

## The Méndez Case

In 1944, Orange County schools were segregated. There were schools for white students and separate schools for Hispanic students. Sylvia Méndez was an 8-year-old girl, and her aunt tried to enroll her for elementary school in Westminster, California.

School officials told the aunt that they would enroll Sylvia's cousins who had light skin and eyes. But the school turned away Sylvia and her brothers.

Officials said that they had dark skin and a "Mexican" last name. They sent the Méndez children to a school for Mexican children.

In 1945, Sylvia's parents and four other families sued school districts in Orange County. They demanded an end to segregated schools.

Almost a year later, Judge Paul McCormick ruled that segregation of children of "Mexican or Latin descent" violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. That amendment ensures that all persons will be protected equally under the law.

Judge McCormick's ruling was upheld. The case of *Méndez v. Westminster School District* ended segregation in California. Because of the case, California passed the Anderson Bill in 1947. It removed segregation from all California schools.

Seven years later, the U.S. Supreme Court made a landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. That case ended school-segregation throughout the nation. The lawyers who brought that case used the Méndez case as a model.

### Activity: The Committee on Civil Rights

You are part of a committee of state lawmakers gathering facts for a new California civil rights law. The law's purpose is to strengthen civil rights in California.

Your committee should:

- a. Read the **The Méndez Case**.
- b. Discuss the problem in the case study. (What unfairness or discrimination was happening? Why was it a problem?)
- c. Decide what the policy was in each case study. (Remember that policy is the official way of dealing with a problem.)
- d. Recommend what additional policies, if any, might be necessary to achieve equal protection for all under the law. If no recommendation is made, explain why not.
- e. Be prepared to report your recommendations and reasons for them.