

Resource 1: Life Long Ago

Name: _____

Was “Separate but Equal” Ever Legal in Our Country?

In 1898 the Supreme Court of the United States announced a decision that it was legal to separate Black and White people in almost every area of life - schools, businesses, hotels, movie theaters, swimming pools, beaches, trains etc. The reason was racism. There was one condition to the decision i.e., the places for Blacks and Whites had to be equal. This is known as the “separate but equal” doctrine. People of different races could be denied access to places but only if the separate places were equal in quality.

In 1954, the Supreme Court changed its decision. The Court announced that “separate is not equal” and that no school was allowed to prevent Black students from attending white schools. While the decision applied to schools, the rule that “separate is not equal” caused Black people to question other laws that did not treat them equally.

1. **Turn and Discuss:** How did the law in the United States change between 1898 and 1954?

What About Buses?

In 1955, all customers in the state of Alabama who rode a bus had to pay the same amount of money to ride the bus. But Alabama had a law that was common in some parts of the country at that time. It stated that Black people were not allowed to sit in the front of a bus. That law made it legal to separate Black and White people on buses. The first 10 seats on the bus in rows 1-5 were considered the front of the bus - for White people only. If a White person got on a bus and White people already filled the first 10 seats, any Black person sitting in the next row (row 5) had to get up and give his or her seat to the White person. And if those seats got filled, any Black people sitting in row 6 had to give up their seat to a White person if more White people got on the bus.

And Black people were not even allowed to sit in the same row as White people!

Turn and Discuss:

1. Explain Alabama’s bus laws.

2. Why do you think Black customers who rode the buses in Alabama thought that the laws were unfair?