



SEF Statement on the Anniversary of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Decision

May 17, 2020

On this day sixty-six years ago, the United States Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, unanimously held in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal and unconstitutional. The Court's ruling paved the way for federally-mandated school desegregation and [overturned](#) the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which for over fifty years, served as a legal basis for exclusionary and discriminatory Jim Crow laws throughout the South.

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF) traces its roots back to the conclusion of the Civil War, when SEF helped build public schools for the children of formerly enslaved people and supported the creation of teacher preparation programs for Black teachers and systems leaders. In 1953, SEF's decades-long work to advance educational equity and excellence for Black students reached critical importance in anticipation of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. During that time, SEF [housed](#) a team of four Ford Foundation-sponsored researchers to compile a definitive study of the conditions of Black education in the South.

The legacy of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision is deeply relevant to America's public school system today, especially for students and families living in the South. [Fifty-five percent](#) of the South's public K-12 students are students of color; the South also educates [fifty-six percent](#) of the nation's Black students. While the South is home to a significant portion of the nation's non-White students, decades of disinvestment in Black students and students of color have led to unequal access to educational opportunities. These disparate educational opportunities have, in part, manifested in a gap in academic outcomes. The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the nation's report card, reveals that, on average, Black students in the South score [25 points lower](#) than their White peers on the fourth-grade Reading assessment, and nearly [29 points lower](#) on the NAEP eighth-grade Math assessment.

Despite the steps taken to integrate our nation's public schools, de facto segregation still lives on. Public schools, where a majority of the South's students of color are educated, are becoming increasingly [segregated](#) by income and race. As a result, over six decades after the

Brown v. Board of Education decision, [334 school districts](#) nationwide, with a significant percentage in the South, are under open desegregation orders from the federal government.

May 17, 1954 presented hope for a more equitable and just public education system for students of color across the United States. Sixty-six years later, the evidence of progress toward equal educational opportunity is undeniable, but the work that remains to fully realize the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* is still substantial. SEF is proud to be in the fight for educational equity alongside [dozens](#) of other organizations, and we remain committed to advocating for fairness and justice in education until one's race, socioeconomic status, and zip code are no longer predictors of success.

Raymond C. Pierce
President & CEO

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