

11 Landmark Supreme Court Cases That Changed American Education

Brown v. Board of Education (1954)

In *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional. It was one of the cornerstones of the civil rights movement and helped establish the precedent that “separate but equal” education and other services weren’t equal at all. African American students had been denied admittance to certain public schools based on laws allowing public education to be segregated by race. They argued that such segregation violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. The plaintiffs were denied relief in the lower courts based on *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Engel v. Vitale (1962) and Abington School District v. Schempp (1963)

In *Engel v. Vitale*, the Supreme Court struck down a New York state rule that let public schools host a short, voluntary, nondenominational prayer at the beginning of the school day. A group of organizations joined forces in challenging the prayer, contending that it violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. The New York Court of Appeals rejected their arguments. The reasoning in *Engel* also was applied in *Abington School District v. Schempp*, in which the high court struck down a Pennsylvania policy that required all students to read from the Bible at the start of each school day. The school district sought to enjoin enforcement of the statute. The district court ruled that the statute violated the First Amendment, even after the statute had been amended to permit a student to excuse himself.

Tinker v. Des Moines (1969)

In *Tinker v. Des Moines*, public school students in Des Moines, Iowa, organized a silent protest against the Vietnam War. Students planned to wear black armbands to school to protest the fighting, but the principal found out and told the students that they would be suspended if they wore the armbands. Despite the warning, students wore the armbands and were suspended. Through their parents, the students sued the school district for violating their right of expression and free speech and sought an injunction to prevent the school district from disciplining them. A U.S. district court sided with the school, ruling that wearing the armbands may disrupt learning. The students appealed the ruling to a U.S. court of appeals but lost, so they took their case to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1969, the high court ruled in a 7-2 decision in favor of the students. The court agreed that students’ rights should be protected.

Lemon v. Kurtzman (1971)

In *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the Supreme Court articulated a three-pronged test to determine whether a particular practice violated the establishment clause, which is now called the *Lemon* test. The *Lemon* case was a consolidation of two separate First Amendment challenges to Pennsylvania and Rhode Island statutes that provided state aid to parochial schools. The Pennsylvania statute

provided funding for nonpublic elementary and secondary school teachers' salaries, textbooks and instructional materials for secular subjects. Rhode Island's statute provided state financial support for nonpublic elementary schools in the form of supplementing 15% of teachers' annual salaries. The appellants in the Pennsylvania case represented citizens and taxpayers in Pennsylvania who believed that the statute violated the separation of church and state described in the First Amendment. The district court granted the state officials' motion to dismiss the case. In the Rhode Island case, the district court found in favor of the appellees and held that the statute violated the First Amendment.

San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez (1973)

In *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, the Supreme Court held that the financing system of the San Antonio Independent School District, which was based on local property taxes, was not an unconstitutional violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. The three-judge district court held that the Texas school financing system was unconstitutional under the equal protection clause because it discriminated on the basis of wealth and was unconstitutional. On direct appeal, the Supreme Court reversed the holding.

Board of Education v. Rowley (1982)

In *Board of Education v. Rowley*, a New York public school refused to provide a sign language interpreter for a deaf student, Amy Rowley, claiming that her academic performance and progress demonstrated that she did not need one. The student could read lips and had minimal, residual hearing. School administrators, along with a sign language expert, determined that the student was able to succeed in school without an interpreter. Her parents sued the school on her behalf for violation of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. A district court ruled in the student's favor, holding that while she was doing better in school than the average hearing student, she was not achieving her full potential because she was unable to understand as much as she would with a sign language interpreter.

Plyler v. Doe (1982)

In *Plyler v. Doe*, a class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of certain school-age children of Mexican origin residing in Texas who could not establish that they had been legally admitted into the United States. The Supreme Court struck down a state statute denying funding for education to immigrant children living illegally in the United States and a municipal school district's attempt to charge an annual \$1,000 tuition fee for each student to compensate for lost state funding. A district court found that the increase in enrollment in Texas public schools was primarily attributable to the admission of children who were legal residents. The court concluded that people living in the country illegally were entitled to the protection of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, and that the Texas legislation violated it. A court of appeals affirmed, and the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case. This case was decided together with *Texas v. Certain Named and Unnamed Alien Child*.

New Jersey v. TLO (1985)

In *New Jersey v. TLO*, the Supreme Court ruled that public school administrators can search a student's belongings if they have a reasonable suspicion of criminal activity. After a student ("TLO") was caught smoking cigarettes in school, she was confronted by school officials, who forced the student to hand over her purse. TLO was charged with possession of marijuana and expelled from the school. Before trial, she moved to suppress evidence discovered in the search, but her motion was denied. The Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court of New Jersey found her guilty and sentenced her to probation for one year. On appeal, the Superior Court of New Jersey, Appellate Division affirmed the denial of the motion to suppress evidence. The New Jersey Supreme Court reversed, holding that the exclusionary rule of the Fourth Amendment applies to searches and seizures conducted by school officials in public schools. The Supreme Court ruled that New Jersey and the school had met a "reasonableness" standard for conducting such searches at school.

United States v. Lopez (1995)

In *United States v. Lopez*, the Supreme Court declared the Gun-Free School Zones Act an unconstitutional overreach, as the case was seen by some experts as signaling a shift in the court's interpretation of the commerce clause of the Constitution. Alfonzo Lopez, a 12th-grade student who carried a concealed weapon into his San Antonio high school, was charged under the statute. He challenged his conviction and the Gun-Free School Zones Act, saying Congress didn't have the constitutional authority to ban guns in school zones. Lopez was found guilty following a bench trial and sentenced to six months' imprisonment and two years' supervised release. Schools were controlled by state and local governments and weren't under the federal government's authority. The federal government claimed that it had authority to ban guns in schools under its commerce power. The government asserted that the law was related to interstate commerce because guns in schools led to gun violence. The Supreme Court rejected the government's claim, holding that the law was not substantially related to commerce.

Forest Grove School District v. T.A. (2009)

In *Forest Grove School District v. T.A.*, the Supreme Court held that parents of disabled children can seek reimbursement for private education expenses regardless of whether their child had previously received special education services from a public school. At issue was whether parents of a student ("T.A.") in the Forest Grove School District in Oregon, who had never previously received special education services from a school district, may be eligible under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for reimbursement of private school tuition. By a 6-3 vote, the court held that the IDEA authorizes reimbursement whenever a public school fails to make a free appropriate public education available to a disabled child.

Note on Sources

The caption text was compiled by Jackson A. Thomas, relying on the sources listed below.

- [History.com](#)
- [Oyez.org, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka](#)
- [History - Brown v. Board of Education Re-enactment](#)
- [Oyez.org, Engel v. Vitale](#)
- [Supreme.Justia.com, Engel v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421 \(1962\)](#)
- [Facts and Case Summary - Engel v. Vitale](#)
- [Oyez.org, School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp](#)
- [Legal Information Institute, School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp](#)
- [The First Amendment Encyclopedia, Abington School District v. Schempp \(1963\)](#)
- [ACLU, Tinker v. Des Moines - Landmark Supreme Court Ruling on Behalf of Student Expression](#)
- [Tinker v. Des Moines Podcast](#)
- [Oyez.org, Lemon v. Kurtzman](#)
- [Legal Information Institute, Lemon v. Kurtzman](#)
- [Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs](#)
- [Oyez.org, San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez](#)
- [Legal Information Institute, San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez](#)
- [Human and Constitutional Rights](#)
- [Supreme.Justia.com, Board of Educ. v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176 \(1982\)](#)
- [Legal Information Institute, Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District Bd. of Ed., Westchester County, et al., Petitioners v. Amy Rowley, by her parents and natural guardians, Clifford and Nancy Rowley etc.](#)
- [Oyez.org, Plyler v. Doe](#)
- [Access to Education - Rule of Law](#)
- [Supreme.Justia.com, Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202 \(1982\)](#)

- [Migration Policy Institute, “Plyler v. Doe: Still Guaranteeing Unauthorized Immigrant Children’s Right to Attend U.S. Public Schools”](#)
- [New Jersey v. T.L.O. Podcast](#)
- [Facts and Case Summary - New Jersey v. T.L.O.](#)
- [Legal Information Institute, New Jersey v. T.L.O.](#)
- [National Constitution Center, “New Jersey v. T.L.O.: The Fourth Amendment in public schools”](#)
- [Oyez.org, New Jersey v. T.L.O.](#)
- [Oyez.org, United States v. Lopez](#)
- [Legal Information Institute, United States v. Lopez \(93-1260\), 514 U.S. 549 \(1995\)](#)
- [Bill of Rights Institute, United States v. Lopez \(1995\)](#)
- [Legal Information Institute, Forest Grove School District v. T. A. \(08-305\)](#)
- [SCOTUSblog, Forest Grove School District v. T.A.](#)
- [SCOTUSblog, Opinion Recap: Forest Grove School District v. T.A](#)
- [Oyez.org, Forest Grove School District v. T.A.](#)