Separate but Equal?  
South Carolina’s Fight Over School Segregation

Lesson Plan

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South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office
Introduction

WHEREFORE, Your petitioners request that…the Board of Trustees of School District Number twenty-two, the County Board of Education of Clarendon County and the Superintendent of School District #22 immediately cease discriminating against Negro children of public school age in said district and county and immediately make available to your petitioners and all other Negro children of public school age similarly situated educational advantages and facilities equal in all respects to that which is being provided for whites…

During the era of segregation, South Carolina viewed the education of its African American students as unimportant. It was illegal for black and white children to attend school together and the state provided little education for African Americans past the tenth grade. African American parents, teachers, and community leaders worked hard to raise money for schools because the local school districts only provided minimal funding to black schools.

Finally, in 1951 South Carolina addressed the disparities and problems in funding public education. It took a group of dedicated African Americans, insistent on bettering the public schools in Summerton, South Carolina, to spur the state to action. Backed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Clarendon County parents began filing suit against the Summerton School District No. 22. As a result, South Carolina passed its first statewide sales tax. The money from the three percent tax was dedicated to building and improving African American schools across the state. It was South Carolina’s first attempt at fulfilling a “separate but equal” school system.

Over 700 schools were constructed, improved, or expanded under the program. Sleek, modern schools of brick, glass block, and walls of windows dotted the state. Rural white schools also received much needed funds. These schools, called equalization schools, are still visible across the state today, often forgotten reminders of the state’s segregated school system.

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1 Petition of Harry Briggs, et al., to the Board of Trustees for School District No. 22, Clarendon County Board of Education, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, SC, 11 November 1949.
About This Lesson

This lesson is based on the National Register of Historic Places Nominations “Summerton High School,” “Florence C. Benson Elementary School,” “Mary H. Wright Elementary School,” and the Multiple Property Submission “Equalization Schools of South Carolina, 1951-1960.” “Separate but Equal”: South Carolina’s Fight over School Segregation” was written by Rebekah Dobrasko, historian with the South Carolina State Historic Preservation Office and author of http://scequalizationschools.org. This lesson is based on the National Park Service’s Teaching with Historic Places module.

Where it fits into the curriculum

*Topics:* This lesson could be used in American History or Social Studies courses in units on the history of education in the United States, the study of African American history in the United States, or on the civil rights movement.

*Time Period:* Mid-20th century

Focus Statement

In this lesson, students will learn how politics and the civil rights movement created a statewide system of school construction aimed at improving African American schools. South Carolina responded to the desegregation case, *Briggs v. Elliott*, by constructing modern schools in an effort to provide “separate but equal” education in the 1950s.

National History Standards

- Standard 4A: The student understands the “Second Reconstruction” and its advancement of civil rights

South Carolina History Standards

- Standard 5-5.3: Explain the advancement of the modern Civil Rights Movement; including the desegregation of the armed forces, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the roles of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, the Civil Rights acts, and the Voting Rights Act.
- Standard 8-7.2: Analyze the movement for civil rights in South Carolina, including the impact of the landmark court cases *Elmore v. Rice* and *Briggs v. Elliott*; civil rights leaders Septima Poinsette Clark, Modjeska Monteith Simkins, and Matthew J. Perry; the South Carolina school equalization effort and other resistance to school integration; peaceful efforts to integrate beginning with colleges and demonstrations in South Carolina such as the Friendship Nine and the Orangeburg Massacre.
Objectives
1) To describe the impact of Briggs v. Elliott on school building and the “separate but equal” mandate for racial segregation
2) To explain some of the ways that state government worked to maintain racial segregation
3) To analyze how racial desegregation affected local schools and/or school districts

Materials for students
The materials listed below can either be used directly on the computer or can be printed out, photocopied, and distributed to students.

1) one map showing South Carolina and the locations of the schools
2) five readings on Briggs v. Elliott, the Briggs v. Elliott equalization petition to the Court, the school equalization program, architecture of schools, and desegregation.
3) five visual images, including a historic map with the locations of some equalization schools, two historic photographs of equalization schools, one historic photograph of Scott’s Branch High School, and a current school photograph

Visiting the sites
Summerton High School is still owned by the Clarendon County School District One, and serves as the district’s offices. The school is located on South Church Street in Summerton, South Carolina. The school is not open to the public, although it is visible from the public right-of-way. Special tours of the school may be arranged by contacting the Clarendon County School District One’s offices at (803) 485-2325 or visiting http://www.clarendon1.k12.sc.us.

The Florence C. Benson Elementary School, located off South Bull Street in Columbia, South Carolina, is currently owned by the University of South Carolina. The university’s Center for Developmental Disabilities and the Department of Environmental Health and Safety are located in the school. The school is not open to the public, although it is visible from the public right-of-way. For additional information, please contact the USC Facilities department at (803) 777-3499 or faccomm@fmc.sc.edu.

Mary H. Wright Elementary School is located at 201 Caulder Avenue in Spartanburg, South Carolina. The historic school is adjacent to the new Mary H. Wright Elementary School. The historic school is currently occupied by the City of Spartanburg and houses the offices of the Spartanburg Housing Authority and the City of Spartanburg Planning Department. For more additional information, contact the City Planning Department at (864) 596-2068.
Why are these two different looking schools adjacent to one another?
Introduction

After World War II, the civil rights movement began to grow and push for African American rights. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led the legal aspect of the civil rights movement, suing for equal teacher pay, voter rights, and equal educational opportunities. In the late 1940s, the NAACP sued on behalf of African American college and graduate students, winning court decisions requiring equalization or desegregation of white universities. Two NAACP-supported lawsuits, Sweatt v. Painter originating in Texas and McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, argued that Texas’ and Oklahoma’s practices of segregation in higher education did not provide blacks with the educational and professional opportunities as those provided to whites. Deciding in favor of the plaintiffs, the Supreme Court ordered the desegregation of the University of Texas law school and the University of Oklahoma graduate school on 5 June 1950.4

As the NAACP turned its attention to education and equality, South Carolina faced a significant educational problem. One-third of South Carolina’s draftees in World War II were rejected by the Army due to illiteracy. A 1947 survey of South Carolina’s schools showed that the state’s school facility investment for whites totaled approximately $221 per pupil. The school plants for blacks reflected an investment of $45 per pupil. The survey estimated that the state and local school boards needed to invest ninety million dollars to improve school building facilities and bring South Carolina’s schools close to the national average in school buildings and equipment.5 School districts were responsible for transporting students to school, and many districts did not provide buses for black schools.

As a result of these problems, parents and students in Clarendon County, South Carolina, decided to sue their local school board for better schools and school buses.6 Through a combination of legal pressure, commitment to segregation, and white fear, South Carolina embarked on a statewide building program to improve black schools in the 1950s.

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5 Peabody Survey, 192-208; Dobrasko, 6-8

The *Briggs v. Elliott* lawsuit originated in Clarendon County, South Carolina. The lawsuit underwent several versions, with the first suit filed in 1948 asking for transportation to schools for African American children. After the case was dismissed based on a technicality, the parents in Clarendon County were forced to purchase a used bus to bring their children to school.\(^7\)

**Questions for Map 1:**

1. Locate Summerton and Clarendon County on the map. Why was transportation to school so important for parents?

2. Locate Charleston and Columbia on the map. Why didn’t the parents in these cities file suits for transportation?

(looking for rural nature of Clarendon County/distance from homes to schools)

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Reading 1: *Briggs v. Elliott* Petition, 11 November 1949


Questions for Reading 1:

1. What are the major complaints outlined in this petition?
2. List the inequalities outlined by the parents in the petition.
3. What does the petition ask the School District to accomplish?
Determining the Facts

Reading 2: From Briggs v. Elliott to Brown v. Board of Education

This excerpt from the beginnings of the Briggs v. Elliott case clearly explains the disparities between the black and white schools in Clarendon County, South Carolina. These conditions were repeated in school districts across the state and across the South. A study of South Carolina’s public school system, released in 1948, showed that the state and school districts invested $221 per white pupil versus $45 per black pupil in school facilities.8 In Clarendon County, African American students walked to school, as no school buses were available. They attended schools with no janitorial services, no central heating, and outdated textbooks. Because Clarendon County was a very rural county, many of the students had to walk ten miles or more to get to school. In 1945, some parents pooled their money to purchase an old school bus no longer used by the white schools to transport their students to school. This school bus was unreliable and broke down often. By 1946, the parents were forced to purchase another bus.9

With the encouragement of Reverend Joseph A. DeLaine, a Clarendon County pastor and a teacher in Liberty Hill Elementary School, local parents worked with the South Carolina chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to file a lawsuit against the school district. The first case against the Clarendon County School District #22 asked the district to provide buses for its African American students. The case was dismissed based on a technicality.10 DeLaine and the local parents regrouped, contacted the national branch of the NAACP, and filed suit with Thurgood Marshall as their lawyer in Briggs v. Elliott. This lawsuit, brought by the parents and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), pointed out the differences between the white Summerton Graded School and the black Scott’s Branch School. The Scott’s Branch school had outdoor privies, buckets for water, old textbooks, and stoves for heating. Summerton Graded had smaller class sizes, indoor plumbing, and new textbooks. The physical conditions of the school buildings themselves were clearly unequal.11 Marshall brought the case demanding equal educational facilities to the U.S. District Court in Charleston, where Judge J. Waites Waring encouraged Marshall and the parents to sue for desegregation of the schools, not


8 Public Schools of South Carolina: A Report of the South Carolina Education Survey Committee (Nashville, TN: Division of Surveys and Field Services, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1948), 192-208.
11 Clyburn and Revels, 22.
equalization. This revised case, arguing that separate schools would never be equal schools, was filed at the district court on May 16, 1950.12

The State of South Carolina lent its support to the Clarendon County School District #22. Robert Figg, attorney for the school district, worked closely with South Carolina Governor James Byrnes to develop a defense strategy for the trial. Byrnes unveiled a massive school construction plan, funded by the state’s first sales tax, aimed at equalizing black and white schools. The plan was in place by the time Briggs v. Elliott went to trial in late May 1951, and Figg was able to argue to the court that South Carolina was already trying to provide “separate but equal” schools for its black and white students.13

The U.S. District Court ruled in favor of the defendants, arguing that South Carolina should be given time to equalize its schools and directing the state to make significant progress in six months. Judge Waring dissented from the majority opinion:

> From their [parents and NAACP] testimony, it was clearly apparent, as it should be to any thoughtful person…that segregation in education can never produce equality and that it is an evil that must be eradicated. This case present the matter clearly…and I am of the opinion that all of the legal guideposts, expert testimony, common sense and reason point unerringly to the conclusion that the system of segregation in education adopted and practiced in the State of South Carolina must go and must go now. Segregation is per se inequality.14

The NAACP and the Clarendon County parents appealed the District Court’s ruling to the United States Supreme Court in July 1951. Eventually, the Supreme Court heard the appeal of the Briggs case, along with three other similar cases from Kansas, Delaware, and Virginia, in the landmark case known as Brown v. Board of Education. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the NAACP, stating that “in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Racial segregation in the public school system was outlawed.15

The impact of Briggs in Clarendon County was mostly negative. The parents that signed the original petition and lawsuit lost their jobs, homes, and land. Rev. DeLaine and his family were eventually forced to leave the state under a threat of violence. Although Scotts Branch High School got a new brick classroom building and gymnasium, and

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15 Clyburn and Revels, 39; DeLaine, 22.
Liberty Hill Elementary was also rebuilt as a larger school, Clarendon County schools, and all of South Carolina’s public schools, remained segregated until 1963.¹⁶

Questions for Reading 2

1. Why is Briggs v. Elliott significant to the United States? Why did this lawsuit originate in South Carolina?

2. What was South Carolina’s response to the Briggs v. Elliott lawsuit?

3. In your words, describe what “separate but equal” schools meant. What should all schools have in equal measure?

¹⁶ Clyburn and Revels, 36-38; Edgar, 126-127.
Determining the Facts

Reading 3: South Carolina’s School Equalization Program

As a result of the *Briggs v. Elliott* lawsuit first calling for “separate but equal” schools and then the desegregation of schools, South Carolina responded with a plan to build new schools across the state. These schools were intended to provide modern buildings for African American students and to upgrade the facilities from small, one- or two-teacher schools, like Rosenwald schools, to larger facilities with more teachers and classrooms. Schools constructed under this comprehensive program are called “equalization schools” after the state’s objective to equalize schools between the races.17

The new governor of South Carolina, James Byrnes, entered office a few months after the NAACP and Clarendon County parents filed the *Briggs v. Elliott* case with the U.S. District Court. Byrnes understood that the NAACP and the parents had a justifiable argument that their schools were unequal and inadequate compared to white schools. Byrnes developed a program based on similar legislation in Mississippi to fund new black schools. The state passed a 3-cent sales tax, the first for South Carolina, to fund a bond of $75 million for new schools. School districts would be consolidated into larger districts and new buses would be purchased and new bus routes would bring both black and white students to school. The State Educational Finance Commission, a new state agency, administered the school building improvement program.18

The first new schools were built in Clarendon County School District #22, but soon school districts across the state were consolidating their schools and applying to the Educational Finance Commission for funds. The Commission required that each school district have one African American high school before it would fund any white schools. Many districts focused on constructing new elementary schools, as the “Baby Boomers” entered school. Education in South Carolina finally entered the modern age.19

Not all school districts wanted to build new schools for black students. Many districts wanted to take the funds from the state to improve the white schools in their communities. Charleston County school officials did not want to build a new black high

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19 Dobrasko, 15, 22-24.
school to replace one that had closed. Some local districts refused to apply for state funds at all if it meant equalizing their schools. Since smaller schools were consolidated into larger ones, many African American communities lost their local schools and community centers. A few leaders of the African American community also opposed the new schools, believing that desegregation was the only acceptable solution to the Briggs case.\(^{20}\)

The Educational Finance Commission had granted most of its money to equalize schools by 1955. Over 700 new schools were built across the state, and over $214 million were spent by South Carolina taxpayers by 1959. The sleek, modern schools spread across the state, prompting one writer to note that “architects have dotted the countryside with clean-cut functional buildings, making little or no distinction in design between white and colored schools.”\(^{21}\) *Briggs v. Elliott* was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision requiring desegregation of schools across the nation. Although South Carolina’s African American students had new schools, they still lacked equipment, updated textbooks, and qualified teachers.\(^{22}\)

Although public schools began to be desegregated in 1963, most school districts maintained primarily white and primarily black schools. This “dual” school system was eliminated in 1970, and many of the equalization schools closed at this time. Often, African American high schools became elementary schools. Schools were renamed for white leaders. Over the years, most of the equalization schools have been altered for central heating and air conditioning, with additions, or have been replaced with new schools. Some schools remain with different uses.\(^{23}\)

**Questions for Reading 3**

1) Did the equalization schools accomplish their purpose? Why or why not?

2) Why did the Educational Finance Commission require school districts to have at least one black high school?

3) Why do you think that many school districts closed the equalization schools when integrating in the 1970s?

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\(^{20}\) “The Byrnes Tax,” *Lighthouse and Informer* (Columbia, SC), 7 July 1951; Dobrasko, 16-17.


\(^{22}\) Dobrasko, 36-37. For an partial list of all the schools built under the equalization program, see [http://scequalizationschools.org](http://scequalizationschools.org).
Determining the Facts

Reading 4: Equalization School Architecture

The design of many public buildings in the United States changed after World War II. Schools were often the first buildings that reflected this shift in architecture. A more “modern” form of design began, as schools constructed in the past were not suitable for education after World War II. In schools designed in the first half of the twentieth century, equipment such as desks and chairs were nailed to the floor limiting the mobility of children and teachers in the classroom. Lighting and ventilation (air flow) in older schools needed improvement. Some areas of the classroom received more light than others and the overall air flow and temperature in the schools were poor.

Across the nation, very few schools were constructed during World War II, as few school districts had the ability to permanently improve their school plant. In addition to the lack of construction, the return of American soldiers from World War II resulted in an increase in the United States’ birth rate. Because these children would first enter elementary school, school districts across American focused their new school construction on the design and construction of elementary schools at the beginning of the 1950s.

The overall look and function of schools changed significantly after World War II. Older schools were usually constructed out of wood or brick, and were either too small or very large. In the 1950s, concrete block was used in the framing of the schools and could be seen in the walls of the classrooms. The use of steel in construction increased after the war, and new schools often had roofs supported by steel beams. These beams were covered in the interior spaces by the ceilings of the classrooms, offices, and hallways.

The new schools typically were one-story, flat-roofed buildings that allowed for future additions. One-story schools also eliminated the need for staircases and fire escapes from upper floors, contributing to student safety. Classrooms located on one floor provided easy access to the outside for the students. One-story schools also had better lighting and ventilation in the classrooms. Rows of windows across the façade (the exterior sides of the building) of the schools allowed an abundance of light to enter the classroom. Architects employed design materials, such as glass blocks, that allowed teachers to control light in their classrooms.

Many schools had classrooms that opened directly to the outside instead of a hallway. Architects liked this design as it allowed for more cross ventilation and natural lighting in the classrooms. The concrete frames of the new schools were covered with brick (veneer), which improved the look of the school. Classrooms were generally thirty feet by thirty feet with nine-foot ceilings and “window-walls.”

South Carolina's schools constructed under the equalization program followed these post-WWII trends, resulting in architecturally distinctive schools across the state. The State Educational Finance Commission, which was in charge of the equalization school
program, required all new schools to be designed by a licensed architect. Architects began to design schools with modern materials that reflected the architecture of schools across the nation. Both black and white schools constructed under this program were similar in design and materials.  

Questions for Reading 4

1) What are some of the identifying features of schools built after World War II?

2) What was important for architects and school districts to include in new schools?

3) Why did South Carolina build these modern schools? Why did architects follow the national trends in school construction?

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Visual Evidence

Map 1: Educational Finance Commission Map


Questions for Map 1:

1) What patterns do you see in this map? What do these patterns tell you about the need for new African American schools?

2) Which county had the most new school construction? Which county had the least?

3) Find your county on the map. How many new schools did your county have? Compare your county to the surrounding counties. What is the same? What is different?
Photo 1: Jane Edwards Elementary School, Edisto Island, Charleston County, South Carolina

Questions for Photo 1:

1) When was this photograph taken?

2) What do you notice about this school? Identify what makes this school unique from other schools today.

3) What else do you notice about this photograph? What would you expect to see at a school that is not shown in this photograph? Why do you think that is?
Questions for Photo 2:

1) What do you notice in this photograph? How is the classroom being used by the students? The teacher?

2) What is similar between this photograph and your classroom? What is different? Which classroom would you prefer to attend for school?

3) What are some of the building materials shown in this photograph? How was the room heated? How was the room cooled?
Florence C. Benson Elementary School opened for the school year in 1954 as the Wheeler Hill Elementary School. Benson served the African American students in the surrounding neighborhood of Wheeler Hill, south of the Statehouse in Columbia, South Carolina. Benson Elementary School had classrooms, a library, a nurses’ office, and a cafeteria/auditorium. There were 270 students in the first through sixth grades in attendance the first school year at Benson Elementary School.

Questions for Photo 3:

1. What are the significant architectural features of this school?

2. How many rooms do you think are in this school?

3. How is this school similar to the school in Photo 1? How is it different? Why do you think this is?
The first equalization school in South Carolina was built at Scott’s Branch High School outside of Summerton in Clarendon County. The school district built this new school in response to the Briggs v. Elliott lawsuit in an attempt to provide better school facilities for the black students at Scott’s Branch.

Questions for Photo 4:

1. Why are these two different schools adjacent to one another?

2. Which school building is the newer one? How do you know that?

3. Do you think that the new school building made up for the old Scott’s Branch school? Why or why not?

4. Which building would you rather attend for school? Why?
Putting It All Together

The following activities will help students better understand the thoughts and motives behind the fight to desegregate public schools in South Carolina.

**Activity 1: Massive Resistance**

Building “separate but equal” schools was one way that the South Carolina government responded to African American demands for better and equal public education. Research other ways that the South Carolina government tried to prevent the desegregation of public schools. How did this “massive resistance,” a term given to the organized white response to the civil rights movement, affect school desegregation in South Carolina? What happened to these laws after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision? When were these laws repealed?

**Activity 2: Separate was not Equal**

Have students choose a white school and an African American school from the historic images here: [http://www.sciway.net/hist/historic-sc-schools-pictures.html](http://www.sciway.net/hist/historic-sc-schools-pictures.html). Compare and contrast the two schools. List ways that the schools did not appear to be equal between the races. Based on the readings and photographs in this lesson plan, write an essay suggesting how the school districts in the 1950s could equalize the school facilities.

**Activity 3: Desegregation at Home**

Develop a timeline/exhibit/essay on the desegregation of public schools in your school district. This activity should use a variety of sources to study desegregation, such as newspaper articles, yearbooks, oral histories, the local historical society, photographs, etc.

Despite the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which also decided *Briggs v. Elliott*, the first schools in South Carolina did not desegregate until 1963. School districts maintained dual school systems (one majority white, one majority black) until 1970-1971. Students should conduct at least one oral history with a family member, neighbor, church member, or older teacher or staff at their school to learn about desegregation in their school district. Teachers may choose to have a speaker talk to the class as a whole about desegregation their experiences. For a balanced perspective, consider inviting both a white and an African American speaker.

Questions to ask the person being interviewed include: Where did you go to school? Was your school segregated? What did your school look like (number of stories, outside building materials, classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, etc.)? What happened to you when schools were desegregated? Did you have to change schools?

The timeline/exhibit/essay should address the following questions: When was the first school desegregated in the school district? What school was it? What schools closed permanently during 1970 when the school district consolidated its schools? Do those schools still exist? Was there any violence or protests?
Separate but Equal?
Supplementary Resources

By looking at *Separate but Equal?: South Carolina’s Fight over School Segregation*, students can more easily understand the social and economic changes that led to changes in the school architecture for African American students in South Carolina and across the South. Those interested in learning more will find that the Internet offers a variety of materials.

**African American Schools in South Carolina**

SCIway, South Carolina’s Information Highway, is a clearinghouse for information about South Carolina. SCIway has collected information on [African American schools in South Carolina](#), including links to historic photographs and websites with more information.

**Briggs v. Elliott**

South Carolina’s Teaching American History program has a [detailed lesson plan](#), along with linked primary documents on the *Briggs v. Elliott* case. Many of these primary sources are available through the South Carolina Department of Archives and History or other South Carolina document repositories.

The [Briggs-DeLaine-Pearson Foundation](#), based in Summerton, South Carolina, is dedicated to improving the lives of students and citizens in Clarendon County. It also publishes books and newsletters related to the *Briggs* case and plans to open a community center that commemorates the people and the history of *Briggs v. Elliott*.

The Smithsonian exhibit, “*Separate is Not Equal: Brown v. Board of Education*”, provides context for the five court cases that comprised the *Brown* decision. The online component of the exhibit showcases photographs of historic schools, detailed information on the history of each case and the individuals involved in each case, and teacher resources.

The National Archives maintains a site with [Documents Related to *Brown v. Board of Education*](#), which include the dissent to the first *Briggs v. Elliott* case written by Judge Waties Waring in 1951.

**Equalization Schools**

Historian Rebekah Dobrasko maintains a website on the [South Carolina equalization school](#) program. The website has a brief history of the equalization school program, historic and current photographs of equalization schools, and an ongoing list of identified equalization schools across the state.

The [Equalization School Flicker](#) page has over 1,000 photographs of equalization schools that still exist today. The page has a wide variety of interior and exterior photographs as well as some historic photographs of schools.