Ruby Bridges and Desegregation

With All Deliberate Speed

In 1954 and 1955 the Supreme Court handed down two landmark decisions in the *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka Kansas* cases. Although celebrated as the decision that overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* and the doctrine of separate but equal, the *Brown* decisions were complied with slowly and often had to be enforced by federal intervention.

The Court’s decision called for desegregation of schools “with all deliberate speed.” This phrase left room for interpretation by the lower courts and meant that integration did not happen rapidly or uniformly. In many instances desegregation was forced upon school districts, as was the case in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. While oftentimes white protestors attempted to block the entrance of African American students into schools, other tactics were also employed. Prince Edward County, Virginia, for example, closed all public schools rather than end segregation. White students attended private schools instead; African American students were unable to attend school until 1963 when the Ford Foundation opened private black schools. It was not until 1964 that the Supreme Court ordered Prince Edward County to reopen its public schools.

“The Littlest Negro Girl You Ever Saw”

In New Orleans in 1960 desegregation was resisted by instituting a test. Like the Jim Crow era literacy tests that were required for voting in many Southern areas, this test was a requirement for black students to “qualify” to attend white schools. Ruby Bridges was one of six children who passed the exam and were to be admitted to white schools in the fall of 1960.

On November 14, 1960, Ruby became the first African American student to attend William Frantz Elementary School. She was greeted by angry white crowds who chanted “Two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate!” They shouted racial slurs and even threatened physical harm to young Ruby. As in Little Rock, the federal government stepped in; U.S. Marshalls escorted Ruby to school daily.

Virtually every white parent pulled their children out of the school. Ruby attended class alone for nearly the entire year. By the 1961-1962 school year the white students returned and William Frantz Elementary operated as an integrated school. Other districts, however, continued to resist the *Brown* decisions throughout the 1960s and beyond. It was not until 1969 that the Supreme Court issued a new ruling which ended the doctrine of “all deliberate speed” and required the “immediate” desegregation of schools across the country.

Neighborhoods continued, and in many areas remain, racially segregated. In order to comply with the Court’s rulings, school districts across the nation began busing students out of their neighborhoods to other schools. While this helped to integrate schools, many districts, neighborhoods, and even entire towns continued to resist.

Ending Desegregation

In 1986 the Supreme Court issued its first decision that allowed for schools and school districts to be released from desegregation requirements. If a school had effectively desegregated, it could be released from federal mandates (such as busing programs). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in spite of studies showing the effectiveness of integration, schools and districts steadily ended programs that encouraged desegregation. According to a study done by the Civil Rights Project of Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, by the year 2000 schools were *more* segregated than they were in 1970.