

CSWS Research Matters

Brown v. Board of Education

By complicating the story of the Topeka lawsuit, Cheney's study engages and expands current historical debates over the modern Civil Rights movement.



Charise Cheney

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Scholarship on *Brown v. Board of Education* is wide-ranging and prolific. During the past generation, historians have assessed *Brown* and its place in the Civil Rights movement, legal scholars have debated *Brown* and the Supreme Court's role in social reform, and social scientists have analyzed the legacy of *Brown* and the persistence of racial segregation in America's schools.¹ Despite considerable attention and analysis, with few exceptions, scholarly writings on the landmark Supreme Court case have neglected the local stories behind the national symbol. My monograph seeks to rectify that historical omission.

Blacks against "Brown": The Black Anti-Integration Movement in Topeka, Kansas, 1941-1954, documents the political battle among black Topekans over the city's all-black schools. *Brown v. Board* may have made black Topekans Linda and Oliver Brown icons of the Civil Rights movement, but in reality black Topekans were in conflict over the issue of integrated schools. During the 1940s and early 1950s, there were just as many or more blacks advocating for race-based school policies than protesting against race-based school policies. *Blacks against "Brown"* tells their story.



Lucinda Todd and her daughter, Nancy. Todd was branch secretary of the Topeka NAACP and one of the architects of the anti-school segregation movement in Topeka. Photo, dated 1946, courtesy of kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society (Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply).

In Topeka, opposition to school desegregation was strong among black residents because the city's Jim Crow schools provided a rare opportunity for black individual and institutional development. Since the early twentieth century, the Topeka Board of Education had been more or less committed to realizing the separate-but-equal standard set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. Among the five lawsuits incorporated into the *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court case, the dispute against the Topeka school board was unique. Even Oliver Brown's widow attests, albeit in retrospect, that black students who attended Buchanan, Monroe, McKinley, and Washington Elementary schools had adequate resources, equitable facilities, similar curricula, as well as compassionate, qualified faculty and administrators. Washington Elementary was even rumored to have had more teachers with master's degrees than any other school in Topeka. So when the local NAACP began mobilizing against school segregation in the 1940s, some black parents and educators rallied to organize a countermovement.

Advocates for racially separated elementary schools believed that integration would have dire consequences for the quality of black children's education.² Black parents recognized and appreciated black teachers' dedication to the educational attainment and social well-being of their students. Black educators were anxious about their students and their jobs. Segregated schools provided unparalleled, relatively equitable wage-earning prospects for college-educated blacks that were not available in any other job sector in the city.³ These economic opportunities were especially significant to black women who were limited to various forms of domestic work because of labor market segregation.

As mothers and teachers, black women dominated the anti-integration group and proved a formidable opponent to the NAACP. The vast majority of teachers at all-black schools were women whose influence outside of the

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classroom was particularly strong in churches, sororities and women's clubs. Former teacher and NAACP branch secretary Lucinda Todd suffered social reprisals after she became active in the school desegregation movement. "I lost some friends," said Todd, "They thought I betrayed them."⁴ Social retribution wasn't the only weapon in black teachers' arsenal, which included verbal threats, vandalism, and harassing mail and phone calls. Because of the teachers' lobby some middle-class blacks, who may have otherwise supported a civil rights agenda, refused to do so for fear of being socially ostracized. In fact, community support for black schools and loyalty to black teachers was so fervent, that had it not been for the resilience and resourcefulness of a couple of local NAACP members—particularly Lucinda Todd—there would have been no *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

By complicating the story of the Topeka lawsuit, my study engages and expands current historical debates over the modern Civil Rights movement. It is a community study that reveals a lack of consensus among blacks over the message and method of civil rights activism. It also sheds light on a pre-movement dispute among African-Americans over whether or not integration would be wholly beneficial to black communities. Many African-American parents wanted integrated



Mamie Luella Williams (1894-1986), principal of Washington School, Topeka, Kan. Photo, dated 1944, courtesy of kansasmemory.org, Kansas State Historical Society (Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply).

schools, not because they believed the education their children received was inferior, but because black schools were underfunded. In Topeka, the school board provided similar resources for black and white students. Therefore, the intraracial dispute over Topeka's segregated schools spotlights a classic ideological tension in black politics between asserting a belief in equal rights and preserving a sense of race pride. Indeed, black Topekans' fight to preserve the dual education system

provides a unique opportunity to explore black Americans' commitment to separate educational spaces.

Footnotes

1. For studies on *Brown* and the civil rights movement, see James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (New York, 2004) and Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education* (Chapel Hill, 1987); for legal scholars' debates on *Brown*, see Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York, 2004) and Michael Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York, 2004); for social scientists' work on the legacy of *Brown*, see Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision* (New York, 2002) and Raymond Wolters, *The Burden of Brown: Thirty Years of School Desegregation* (Knoxville, 1984).
2. The city's high school had always been integrated and the junior high schools were desegregated after a 1941 Kansas Supreme Court decision in *Graham vs. Board of Education of the City of Topeka*.
3. During the 1939-1940 academic year, the average salary for white and black teachers was \$1,571 and \$1,555, respectively. During the 1951-1952 academic year, the average salary for white and black teachers was \$1,621 and \$1,559, respectively. Therefore, from the year before the *Graham* case was initiated to the year the *Brown* case was initiated, teachers' salaries in Topeka may not have been equal, but they were certainly comparable.
4. Nancy Stoetzer, "35 Years Ago The Fight for this Classroom Began," *Topeka Capital Journal*, 14 May 1989.