

# Dedication Ceremony - Paige Remarks

*Grand Opening Dedication Ceremony*

*May 17, 2004*

*Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site*

*Remarks by Rod Paige*

*Secretary, U.S. Department of Education*



Thank you. Brown v. Board of Education was a triumph of the human spirit, a reaffirmation of constitutional and human rights. The decision struck down an American apartheid founded on ignorance, hatred, and violence. It was, and remains today, a statement of hope and expectation, a belief that the American people will rise above prejudice, ignorance, and classification to find our common humanity.

Today it is right that we remember Oliver Brown, Linda Brown, and all of the plaintiffs involved in the case. They were parents, students, and neighbors who saw the viciousness of segregation and could no longer tolerate it. These parents rose above the terrible turbulence of history and conflict to fight for freedom - freedom for their children, for themselves, and for all Americans.

Today, we are thankful for their act of courage and conviction. And we are thankful for those who joined them: Robert Carter, Thurgood Marshall, Spottswood Robinson, Charles Hamilton Houston, and the many attorneys, scholars, and advocates involved in the cases that made up the Brown decision.

For me, the decision was more than a legal ruling; it was a ruling on a way of life. I grew up in rural, segregated Mississippi. We lived with segregation and the racism that inspired it every single day. African Americans understood the moral imperative guiding Oliver Brown and everyone involved in the case. We felt the tenacious hold of segregation on our country and our culture. And we knew its terrible consequences -- centuries of prejudice, waste, division, and even death.

For us, it came as no surprise that the battleground was the educational system. Our schools reflected segregationist thinking; they institutionalized separation. By example, many of our schools taught inequality, incivility, callousness, disregard, exclusion, and disrespect. It was a vicious circle. Racism was the cause, and the result, of such teaching, generation after generation, for over 250 years. It still has a hold on our schools today as we confront re-segregation and the exclusion of millions of children from a quality education.

There are some who say the decision remains unfulfilled. They are right! Brown opened the doors of our schools. Now we must build on that decision to make education fully inclusive and fair. That why there are efforts like the No Child Left Behind Act, the next logical step to Brown because it tries to provide equal opportunity in fact as well as law.

Langston Hughes captured our struggle with these words: "Remember my years, heavy with sorrow - and make of those years a torch for tomorrow."

On May 17th, 1954, thanks to a handful of Americans, a unanimous Supreme Court ignited a torch for tomorrow, a torch of freedom and hope. That torch still burns brightly today. We can use it to illuminate our minds, our hearts, and our souls. We will make sure no child is left in the shadows, that no child is ignored or excluded or disrespected. And carrying this torch, we walk into tomorrow, down a path blazed 50 years ago.