



An Introduction to *Mendez vs. Westminster*

BY JOSH MOON

In the mid-1940s, Soledad Vidaurri went to enroll her three children and her brother Gonzalo Mendez's three children in a California elementary school. Her children, with their light complexions and French surname, were enrolled easily. But Mendez's children, who had darker skin and a Spanish surname, were relegated to the school for Mexican immigrants.

Vidaurri refused to enroll any of the children. Mendez identified four other fathers in similar circumstances, and together they filed a federal lawsuit against the district, alleging it was in violation of state laws prohibiting school segregation based on race. The district quickly folded and offered Mendez a compromise: We'll enroll your kids—and only your kids—if you drop the lawsuit. Mendez turned it down.

In 1947, a full seven years before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Mendez and the other plaintiffs struck one of the earliest blows against school segregation when a federal court in California ruled that the segregation was illegal.

It was a great victory, a precursor to the *Brown* decision and a landmark triumph in the fight for Mexican-American civil rights. At least, that's the simplified synopsis.