

*Brown v. Board of Education (Brown)* was decided on May 17, 1954, by a unanimous Supreme Court decision. Now, 64 years later, I cannot imagine the Supreme Court reaching the same conclusion with a unanimous decision. The 1954 Supreme Court found that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." In language as true today as it was in 1954, the Court said,

"Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms."

Sixty four years later, I am unsure that the intent of the *Brown* decision was ever fully realized. As school choice and charter schools seem to be taking over the landscape of public education and as the federal government is pushing for the privatization of our public schools, I fear that our educational facilities are more segregated than ever. This is also true for the 6.8 million children with disabilities who attend public schools. Children with disabilities are disproportionately placed into separate classrooms and separate schools. Integration is nonexistent for many students with disabilities and these numbers are even higher for students of color. Despite the hundreds of studies finding that integration of students with disabilities is beneficial to not only the disabled students but their non-disabled peers, school districts continue to segregate disabled students from their peers. Segregation is done, not for the student's benefit or the safety of the students, but rather to save money and consolidate resources. The IDEA (individuals with disabilities education act) requires schools to educate children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and in their communities. Yet despite this clear mandate, children are placed in schools outside their communities, often requiring long bus rides to and from school. Parents often hearing that "this is the only school that

can give your child all the services they need.” The starting point is the child’s home school – the school where they would go if they did not have a disability. Too often, this is the last option that is discussed, if it is ever discussed. Instead the districts send all blind kids to school x and all autistic children to school y. Sometimes, there is no school that neatly matches the needs of a student. These students often fall through the cracks and are left to sink or swim in their home schools or are tracked into a separate classroom with no hope of ever getting off the track. I find this reality not only frustrating but in direct contradiction to the IDEA.

One additional frustrating reality is the district’s feeble attempts to integrate children with disabilities with their nondisabled peers. Often, the only time during the school day that disabled students integrate with their nondisabled peers is at lunch. During lunch however the disabled students are seated at one table while the nondisabled students are seated at another table. There is not integration. There is no opportunity for the nondisabled students to speak to or interact with the disabled students. This is not integration. Placing students in the same space is not integration. Passing nondisabled students in the hallway is not integration. Attending the same event in the auditorium but sitting separately from the other students is not integration. Being on the PE field at the same time as nondisabled students but not being able to interact with them is not integration. Going on the same field trip but riding separate buses is not integration. School district’s must do better, must do more to integration disabled peers with nondisabled peers. There is no reason not to mix up the tables at lunch. Is it harder for the staff, does it require more work for the staff, yes, but the rewards greatly outweigh the work required by the school staff. It may require some extra work, some outside of the box thinking, but it is not hard and we should demand more. Segregation and separation hurts our students and our communities. As was true 64 years ago, today education remains a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing them for the future and in helping them adjust normally to their environment. We cannot reasonable expect any child to succeed in life when they are denied the opportunity for an equal and appropriate education.