

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

SYLVIA MENDEZ

activist

“We weren’t being taught to be smart. We were being taught how to be maids and how to crochet and how to quilt”

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Courtesy of the Mendez Family

Background Information

Born: June 7, 1936, in Santa Ana (Orange County), California

In the 1940s, there were only two elementary schools in Orange County—Hoover Elementary and 17th Street Elementary—and 17th Street Elementary was a Whites-only school.ⁱ

Mendez’s Resistance

After learning about the large academic disparities between the two schools, Mendez’s father decided he wanted his children, niece and nephews to receive a stronger education; however, Mendez was denied entry for being too dark skinned and for having a Mexican last name. Her parents decided to challenge that decision in court, and fight for racial equality.

Mendez v. Westminster (issued in 1945) was a class-action lawsuit against four Orange County school districts demanding they desegregate. Five Mexican American families spoke on behalf of 5,000 children who had been denied an equally well-rounded education due to the segregated public-school system.ⁱⁱ Mendez, at eight years-old, did not understand the gravity this case would have for students of color in the United States in the years to come. In March 1946, Judge Paul J. McCormick ruled that the equal protection clause had been violated, and this decision paved the way for *Brown v. Board of Education* less than a decade later. Today, Mendez continues to share her story and victory, especially to Latinx families, with the hopes of inspiring more social change.ⁱⁱⁱ

Achievements

The five Mexican American families were supported by files in favor of desegregation by the American Civil Liberties Union, NAACP, the National Lawyers Guild, the American Jewish Congress, and the Japanese American Citizens League. *Mendez v. Westminster*^{iv} was not just a win for the Sylvia and other Mexican American children who had been denied entry into White schools; it was one of the first civil right victories, and it catalyzed many leaders and supporters to press forward and fight harder for racial equality. In 2011, Mendez received the Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama, recognizing her and her family’s tenacity in *Mendez v. Westminster* and her continued advocacy 70+ years later as a civil rights activist of Mexican-Puerto Rican descent.^v

