

## Segregated Schools: Winners and Losers

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### Goals

Students compare school segregation in Milwaukee and Mississippi during the 1960s, consider the relationship between knowledge and power, and reflect upon the value of education in their own lives.

### Central Questions

How were segregated schools in Mississippi and Milwaukee similar? What's the relationship between a poor education and the choices people have in later life? How important is education in helping people shape their own lives?

### Background Information

In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” facilities for Blacks and whites were legal as long as they were of the same quality. State and local officials quickly passed laws to separate the races in nearly all aspects of social life. Throughout the South, in particular, control of government, laws, courts, police, jobs, banks, business, media, and schools was quickly concentrated in the hands of a white elite.

By 1960, six decades of these laws and customs had left the majority of Black Mississippians uneducated and powerless. Most lived in rural areas, worked as field hands or domestic servants, and spent six years or less in school. Tens of thousands could not read or write. On average, Black workers earned about a third of what white workers earned. The white power structure relied on a huge labor force of intimidated, compliant workers; schools that taught white supremacy and kept African Americans down were key to the success of the unjust system. “I didn’t know colored people could vote,” a Black Mississippian told one Freedom Summer volunteer in 1964.

Meanwhile, in Milwaukee, most schools were more than 90 percent white, while those in the central city were 90 percent Black. Predominantly Black schools generally had poorer facilities, larger classes, and other problems similar to those in Mississippi.

In 1965, Milwaukee attorney Lloyd Barbee filed a lawsuit that challenged segregation in the city’s public schools, the first of its kind in the nation. The suit claimed that the school board intentionally practiced discrimination in the public schools by drawing district boundaries based on segregated housing patterns and other discriminatory policies. For 14 years the city fought the suit, all the way to the US Supreme Court, but in March 1979 the case was settled and the school board agreed to implement a five-year desegregation plan. See Lessons 2 and 7 for more on Milwaukee’s civil rights history.

### Documents Used in this Lesson:

1. “What Is a Ruleville Education?” (1964).  
<http://wihist.org/1DUD9vX>
2. Mississippi occupations and income by race in 1960.  
<http://wihist.org/1wn5ffw>
3. Comments on Milwaukee schools by Black residents, 1965 (excerpts).  
<http://wihist.org/1uUxFM6>

Document 1: "What Is a Ruleville Education?" (Three paragraphs written by a visitor to the segregated high school in Ruleville, Miss., in 1964).  
<http://wihist.org/1DUD9vX>

high school. I will list these problems

1) In the high school it is not uncommon to find classes with over sixty kids in them. There are two with over seventy six. Another has ninety eight taught by two teachers. There are four classes using the gym at the same time. This means that there is little opportunity for discussion between teacher and student. Quite often students have to sit two in one seat. In this ~~kind~~ heat this kind of classroom arrangement would make it impossible to learn anything. Along with the overcrowded classrooms go the overcrowded school buses. This might not seem so important, but in a rural school that takes people in from the plantations and from places as far away as the outskirts of Shaw it is pretty important how the students are transported.

2) of Ruleville had never seen a library or knew how to use one.

3) (Principal has admitted to me in "confidence" that teachers are poorly prepared to teach.) Generally they all go through a segregated Mississippi high school and then get a two year certificate from a segregated Miss. college. With this education they walk into classrooms with sixty people in them.

4) A couple of other problems that arise out of a lack of funds are poor quality text books and no cooling facilities although students are in session from July 5 to August 26. Teachers salaries are among the lowest in the United States so there is not much attraction in going into the field. From the lot of teachers that have been talked to, there seems to be little interest in teaching. One of the students told that the Miss. history teacher spent most of the time talking about the state flower and famous areas in the state.

Document 2: Mississippi occupations and income by race in 1960.  
<http://wihist.org/1wn5ffw>

TABLE 16: MEDIAN INCOME FOR PERSONS, 1950 AND 1960

RACE	1950			1960		
	State	Urban	Rural	State	Urban	Rural
White	\$1,236	\$1,826	\$973	\$2,023	\$2,622	\$1,065
Nonwhite	\$ 440	\$ 693	\$390	\$ 606	\$ 871	\$ 474

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

TABLE 14: INDUSTRY GROUPING OF EMPLOYED PERSONS, 1960 (PERCENTAGE) 17

INDUSTRY	NONWHITE				WHITE			
	State	Urban	Rural Non-farm	Rural Farm	State	Urban	Rural Non-farm	Rural Farm
Agriculture	34.9	3.1	36.0	76.5	12.8	1.2	8.4	47.1
Manufacturing	4.6	6.7	4.4	2.0	23.3	20.1	29.1	20.2
Wholesale trade	1.3	2.4	1.1	0.2	3.2	4.6	2.5	1.1
Mining	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	1.3	1.3	0.9	0.8
Transportation, Communications and other public utilities	4.0	3.6	3.3	1.5	4.8	6.1	3.3	2.8
Retail Trade	8.5	14.4	7.4	1.7	16.9	20.9	16.9	7.5
Service Industries	35.9	55.1	31.7	12.4	26.1	31.1	23.0	10.8
Industry not reported	2.1	2.6	1.9	1.5	1.9	2.2	1.7	1.8

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

## Questions

Documents 1 and 2: “What Is a Ruleville Education?” (1964) and “Mississippi occupations and income by race in 1960.”

With your partner(s), read the documents and agree on answers to the following questions. We’ll discuss them as a class afterward.

1. List three problems mentioned in the first document (“What Is a Ruleville Education?”) that were present in Mississippi’s segregated schools.
2. How would you describe those same three things in your own school today? How is your school different than those 1960 Mississippi schools? Is there anything that’s the same?
3. Look at the tables in the second document (“Mississippi occupations and income by race in 1960”). What kinds of jobs did most Black kids in Mississippi get when they grew up? What kinds of jobs did most white people get? Who made more money, according to the second table?
4. In Mississippi in 1960, nearly every school board member, every elected official, every plantation owner, and every business leader was white. They decided how much money went to segregated schools for Black kids. Do you think they wanted those kids to be uneducated and uninformed? Why or why not?

Document 3: Comments on Milwaukee Schools by Black residents, 1965 (excerpts).

<http://wihist.org/1uUxFM6>

Black Milwaukee residents made these comments about the city's segregated schools in 1965:

- Those schools should have been torn down long ago. I work on construction, help build schools -- in other areas they have everything. The lobbys are bigger than the auditoriums around here.
- The curriculum is not up to date. The textbooks are not what they should be, and the teachers are not in sympathy with the kids.
- There is so much difference between the Negro and White school children. Kids on the side don't know anything about their subjects; the way they conduct themselves and their environments are different. I was really suprised -- the the kids from this side have to play by themselves.
- Most of the White schools have first-class facilities whereas, we have to use the things that they don't want anymore.
- Because they could have lunch rooms and more playground space, more room on the sidewalk and more crossing guards.
- Some of the teachers are prejudiced.
- Well, I could say that the teachers are not rough enough on the kids.
- I feel that Negro children being moved from one area to another is bad. It is unfair to go somewhere where you are not wanted. I also feel that they should have more schools built in Negro neighborhoods and all this trouble could be avoided.
- Some kids don't get the books that they need. They get the old books from the White schools. I think they should have just what the White schools should have.

## Questions

### Document 3: Comments on Milwaukee Schools by Black residents, 1965 (excerpts).

With your partner(s), read the comments and make notes on the following questions. We'll discuss them as a class afterward.

1. List three problems that Milwaukee's segregated schools faced in 1964. Were they similar to the problems you listed for Mississippi schools?
2. Who in Milwaukee made the decisions in 1965 about public schools, like allocating money for new buildings, deciding how big classes would be, or what courses were offered, etc.? Do you think they wanted Black kids to be uneducated and uninformed, like the decision makers in Mississippi? Why do you think that?
3. Think of some people you've met who didn't finish high school. Do they have the skills they need to affect their future? How much money do you think they make, compared to occupations that require degrees?
4. Do you think there is a connection between the education students receive and the jobs they get? What choices do you think you should make about school?