. Primary and secondary school systems remained segregated, however, and in the same year the [Pamlico County](#) ^[12] NAACP filed a lawsuit for school equalization or integration. At the time, the national NAACP was readying the court challenge that would lead to the *Brown* decision.


Following the 1954 *Brown* decision, which ordered states' compliance "with all deliberate speed," North Carolina lawmakers moved with extraordinary caution in the face of virulent white opposition to the decision. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Governor [Luther H. Hodges](#) ^[13], the state developed a series of legal and administrative barriers that blocked school integration in the interest of "local choice" without appearing to openly violate the Supreme Court ruling. The most significant of these policies were the [Pupil Assignment Act](#) ^[14] of 1955 and the [Pearsall Plan](#) ^[15] of 1956.

The Pupil Assignment Act placed authority for public education in the hands of local school districts to deter a statewide lawsuit by the NAACP. It also hampered black students' efforts to transfer to white schools by establishing a series of vague criteria by which school boards could deny black students admission, without citing race as the reason. The act thus divided the state school system into numerous potential legal targets and gave local schools ways to avoid school desegregation that were legal under state statutes. Meanwhile, the Pearsall Plan—which comprised six laws, one resolution, and a constitutional amendment—further forestalled integration by making it voluntary by establishing private tuition grants from the state for white parents who did not wish their children to attend an integrated school. The plan was

said by whites to have "softened the blow" of integration in North Carolina and to have given the state time to initiate progressive desegregation programs without incident. However, the plan was bitterly opposed by blacks, who recognized its shortcomings, and by most whites, who continued their hostile protests at the few previously all-white schools to which blacks were admitted.

In 1957 North Carolina admitted only 11 black students to previously all-white schools. In 1958 the school boards in [Charlotte](#) ^[16], [Greensboro](#) ^[17], and [Winston-Salem](#) ^[18] (which had first admitted blacks to white schools the year before) admitted a few additional blacks without incident. But even these modest gains for African Americans in the public schools were achieved in only a few counties by the mid-1960s. A few towns near military bases, where black officers asserted their influence in local schools, were an exception to the general pattern, but overall in North Carolina, the combination of the Pearsall Plan and the Pupil Assignment Act allowed local school boards to delay segregation for more than a decade.

North Carolina saw a significant rise in racial violence and membership in the [Ku Klux Klan](#) ^[19] (KKK) in reaction to school desegregation and social change in the 1950s. Some blacks and other minorities involved in the movement for civil rights met white backlash with equal force. Robert F. Williams, president of the Monroe chapter of the NAACP, began organizing squads of black citizens to arm themselves against the KKK in 1957. The national NAACP, which embraced Martin Luther King Jr.'s doctrine of nonviolent direct action, disapproved of Williams's philosophy of armed self-defense and suspended him from the organization. But Williams was undeterred and remained an important advocate for black armed resistance on the state and national level.

Keep reading >> [Part 4: Integration Efforts in the Workplace, Sit-Ins, and Other Nonviolent Protests](#)  ^[5]

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Authors:

[Criner, Allyson C.](#) ^[21]

[Powell, William S.](#) ^[22]

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