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Educators want to reopen 'Brown' case school

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Fifty-six years ago, the Rev. Oliver Brown and 12 other Black parents helped kick-start the civil rights movement when they tried to enroll their children in all-White schools in Topeka, Kan. The schools' refusal helped give rise to the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* case, which led to school desegregation nationwide.

Brown's old neighborhood school, Sumner Elementary, has been shuttered for years. Now two Black Kansas educators want to turn it into a charter school for at-risk students, most of whom, they say, will be Black or Hispanic. Their bid, which goes before the Topeka school board next month, has a certain symbolic importance: Not only would it reopen the landmark building, potentially to children of all races, it illustrates just how far the discussion on race and schooling has moved since *Brown*.

The proposal is backed by Cheryl Brown Henderson, one of Brown's daughters, who heads the Brown family foundation. She is on the governing board, whose plan includes a proposal to buy Sumner from the city and raise up to \$5.5 million to renovate it.

But Henderson downplays the school's significance, saying it is just one of 16 historic buildings from the *Brown* case.

"I don't want to suggest that there is any uniqueness to this building, because there is not," she said.

More significant, she says, is the possibility that a historic school be maintained.

"You can't afford to have empty buildings that are sitting in neighborhoods; it's a blight on the neighborhood," she said.

Publicly funded but, in most cases, privately run charter schools, first proposed in the 1990s, have become the leading tool of grass-roots reformers impatient with districts' slow progress improving poor and minority children's schools.

Nationwide, charter schools enroll much larger proportions of poor and minority students than public schools, leading some observers to worry that they could be contributing, in a small way, to a resegregation of public schools.

Sandra Lassiter, 58, the project's co-leader and the school's presumptive principal, says the proposal would actually fulfill the goals of the landmark ruling.

"We're going to be doing what the *Brown* case said we should be doing: Neighborhood children and diverse children should have access to the highest quality education," she said.

Co-organizer Betty Horton added, "We want to set up centers of excellence for students who have been left behind in terms of achievement, left out in terms of truancy, and who have essentially opted out of the system."

Horton, 57, says the school, one of three they're proposing, would operate from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., with a customized curriculum, tiny enrollments and small student-teacher ratios.

Built in 1936, the art deco Sumner school closed in the mid-1990s and briefly served as a book warehouse for the Topeka Public Library, but it has stood vacant since.

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