

EDUCATION

70 years after Brown v Board, Georgia's promise of integration still elusive

After Supreme Court issued ruling in 1954, change came slowly, and its full impact remains to be seen





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When Henry Mathis was in primary school, he and the other Black students read books that came from the trash.

His southwest Georgia school couldn't afford them, so the principal sourced them himself.

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“He went dumpster diving to the white schools to get books,” said Mathis, who lives in Albany.

He was born in 1955, the year after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the 19th-century decision that had established the constitutional foundation for segregation, including in schools.

That 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision said “separate but equal” facilities for Black people were constitutional. So Black and white schools remained separate, but they were not equal.

Black Georgians describe schools without libraries or musical instruments or even a cafeteria.

That inequity didn't end in 1954 with the high court's [Brown v. Board of Education](#) ruling, which turned 70 on Friday. Mathis would be a high school junior before he sat in classrooms



Across the South, white politicians concocted schemes to maintain the status quo or at least delay implementation in the face of “massive resistance” by their white constituents. In Georgia, lawmakers amended the state constitution to force the governor to cut off state funding to any school that desegregated.

By January 1961, under pressure from the courts, Georgia finally relented. A federal judge had ordered the University of Georgia to admit two Black students, [Charlayne Hunter](#) and [Hamilton Holmes](#). To avoid a legal showdown, Gov. Ernest Vandiver Jr. asked lawmakers to repeal the legal requirement to defund schools that admitted Black students, and by the end of the month, they complied.



Credit: AP

University of Georgia students shout and jeer at Charlayne Hunter (left), 18, and Hamilton Holmes, 19, as they leave the administration building after completing registration in January 1961. Admitted under federal court order, they were the first Black students to attend the university in its history. (1961 AP photo)



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Segregation was officially dead in Georgia. Atlanta Public Schools admitted nine Black students to four white high schools in the fall of 1961, in a carefully orchestrated plan designed to avoid the riots that had made cities such as Little Rock, Arkansas, an international spectacle. It would take a decade to fully integrate schools in the city. The rest of the state followed.

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New report highlights Atlanta's persistent racial inequality

America, and Georgia, are a different place than before desegregation, when lynchings were not uncommon. But de facto segregation — including in schools — remains in many places due to personal choice, housing costs and other factors. Atlanta has the second-lowest economic mobility numbers in the country because of disparities in income, savings and debt, according to an Annie E. Casey Foundation report released this spring. A 2022 federal report found more than a third of students — about 18.5 million — attended schools where 75% or more were of a single race or ethnicity.



said Omirami, who helped to desegregate several schools in Atlanta and other places.

Black teachers paid a price

Some consequences of their efforts were unforeseen, such as the elimination of jobs for many Black teachers.

While doing research for an upcoming documentary about the Brown anniversary, Nina Gilbert spoke with family members who'd participated in the integration of her high school long before she got there. The town's segregated Black school eventually closed, and she learned that the students there started moving to the previously all-white LaGrange High in the late 1960s, ahead of Black teachers, including her mom and dad, who arrived there in 1971.

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Gilbert, an assistant professor of education at Morehouse College, checked the yearbook and saw only nine Black teachers that year. Yet there had probably been a hundred at the Black school, said Gilbert, who was born in 1967 and had to piece together the chain of events.

“So I asked my mother, ‘Where did those teachers go?’ And she said, ‘They lost their jobs.’”

Explore As children and teachers, they integrated Georgia's schools



A former professor of hers at Clark Atlanta University, Leslie Fenwick, wrote a 2022 book called “[Jim Crow’s Pink Slip](#).” It documented a 1971 U.S. Senate hearing where there was testimony about 100,000 Black teachers and principals losing their jobs across the country due to desegregation.

“So you had Black teachers who had to go back to lower-wage jobs,” Gilbert said. “They were totally displaced.”

Many Black teachers had traveled outside Georgia for college, with help from the state.

Georgia gave Black students out-of-state tuition aid “to give some semblance of ‘separate but equal,’” at a time when the state’s white colleges weren’t yet an option for them, one journalist surmised at the time. Calvin Trillin, who documented the integration of UGA, wrote in his 1963 book, “[An Education in Georgia](#),” that to qualify for the aid, the Black students had to study a subject that was not offered at one of the state’s three Black universities.

“You had Black teachers who had to go back to lower-wage jobs. They were totally displaced.”

- Nina Gilbert, an assistant professor of education at Morehouse College

Each year, Georgia paid the difference between in-state tuition and wherever the Black student attended, plus the equivalent of a round-trip rail ticket and room-and-board of \$2.78 a week, Trillin reported. Nearly two-thirds of the 1,425 recipients during the 1961-62 school year were majoring in education, he wrote.

“Black teachers were highly educated,” former Atlanta teacher and school principal Gwendolyn Mayfield said. “So many of them graduated from NYU, Syracuse, Ohio, Iowa, University of Chicago, you name it. And they were educated from those places because the state paid their tuition.”

Black students paid a price, too



implementation by officials and citizens who had been planning the event for months.

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The Atlanta Nine, as they came to be known, were still kids in 1957, when nine Black students desegregated a high school in Little Rock amid chaos. President Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched 1,200 members of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division to accompany them through an angry mob of some 1,000 white protesters.

Explore

Photos: How Atlanta Public Schools integrated in 1961

It wasn't like that in Atlanta, at least on the surface.

In the early years, Black students couldn't participate in extracurricular activities like band. And few white students would talk with them. Some had food thrown at them. The white teachers often ignored the harassment.

Martha Jackson was among those nine pioneers in the fall of 1961. She and another teenager were the first two Black students to attend Murphy High School in East Atlanta. Jackson, whose maiden name was Holmes, had played the cornet, a brass instrument, at her segregated school, but had to give that up when she desegregated Murphy. She also had been in line for valedictorian or salutatorian at Howard High, her former school in the Old Fourth Ward neighborhood, and she knew she would be sacrificing that honor.

But she wanted to prove she was just as capable and smart as any white student.

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Most white students didn't seem to want her there. In one class, a white boy threw wire nails in her hair. Boys bumped her hard in the hallways. No one would sit with her and Rosalyn Walton, the other Black student, during lunch, though eventually one shy white girl ate quietly with them.

Some of the white students began speaking to her, but if she happened upon them off campus, they'd act like they didn't know her.

couldn't take the isolation and loneliness.

Some who desegregated other schools later, after the world had stopped watching so closely, described a rougher experience. Phyllis Jackson and her sister were among the seven Black students who desegregated Atlanta's Southwest High in 1964.



Credit: Miguel Martinez

Phyllis Jackson-Smith, seen here in May 2024 at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, was one of seven Black students who desegregated Atlanta's Southwest High in 1964. She says that white students yelled racial slurs in the hallways and that teachers allowed students to move their desks away from her in the classroom. (Miguel Martinez / AJC)

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White students yelled racial slurs in the hallways and pulled their desks away in the classrooms.

“I was always in a row by myself in several of the classes, and the teachers would say nothing,” said the former Southwest High student, who now goes by Jackson-Smith.

throw it at me," said Jackson-Smith, 74.

She does recall one white teacher who wouldn't let the white students move their desks. And there were a couple of white girls who talked with her. But they weren't from the South, and they soon moved away.

Linda Clonts, among 13 students who desegregated McEachern High in Cobb County in 1965, also felt isolated.

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"The white people stayed away from us. Even the teachers. No one would say anything to you, even if you raised your hand in class," she said. Clonts, whose maiden name was Florence, dropped out within a few months. She later tried to earn a diploma but said she was holding down a job by then and couldn't finish.



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Taking stock

“I don’t care about the Constitution alone or the Declaration of Independence or all the books together. What is important is a goal toward which you’re moving — a goal that is the basis of true democracy above the law.”

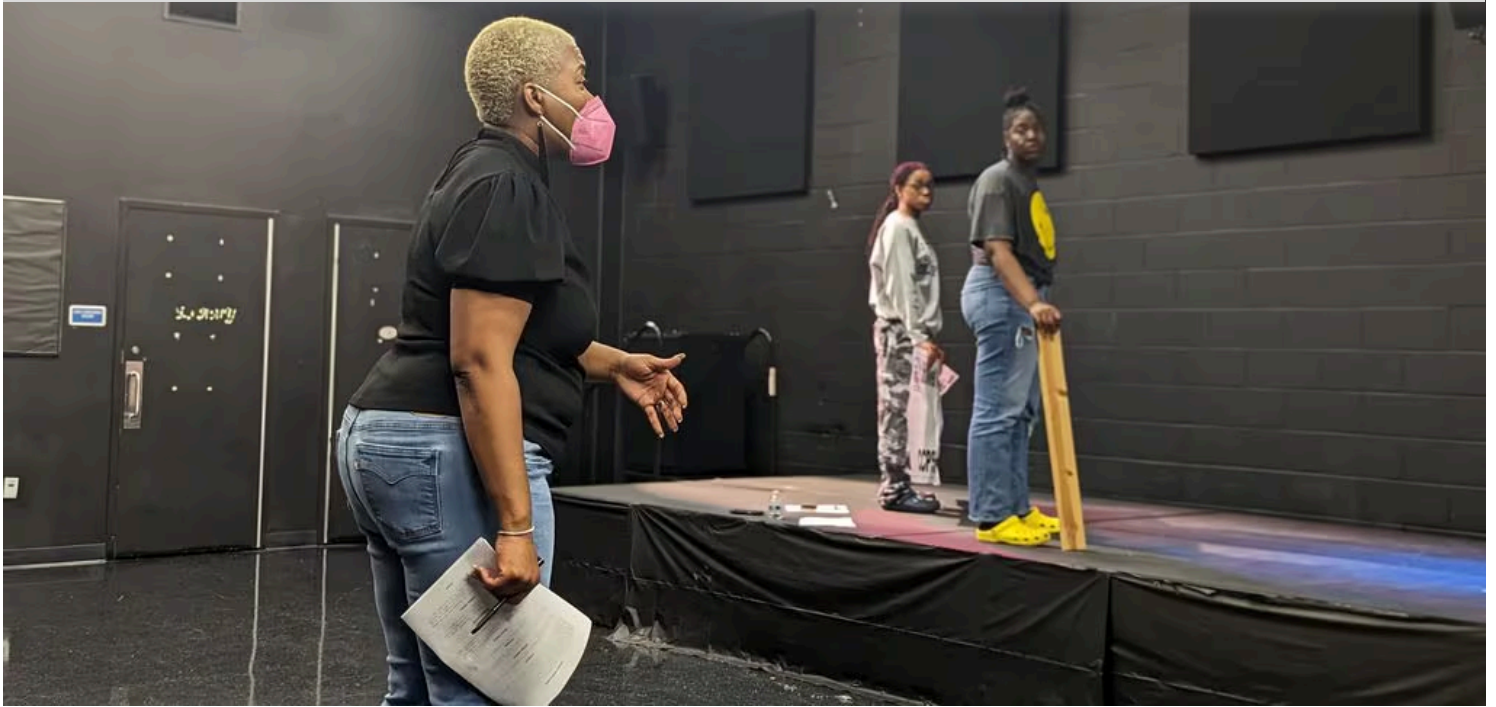
Thurgood Marshall, the lead lawyer for the plaintiffs in the Brown case, said that in 1988, when he was still the only Black justice — the first Black justice — on the U.S. Supreme Court.

Nikki Toombs, a former teacher in Gwinnett County, used that quotation in a musical she wrote for the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. The production, “Courageous Steps,” was performed in Atlanta last month to honor Black people who’d desegregated schools.

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Omilami played a college professor who educates a Black female student about the history of school segregation. Despite the Brown decision, her character explains, some parts of the country remain segregated and unequal.

Toombs taught in a high-poverty, largely Black school that she said was underfunded. She noted her research for the show turned up articles about Georgia public schools that had [only recently integrated their proms](#).



Credit: Larsen Kennedy

Playwright Nikki Toombs (left) leads a rehearsal at Martha Ellen Stilwell School of the Arts in Jonesboro. Toombs, who wrote a musical "Courageous Steps" commemorating school desegregation, says that America hasn't yet fulfilled the goal of Thurgood Marshall, the lead attorney in the 1954 Brown case. (Courtesy of Larsen Kennedy)

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America hasn't fulfilled Marshall's goal yet, she said. "I feel like Brown was a part of us inching towards the goal."

Martha Jackson, that member of the Atlanta Nine who desegregated Murphy High, said she benefited personally from it. She earned a scholarship to Spelman College and thinks people were looking out for her because of her role in history.

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Still, Jackson said she is unsure whether she and the others who desegregated the schools had much of an effect on society.

"I like to think we did. But the progress that we made didn't continue to grow for the better because even as an adult, I find that whites who are friendly towards me still don't want to socialize," she said. "Whatever setting we were in, we tolerated each other, but it didn't extend beyond that setting."

She has no lasting friendships from her time at Murphy High, she said.

those tuition grants that Thimn wrote about, he became one of three Black students enrolled at a medical school in Boston.

He said his education at [Booker T. Washington High](#), Atlanta's first public secondary school for Black students, had prepared him well.

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But Sullivan, the founding dean of Morehouse School of Medicine, said his family had to move him from rural Blakely, with its impoverished segregated school, to ensure he got a good education as a teenager.

“We still have a lot of inequities in our society that need to be addressed,” he said, adding that the decades since schools integrated hadn't fully addressed what happened before. “That doesn't really erase 200 years of slavery.”

Ila-Rose Robinson, the 17-year-old who played the college student opposite Omilami's professor in that musical about school desegregation, attends a public school in Clayton County.

There are only a handful of white students there, said Ila-Rose, who is Black. She likes being surrounded by other Black students, she said.

“But at the same time, because there's a lack of white students at the school, we find ourselves with a lack of resources,” she said. “I really do truly believe if more white students attended our school, we would be getting the same funding as schools that are predominantly white.”

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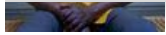
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How the 1954 Brown decision was covered in Atlanta

About the Author



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Ty Tagami is a staff writer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Since joining the newspaper in 2002, he has written about everything from hurricanes to homelessness. He has deep experience covering local government and education, and can often be found under the Gold Dome when lawmakers meet or in a school somewhere in the state.

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