



SYMPOSIUM

MENDEZ V. WESTMINSTER SCHOOL DISTRICT: PAVING THE PATH FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AND BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION

Sponsored by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Coordinated by

Dr. Carlos Haro, Chicano Studies Research Center, UCLA

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Introduction

Seven years prior to the landmark desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, the case of *Mendez v. Westminster School District (1946, 1947)* successfully ended de jure segregation in California. Filed on behalf of 5,000 students of Mexican descent, *Mendez v. Westminster* sought to defend the constitutional rights of children across America. With the leadership of Gonzalo Mendez and three other co-plaintiffs, Mexican American parents, families and local residents organized to battle race discrimination in their neighborhood schools. In what would eventually lead to the desegregation of California schools, *Mendez v. Westminster* opened the door to integration and paved the path for other desegregation cases to follow.

Purpose of the Symposium

This proposed one-day symposium at UCLA, sponsored by the Chicano Studies Research Center, is designed with several key objectives in mind. First, it is intended to inform students and the public about the *Mendez case* and its significance to the *Brown case*; second, to honor the memory and efforts of the many Mexicans/Chicana/os involved in the *Mendez* lawsuit and the struggle over desegregation in the mid-1940s; third, to generate dialogue about race discrimination in California public schools; fourth, to educate people about the important contributions that people of Mexican descent have made to education and the quest for educational equality; fifth, to impact ethnic studies and educational scholarship that recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color. Lastly, the symposium is intended to inform participants about research regarding past practices of de jure segregation with the hopes of informing present day practices of de facto segregation.

Symposium Date

Spring Quarter: Friday, May 21, 2004

Location

UCLA Faculty Center, California Room

- On display at the Faculty Center will be an exhibit of photographs and documents related to the Mendez case. Included among them are pictures of former students, the Mendez family, the Westminster School District's designated Mexican School and White School, as well as copies of court briefs, testimonies and district records.
- Also on display in the Faculty Center will be the historical photographic exhibit, "Fire in the Morning" created by Yolanda Alvarez. This exhibit provides a general overview of the lives of Mexican Americans in Orange County in the early part of the twentieth century.

Symposium Time Schedule

- 9:00am-5:00pm
- Total estimated time: 8.0 hours

Symposium Schedule

9:00am: Morning Refreshments-Location: UCLA Faculty Center, California Room

9:30am

Section 1: Welcome and Introduction

(estimated time: 10 minutes)

Welcome: Carlos Manuel Haro (facilitator)

Opening Remarks: Sylvia Mendez

9:45am

Section 2: The Mendez Case and School Segregation: An Overview

(estimated time: 1 hour 30 minutes: 30 minutes each)

A Historical Overview of the Mendez Case: Gilbert Gonzalez

The Legal, Economic and Labor Significance of School Segregation: Christopher Arriola

Issues of Race and Racism in the Schools: Daniel Solorzano

11:15am

Break (15 minutes)

11:30am

Section 3: The Experiences of Mexican Americans in the Age of School Segregation

(estimated time: 1 hour: video 30 minutes; discussion 30 minutes)

Education, the Media and Project "One Year to 100%": Sandra Robbie

Para Todo Los Ninos: Mendez v. Westminster School District: Video Screening

12:30pm

Lunch (Sequoia 3 for Conference Presenters)

1:30PM

Section 4: Testimonios: Former Students of The Segregated Mexican Schools Speak Out: Round Table Discussion

2:30pm

Section 4: The Educational Significance of the Mendez Case

(estimated time: 2.5 hours)

The Legal Significance of Mendez to California and the Nation: Honorable Frederick P. Aguirre

The Relationship of *Mendez Case* to *Brown v. Board of Education*: Charles Wollenberg
School Segregation in Los Angeles Schools: John Rogers
An Introduction to Researching the *Mendez Case*: Erica Bennett
The Importance of *Mendez* to Chicano Studies: Nadine Bermudez

5:00pm

Closing Remarks: Carlos Manuel Haro (5-10 minutes)

Proceed to Haines Hall 179, The Chicanos Studies Research Center Conference Room for a staged reading of June 26, 1945 Pre-Trial Hearing of Mendez, and others, vs. Westminster School district.

A Brief Description of Panelists' Presentation Topics

Section 1:

- **Carlos Manuel Haro**: Assistant Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Dr. Haro is author of *Mexicano/Chicano Concerns and School Desegregation in Los Angeles*. Monograph No. 9, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications. In 1980, Dr. Haro was appointed by Superior Court Judge Paul Egly to the Los Angeles Unified School District Desegregation Monitoring Committee, and served as Chair of the committee in 1981.
- **Sylvia Mendez**: Ms. Mendez is the daughter of Gonzalo and Felicita Mendez, the main plaintiffs named in the lawsuit. Sylvia is a retired nurse and the former Assistant Nursing Director the Pediatric Pavilion in Los Angeles. She routinely presents on campus across the nation about the *Mendez case* with the intent of carrying on the legacy left by her parents. Ms. Mendez will help to comprise a symposium panel of former students in attendance of the Mexican School, along with her siblings.

Section 2:

- **Gilbert Gonzalez**: As a historian, professor and the author of the well-known Chicano Studies book, *Chicano Education: In the Era of Segregation*, Dr. Gonzalez will provide an overview of the Mendez case. He is expected to discuss the educational, social, and political aspects of the schools segregation and the Mexican American educational experiences in the 1940s. Dr. Gonzalez is a professor at the University of California, Irvine in the School of Social Sciences. He is also the author of *Century of Chicano History* (Routledge, 1990); *Empire, Nations, and Migration*, (Routledge, 2003) (Co-authored with Raul Fernandez) and "Segregation and the Education of Mexican Children, 1900-1940," in Dennis J. Bixler-Marquez, et al, Eds., *Chicano Studies: Survey and Analysis*, (Kendall Hunt, 2001).
- **Christopher Arriola**: As a lawyer, District Attorney and Judicial Chair of the La Raza Lawyers Association, Mr. Arriola will discuss the legal aspects of the Mendez (i.e., de facto segregation, de jure segregation, and the constitutionality of school segregation). As the author of the Law Raza Law Journal article, *Knocking on the School House Door: Mendez v. Westminster, Equal Protection, Public Education and Mexican Americans in the 1940s*, Mr. Arriola possesses great knowledge about the Mendez case and the El Modena School District, who were named as co-defendants in the lawsuit. He is also expected to discuss the historical relationship between labor, economics and school segregation. Mr. Arriola is the Deputy District Attorney for Santa Clara, California; and the Judicial Chair and former president of La Raza Lawyers Association
- **Danny Solorzano**: As the Chair of the Department of Education at UCLA, and one of the foremost experts on critical race theory in education, Dr. Solorzano will discuss the racial aspects of the Mendez case. In his presentation, Dr. Solorzano will examine the relationship between race/racism and school segregation, both in the era of de jure segregation and de facto segregation. He will further discuss the issue of race in relationship to educational policy and practice. His faculty appointment is in the Division

of Social Sciences and Comparative Education. He also has a joint appointment as Professor in the Cesar Chavez Center for Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCLA. His teaching and research interests include critical race and gender studies on the educational access, persistence, and graduation of underrepresented minority undergraduate and graduate students in the United States.

Section 3:

- **Sandra Robbie:** Ms. Robbie is the Emmy Award-winning writer/producer of the KOCE-PBS documentary *Mendez vs. Westminster: For All the Children / Para Todos los Niños*. She will discuss the film in terms of its significance, intent, and the national recognition it has received. Ms. Robbie is also expected to discuss the educational campaign she founded “1 Year to 100%,” which aims to educate students across the state and nation about the Mendez case and seeks to incorporate the *Mendez case* in the California curriculum. Ms. Robbie is the Orange County NAACP 2003 Citizen of Distinction recipient and Orange County MANA honoree for her work in the media.
- **Video Recording:** *Mendez vs. Westminster: For All the Children/Para Todos los Niños*. This 30-minute documentary tells the story of the historic California school desegregation case that began in Orange County and ended segregation in California seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education*. Included in the film are a number of interviews with community organizers, educational experts and former students in attendance of the Westminster School District.

Section 4:

Former Students of the Westminster School District. This portion of the symposium will provide a number of former students who attended the Westminster School District’s segregated school in the 1940s with an opportunity to share their educational experiences. They will discuss with the audience their memories, thoughts, opinions, reaction, and feelings about school segregation, the Hoover School (Westminster’s designated Mexican School), and their general experiences with segregation, desegregation and integration.
Panelists: Eight Former Students of the Westminster School District’s “Mexican School” including: The Mendez Children (Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr., and Geronimo) Jennie Acosta, Delia Acosta, Felix Bermudez, Frank Mendoza, and Theresa Salinas.

Section 5:

- **Erica Bennett:** A graduate student in the Department of Informational Studies at UCLA, Ms. Bennett’s presentation explains how to research the Mendez case. She is expected to discuss her search for primary source materials related to the Mendez case and describe the case as a “living bibliography,” as well as her proposal for an educational documentary video series geared for K-12 students that offers a provocative look at the research process through which the historical documents were uncovered. Her master’s thesis focuses on library studies and researching the *Mendez case*.
- **Nadine Bermudez:** A Ph.D. graduate student in the Department of Education at UCLA, Ms. Bermudez will discuss the educational value of the Mendez case from a Chicana/o Studies perspective. Her presentation will include a discussion of grassroots organizing,

Chicana/o resistance and the role of Mexican American women in the struggle over desegregation. While completing her Ph.D. program, Ms. Bermudez is also a Chicana/o Studies Instructor at East Los Angeles Community College. Her dissertation research examines the *Mendez case* in relationship to education, Americanization programs and Chicano community organizing.

- **John Rogers**: Dr. Rogers will discuss school segregation in the greater Los Angeles area, both in its historical and contemporary context. He has extensive knowledge about school segregation and the many legal cases that have impacted schools in Southern California over the years. Dr. Rogers is the Associate Director of UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) and a member of the faculty of UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. He studies strategies for engaging urban youth, community members, and teachers as public intellectuals seeking to make schools places of equal opportunity and democratic life. John Rogers is the founder and managing editor of Teaching to Change LA, an on-line journal.
- **Charles Wollenberg**: As the author the book, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975*, Mr. Wollenberg will discuss the history of school segregation in California schools. He is also expected to discuss the national landmark desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education* and its relationship to the Mendez case. Dr. Wollenberg is Department Chair and Professor of Social Science, History and Political Science at Vista Community College. Apart from his book on school segregation in the State, he has authored several articles, including Mendez v. Westminster: *Race, Nationality and Segregation in California Schools*, California Historical Quarterly. 53, no. 4; 317-322. 1974.

Suggested Reading

Arriola, C. (1995). *Knocking on the Schoolhouse Door: Mendez v. Westminster, Equal Protection, Public Education, and Mexican Americans in the 1940's*. La Raza Journal. Vol. 8. No. 2.

Camarillo, A. (1990). Chicanos in California. Sparks, Nevada: Materials for Today's Learning.

Carter, T. P. (1970). Mexican Americans in School: A History of Educational Neglect. NY: College entrance examination Board.

Carter, T. P. and Segura, R. D. (1979). Mexican Americans in School: A Decade of Change. (2nd ed.). Princeton, N.J.: College Entrance Examination Board.

Cooke, W. H. (1948). *The Segregation of Mexican-American School Children in Southern California*. School and Society. Vol. 67, n. 1745, June 5, 1948.

Gonzalez, G. (1985). *Segregation of Mexican Children in a Southern California City: The Legacy of Expansionism and the American Southwest*. The Western Historical Quarterly, January, p.55-76.

Gonzalez, G. (1990). Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation. PENN: The Balch Institute Press,

Harders, R. and Gomez, M. N. (1998). *A Family Changes History: Mendez v. Westminster. Fifth Anniversary Commemorative*. Harvard Educational Review, April 25.

Haro, Carlos Manuel (1977). Mexicano/Chicano Concerns and School Desegregation in Los Angeles. Monograph No. 9, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications.

Hass, M. L. (1985). Barrios of Santa Ana: Community, Class, and Urbanization, 1850-1947. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International. Doctoral Thesis, University of California, Irvine.

McWilliams, C. *Is Your Name Gonzalez?* The Nation. March 15, 1947.

McWilliams, C. (1968). North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States. New York: Greenwood Press.

Menchaca, M. (1995). The Mexican Outsiders: A Community History of Marginalization and Discrimination in California. (1st ed.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Mendez v. Westminster, 64 F. Supp. 544 (S.D. Cal. 1946).

Mendez v. Westminster, 161 F. 2d 774 (9th Cir. 1947).

Moreno, J. F. The Exclusive Quest for Equality: 150 Years of Chicano/Chicana Education. MA: Harvard Educational Review.

Orfield, G. and Yun, J. T. (1999). *Resegregation in American Schools*. The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
<http://www.law.harvard.edu/groups/civilrights>.

Peters, M. M. (1948). The Segregation of Mexican American children in the Elementary Schools of California: Its Legal and Administrative Aspects. Master's Thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.

Ruiz, V. L. (2003). "We Always Tell Our Children They are Americans": *Mendez v. Westminster and the California Road to Brown v. Board of Education*. The College Board Review, no. 200, fall, 2003.

Ruiz, V. L. (2001). *South by Southwest: Mexican Americans and Segregated Schooling, 1900-1950*. Organization of American Historians.
<http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/deseg/ruiz.html>

Spring, J. (1997). Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures in the United States. (2nd ed.). New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

Treff, S. L. (1934). The Education of Mexican Children in Orange County, Master's Thesis. University of Southern California.

Valencia, R., Menchaca, M. and Donato, R. (2002). *Segregation, desegregation and Integration of Chicano Students: Old and New Realities*. In Valencia's (ed.) Chicano School Failure and Success: Past, Present, and Future (2nd ed). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Wollenberg, C. (1974). *Mendez v. Westminster: Race, Nationality and Segregation in California Schools*. California Historical Quarterly. 53, no. 4; 317-322.

Wollenberg, C. (1978). All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion of California Schools, 1855-1975. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Newspaper Articles

A Landmark Little Noted-Until Today. Los Angeles Times, Monday, April 14, 1997.

Discrimination Suit Against Schools is Opened in Los Angeles. Santa Ana Register, Saturday, July 7, 1945. Saturday "Victory Edition, Page 1.

Fitting Legacy: Widow of Latino who Sued to Integrate Schools sees their Names on One. Los Angeles Times, Metro Section, December 4, 1997).

First Round in Segregation Suit Lost by County. Santa Ana Register, Wednesday, July 11, 1945. Page 1.

Mexican Families' Struggled Honored: Plaintiffs in a Desegregation Case Opened the Schools in Orange County. Orange County Register. Sunday, March 16, 1993. Local Section.

News Focus: Family's Landmark School Battle: The Mendezes are Honored by the O.C. Education Department for their 1945 contribution to Civil-Rights Law. The Orange County Register, Metro Section, January 24, 1997.

School Board to Accept Decision on Non-Segregation. Santa Ana Register, Friday, June 6, 1947. Page 1.

Segregation Case Lost by County Schools. Santa Ana Register, Wednesday, July 11, 1945. Page 1.

Termina la Segregación: El Juez MacCormick Ordena que Cese en Orange la Discriminación en Contra de los Niños Mexicanos. La Opinion. March 22, 1946. p. 1, 8.

Video Recordings

Robbie, S. (writer/producer) (2002). *Mendez v. Westminster: For all the Children/Para todos los Niños*. KOCE-TV Presentation. Huntington Beach, CA: KOCE Foundation.

Related Cases, Readings and Video Recordings

Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District, Superior Court of the State of California, County of San Diego, 1931, Petition for Write of Mandate, No. 66625.

Alvarez, R. Jr., (1986). *The Lemon Grove Incident: The Nation's First Successful Desegregation Court Case*. The Journal of San Diego History, Volume XXXII, Spring, No. 2.

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Donato, R. (1997). The Other Struggle for Equal Schools: Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights Era. New York: State University of New York Press.

Espinosa, P. (producer). Christopher, F. (director). (1985). *The Lemon Grove Incident*. Documentary. Cinema Guild. Video Recording.

Independent School District v. Salvatierra, 33 S.W. 2d 790 (Tex. Civ. App. –San Antonio 1930), cert. denied, 284 U.S. 580 (1931).

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San Miguel, G. "Let all of them take Heed": Mexican Americans and the Campaign for educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Sanchez, G. J. (1993). Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945. New York: Oxford University Press.

Freeman Bollman, I. (1983). Westminster Colony, California 1869-1879. Santa Ana, CA: Friis-Pioneer Press.

Other Resources

Mendez, Sylvia. sylviamendez@aol.com

National Archives & Records Administration: Pacific Region (Laguna Niguel). 24000 Avila Road, 1st Floor, East, Laguna Niguel, California, 92677-3497. (949) 360-2641 (Houses documents and records of the original court case).

National Archives & Records Administration: Northern Region. Pacific Region (San Francisco). 1000 Commodore Drive, San Bruno, California, 94066-2350. (650) 238-3488. (Houses documents and records of the appeal case).

Orange Public Library. Local History Collection. 101 North Center Street, Orange, CA 92866 (714). 288-2400.

Orange County Mexican American Historical Foundation. Yolanda Morelos Alvarez, Chairwomen. www.OCMAHF.com (714) 990-3060

Stanford University: Department of Special Collections and University Archives. Stanford, CA 94305-6004. (650) 725-1022.