

Education has long been seen as an essential tool of liberation for black women and girls. Even before black people were legally allowed to learn to read and write, black women and girls remained steadfast in their commitment to the advancement of their race and gender through education — yet despite their essential role in the fight for equal access to education, the contributions of black women and girls are often forgotten in the broad strokes of American history.

More than sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that state laws segregating schools were unconstitutional, schools are more segregated than they were in 1968 (approximately 75 percent of black students attend racially segregated schools), and black girls have suffered greatly as a result. Studies show that segregated schools made up mostly of black students tend to be poorly funded and are often more likely to employ punitive tactics such as suspension and expulsion than integrated or mostly white schools.

Research has also found that black girls are up to six times more likely to be disciplined in schools than boys or girls of any other race, putting them at disproportionate risk for “pushout,” or being funneled out of the educational system into the criminal justice system, due to barriers such as racism and sexism. Those same barriers also contribute to that fact that only one-quarter of black women go on to get a four-year degree after high school, and that if they do reach college, they are more likely to need to take out student loans. After leaving college, black women also report having more difficulty paying these loans back.

Researchers know that these “achievement gaps,” or alleged differences in educational performance based on race, are not due to an innate lack of ability in black women students; rather, systems of oppression place a series of obstacles in the way of black women’s educations and careers to hinder their progress toward success. The legacy of Jim Crow, de-facto segregation, is one of these systems. De-facto segregation refers to patterns of racial separation that are no longer required by explicitly discriminatory laws.

So how did we get here and how do we move forward? Over three installments, the Building to Brown series will examine the history of school segregation in the United States leading up to *Brown v. Board*; dive deeper into the *Brown* decision, white backlash and resistance to integration, and the outstanding efforts that black women and girls made to protect their right to education; and discuss the “re-segregation” of public schools and the negative effects it has had on black women and girls in education and the workforce. It will also make suggestions for federal, state, and local policy change as well as the individual- and institutional-level changes necessary to make high-quality public education fully available to all women and girls.