Separate but Never Equal

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| *When I was a boy, I would go downtown…, and I’d see the signs saying “White” and “Colored” on the water fountains. There’d be a beautiful, shining water fountain in one corner of the store marked “White,” and in another corner was just a little spigot marked “Colored.” I saw the signs saying “White Men,” “Colored Men,” and “White Women,” “Colored Women.” And at the theater we had to go upstairs to go to a movie. You bought your ticket at the same window that the white people did, but they could sit downstairs, and you had to go upstairs.*  *—U.S. Congressman and civil rights leader John Lewis* |
| [http://my.hrw.com/la/eolit05/nsmedia/icons/redball_1_off.gif](javascript:code.getNodeByID('id_36').onClickHandler();)In 1896, in a famous case known as *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states could enact laws separating people by skin color as long as the facilities for African Americans were equivalent to those for whites. This “separate but equal” decision stood for more than half a century, supporting a system of racial segregation in states throughout the South. |

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| [http://my.hrw.com/la/eolit05/nsmedia/icons/redball_2_off.gif](javascript:code.getNodeByID('id_59').onClickHandler();)In reality, separate was never equal. Take buses, for example. The fare was the same for all passengers, regardless of race. But if the “white section” at the front of the bus filled up, the invisible line separating it from the “colored section” simply moved back. Black people had to stand up so that white people could sit. |

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| [http://my.hrw.com/la/eolit05/nsmedia/icons/redball_3_off.gif](javascript:code.getNodeByID('id_59_2').onClickHandler();)Consider shopping. An African American woman could buy the same dress as a white woman, but she wasn’t allowed to try it on in the store—and if she found that it didn’t fit, she couldn’t return it. Or restaurants. Some white-owned restaurants filled orders for blacks only at their takeout window. Others wouldn’t serve them at all. |

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| [http://my.hrw.com/la/eolit05/nsmedia/icons/redball_4_off.gif](javascript:code.getNodeByID('id_67').onClickHandler();)Perhaps most separate, and most unequal, were the public schools. If you attended a “colored school,” you might walk eight miles to school every morning, while buses full of white children drove past on their way to schools closer by. The schools attended by white children would be modern and well maintained, while yours would be old and run-down. White students would have up-to-date books and materials, while you might be forced to share a twenty-year-old textbook with three other students. |

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| [http://my.hrw.com/la/eolit05/nsmedia/icons/redball_5_off.gif](javascript:code.getNodeByID('id_59_3').onClickHandler();)In 1949, several African American parents sued their school district over the inequalities between the local white elementary school and the school their children were forced to attend. Two years earlier the district had built a brand-new school for white students while leaving the black students’ school in disrepair. Unlike the all-black school, the all-white school had an auditorium, a kindergarten, a part-time music teacher, a well-equipped playground, and a lunch program. The all-white school had a teacher and a separate room for each grade; the all-black school had only two teachers and two classrooms for all eight grades. |

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| [http://my.hrw.com/la/eolit05/nsmedia/icons/redball_6_off.gif](javascript:code.getNodeByID('id_59_4').onClickHandler();)Finally, in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown* v. *Board of Education* that segregated schools were by their very nature unequal. No longer would the highest court in the land support the myth of *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*. Separate could never be equal. |

—Mara Rockliff