South by Southwest: Mexican Americans and Segregated Schooling, 1900-1950
Author(s): Vicki L. Ruiz
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Organization of American Historians
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163422
Accessed: 11/02/2012 17:01

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of
content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms
of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Organization of American Historians is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
OAH Magazine of History.
Recalling her rural California girlhood, Maria Arredondo stated simply, “I remember signs all over that read ‘no Mexicans allowed.’” Historian Francisco Balderrama contends that at the dawning of the Great Depression “more than 80 percent of the school districts in southern California enrolled Mexicans and Mexican Americans in segregated schools.” While Mexican American struggles for educational desegregation remain largely hidden from history, the case of *Méndez v. Westminster* (1946) helped pave the way for *Brown v. Board of Education* nearly a decade later. Indeed, Thurgood Marshall himself was a co-author of the NAACP’s *Amicus curiae* (friend of the court) brief in the *Méndez* case. The narrative that follows briefly delineates the institutional nature of segregation “for the cause of Americanization” as well as two significant legal challenges by Latino parents on behalf of their children.

Between 1910 and 1930, over one million Mexicans (one-eighth to one-tenth of Mexico’s population) migrated northward. Pushed by the economic and political chaos generated by the Mexican Revolution and lured by jobs in U.S. agribusiness and industry, they settled into existing barrios and created new ones in the Southwest and Midwest. In 1900 from 375,000 to perhaps as many as 500,000 Mexicans lived in the Southwest. Within a short space of twenty years, Mexican Americans were outnumbered at least two to one, and their *colonias* became immigrant enclaves. In some areas, this transformation appeared even more dramatic. Los Angeles, for example, had a Mexican population ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 in 1900. By 1930 approximately 150,000 persons of Mexican birth or heritage resided in the city’s expanding barrios. As historian David Gutiérrez has so persuasively argued, immigration from Mexico in the twentieth century has had profound consequences for Mexican Americans in terms of “daily decisions about who they are—politically, socially, and culturally—in comparison to more recent immigrants from Mexico.” Indeed, a unique layering of generations has occurred in which ethnic/racial identities take many forms—from the *Hispanos* of New Mexico and Colorado, whose roots go back to the eighteenth century, to the recently arrived who live as best they can in the canyons of northern San Diego County.

Such a heterogeneous Mexican community is not new. Throughout the twentieth century, a layering of generations can be detected in schools, churches, community organizations, work sites, and neighborhoods. Writing about San Bernardino in the 1940s, Ruth Tuck offered the following illustration: “There is a street...on which three families live side by side. The head of one family is a naturalized citizen, who arrived eighteen years ago; the head of the second is an alien who came...in 1905; the head of the third is the descendant of people who came...in 1843.” She continued, “All of them, with their families, live in poor housing; earn approximately $150 a month as unskilled laborers; send their children to ‘Mexican’ schools; and encounter the same sort of discriminatory practices.”

Viewing all barrio residents as a monolithic group of unassimilated immigrants, proponents of Americanization swung into action during the early decades of the twentieth century. Religious and state-organized Americanization projects aimed at the Mexican population proliferated throughout the Southwest and Midwest. While these efforts varied in scale from settlement houses to night classes, curriculum generally revolved around cooking, hygiene, English, and civics. Frequently, segregated schools were touted as tools of Americanization. In 1899 the Arizona territorial legislature penned Title XIX, a bill stipulating English as the language of instruction in the

**Vicki L. Ruiz**

**South by Southwest:**

**Mexican Americans and Segregated Schooling, 1900-1950**
public schools. Title XIX would later be used as the legislative foundation for local school districts to segregate Spanish-speaking pupils, who, not coincidentally, represented over 50 percent of the territory's school-age population. However, as Laura Muñoz points out in the following lesson plan, Arizona rural schools were "usually integrated."

While some school districts did not segregate Mexican youth, residential and educational segregation frequently went hand in hand. Historian Albert Camarillo has demonstrated that in Los Angeles restrictive real estate covenants and segregated schools increased dramatically between 1920 and 1950. In the tiny hamlet of Fort Stockton, Texas, the street separating the European American community from the Mexican barrio, the white school from the "Mexican" school, was aptly named Division Street. On the eve of the Great Depression, Phoenix, Arizona, represented a western apogee of segregation with George Washington Carver High School for blacks, the Phoenix Indian School, and several "Mexican" elementary schools sprinkled across the valley. The Tempe Eighth Street School was "restricted to 'Spanish American' or 'Mexican American'" youth and staffed primarily by student teachers from the neighboring normal school (now Arizona State University).

In the memories of pupils past, "Mexican" segregated schools were not necessarily conducive to either self-esteem or collective identity. Throughout the Southwest, Spanish-speaking children had to sink or swim in an English-only environment. Even on the playground, students were punished for conversing in Spanish. Admonishments, such as "Don't speak that ugly language, you are an American now...," not only reflected a strong belief in Anglo conformity but denigrated the self-esteem of Mexican American children. As Mary Luna remembered:

It was rough because I didn't know English. The teacher wouldn't let us talk Spanish. How can you talk to anybody? If you can't talk Spanish and you can't talk English?...It wasn't until maybe the fourth or fifth grade that I started catching up. And all that time I just felt I was stupid.

Yet, Luna credited her love of reading to a European American educator who had converted a small barrio house into a makeshift community center and library. Her words underscore the dual thrust of Americanization—education and consumerism. "To this day I just love going into libraries...there are two places that I can go in and get a real warm, happy feeling; that is, the library and Bullock's in the perfume and make-up department."

But what type of training was associated with Americanization? As in other segregated facilities across the nation, the curriculum in "Mexican" schools was vocational in nature. Many teachers and administrators believed that their students possessed few aspirations and fewer abilities beyond farm and domestic work. Luis Flores remembered the principal at his segregated grammar school as a man who didn't "offer help or encouragement." When Flores missed a few days of school, the principal told him point blank, "If you have to go and pick cotton, you get out and pick cotton and just quit school." Focusing on a home economics class for Mexican Americans, one Americanization article typified this mindset. "These girls are very enthusiastic and are learning in this class, things which will make it possible for them to be efficient domestic help, when they go into American homes to work." Historians Gilbert González and Mario Garcia demonstrated that the
curricula in "Mexican" schools, which emphasized vocational education, served to funnel youth into the factories and building trades. In the abstract education held out hope, but in practice it trained Mexican American students for low-status, low-paying jobs. Perhaps some Americanization proponents had their own doubts about their enterprise, as noted by the provocative title to the article, "Does it Pay to Educate a Mexican?"

Schools, in some instances, did raise expectations. Imbued with the American Dream, young people believed that hard work would bring material rewards and social acceptance. In fact, one California grower disdained education for Mexicans because it would give them "tastes for things they can't acquire." Some teenage women aspired to college while others planned careers as secretaries. "I want to study science or be a stenographer," related one Colorado adolescent. "I thinned beets this spring, but I believe it is the last time. The girls who don't go to school will continue to top beets the rest of their lives."

I contend that the impact of Americanization was felt most keenly at the level of personal aspiration. "We felt that if we worked hard, proved ourselves, we would become professional people," remembered one young woman.

Braced with such idealism, Mexican Americans faced prejudice, segregation, and economic segmentation. Though they perceived themselves as Americans, others perceived them as less than desirable foreigners. The *Saturday Evening Post*, for example, ran a series of articles urging the restriction of Mexican immigration. The titles tell the story: "The Mexican Invasion," "Wet and Other Mexicans," and "The Alien on Relief."

With the Great Depression, rhetoric exploded into action. Between 1931 and 1934, an estimated one-third of the Mexican population in the United States (over 500,000 people) was either deported or repatriated to Mexico, even though the majority (an estimated 60 percent) were native U.S. citizens. Mexicans were the only immigrants targeted for removal. Proximity to the Mexican border, the physical distinctiveness of mestizos, and easily identifiable barriers influenced immigration and social welfare officials to focus their efforts solely on the Mexican people. From Los Angeles, California, to Gary, Indiana, Mexicans were either summarily deported by immigration agencies or persuaded to depart voluntarily by duplicitous social workers who greatly exaggerated the opportunities awaiting them south of the border. Policies of segregation in public facilities compounded the climate surrounding deportations and repatriations.

Even under these circumstances Mexican parents sought educational equity for their children. Before 1931 Mexican American and European American youngsters in Lemon Grove, California, a sleepy agricultural community north of San Diego, attended the same school. In January 1931 the local school board built a separate facility for Mexican pupils across the tracks in the barrio. The "new" two-room facility resembled a barn hastily furnished with second-hand equipment, supplies, and books. Forming el Comité de Vecinos de Lemon Grove, local parents voted to boycott the school and to seek legal redress. Except for one household, every family kept the children home. With the assistance of the Mexican Consul, the comité hired attorneys on behalf of the eighty-five children affected and filed suit. Using the Americanization banner, board members justified their actions on the grounds that a separate facility was necessary to meet the needs of non-English-speaking children. To counter this argument, students "took the stand to prove their knowledge of English." In *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove School District*, Judge Claude Chambers ordered the "immediate reinstatement" of Mexican children to their old school. During a reign of deportations and repatriations, Mexican immigrants had mustered the courage to protest segregation in education, and they had won. *Comadres and compadres* (godparents) had banded together for grassroots political action. These immigrant parents, moreover, had sought the assistance of the Mexican Consul in their effort to provide equal opportunities for their U.S. born children. Equally important, this case may represent "the first successful court action in favor of school desegregation in the United States." Certainly it was an early victory.

In shaping a legal strategy to challenge the constitutionality of segregation per se, NAACP lawyers began experimenting with sociological arguments to demonstrate the inherent inequality of racial segregation. At this time, League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) lawyers were implementing such a strategy in a challenge to school segregation in California filed by Mexican American parents in Orange County, California. NAACP lawyers, including Thurgood Marshall, followed *Méndez v. Westminster* closely, and they filed an *Amicus curiae* brief.

Gonzalo Méndez, a naturalized U.S. citizen and a relatively prosperous tenant farmer, and his Puerto Rico born wife Felicitas
attempted to send their three children, Sylvia, Gonzalo Jr., and Geronimo to the 17th Street School, the elementary Gonzalo himself had attended as a child. But times had changed; the Westminster school district, like its counterparts throughout Orange County, had drawn boundaries around Mexican neighborhoods, ensuring de facto segregation. Placement of children, furthermore, was also based on Spanish surnames and phenotypes. As the preeminent commentator on California life Carey McWilliams stated, "Occasionally the school authorities inspect the children so that the offspring of a Mexican mother whose name may be O'Shaughnessy will not slip into the wrong school."

After their children were turned away, Gonzalo and Felícitas Méndez organized other parents, including World War II veterans, and they "persuaded the school board to propose a bond issue for construction of a new, integrated school." When the measure failed, the school board refused to take further action. Méndez then enlisted the help of LULAC and hired attorney David Marcus. On behalf of their children and five thousand others, Gonzalo and Felícitas Méndez with four other families filed suit against the Westminster, Garden Grove, Santa Ana, and El Modena school districts in Orange County in 1945.

The superintendents reiterated both the tired stereotypes of the nineteenth century and the rhetoric of twentieth-century Americanization. The Garden Grove superintendent boldly asserted that "Mexicans are inferior in personal hygiene, ability and in their economic outlook." In addition to the image of "dirty" Mexican children, another school district chief noted that these youngsters needed separate schools given their lack of English proficiency, that they "were handicapped in interpreting English words because their cultural background" prevented them from learning Mother Goose rhymes.

Marcus devised a two-fold strategy; he questioned the constitutionality of educational segregation and called in expert witnesses—social scientists who challenged these assumptions about Mexican American children and the supposed need for separate schools. Like Robert Alvarez fourteen years before her in the Lemon Grove case, eight-year-old Sylvia Méndez took the stand. "I had to testify because [school authorities] said we didn't speak English."

Taking almost a year to formulate his decision, Judge Paul McCormick "ruled that segregation of Mexican youngsters found no justification in the laws of California and furthermore was a clear denial of the 'equal protection' clause of the Fourteenth Amendment." He further condemned separation for Americanization by stating that "evidence clearly shows that Spanish-speaking children are retarded in learning English by lack of exposure to its use by segregation...." Noting that since seventh graders at the El Modena "Mexican" school had higher standardized test scores than their peers at the white school, McCormick surmised that children were segregated not on pedagogical rationale but on their Spanish surnames.

The school district appealed the decision, partly on a states' rights argument that the federal court had no jurisdiction in the matter. The importance of Judge McCormick's ruling was not lost on civil rights activists. Amicus curiae briefs were filed by the American Jewish Congress, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Lawyers Guild, the Japanese American Citizens League, and the NAACP. California Attorney General Robert W. Kenney even composed his own supporting brief. Nationally, hopes were high that this would be the test case before the U.S. Supreme Court. In McWilliams's words, "the decision may sound the death knell of Jim Crow in education." When the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court in 1947 upheld McCormick's ruling, the Orange County school districts decided to desegregate and drop the case, dashed the heightened expectations.

Méndez v. Westminster assumes national significance through its tangible connections to Brown v. Board of Education in three interrelated areas in addition to the direct involvement of NAACP.
attorney Thurgood Marshall. First, Judge McCormick, in deliberating his decision, relied not just on legal precedent but on social science and education research. As Charles Wollenberg noted, “much of the social and educational theory expressed by Judge McCormick anticipated Earl Warren’s historic opinion in the Brown case.” Indeed, the U.S. Supreme Court cited seven academic studies in its landmark 1954 ruling. Second, “it was the first time that a federal court had concluded that the segregation of Mexican Americans in public schools was a violation of state law” and unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment because of the denial of due process and equal protection. This case posed a federal challenge, though limited in scope, to Plessy v. Ferguson. Third, the Anderson bill, passed in 1947, was the direct result of the M?ndez case. This measure repealed all California school codes mandating segregation and was signed into law by then Governor Earl Warren, who seven years later would preside over the Brown case.

M?ndez v. Westminster would also be used as a precedent in cracking school segregation in Texas and Arizona. Again, with the aid of LULAC, Mexican American parents, led by Minerva Franco, successfully overturned the segregationist policies of local schools. In Minerva Franco v. Bastrop Independent School District (1947), federal district judge Ben Rice cited the M?ndez case in crafting his own path-breaking decision. Moving beyond the California ruling, Rice “specifically declared unconstitutional the segregation of Mexican Americans in separate classrooms within ‘integrated’ schools.” For monolingual Spanish speakers entering the first grade, exceptions could be made so they could receive the specialized instruction necessary to transition to integrated second grade classes.

The legacy of the M?ndez case, however, has only recently been acknowledged. On the fiftieth anniversary of the ruling, the Orange County superintendent informed a reporter that he knew nothing of the case and the district had not planned any commemorative activity. However, a year later the Orange County Board of Education passed a resolution honoring Gonzalo M?ndez. Furthermore, the Santa Ana Unified School District broke ground for a new junior high named in honor of Gonzalo and Felicita M?ndez. Once a battleground for desegregation, the Westminster schools of the 1990s have been touted as “a model of integration” with youngsters of color representing two-thirds of the student body. Although recognizing that American life had changed over the last half century, Felicita M?ndez in 1996 expressed concern over rising nativism reminding her of a time “when whites told us to stay in our place.” We remember the quiet courage of Latino parents, like the M?ndezes, who fought for educational equity. M?ndez v. Westminster was certainly a crucial case in the multiple struggles for school desegregation, one that forecast the rationale of the Warren Court in Brown v. Board of Education.

Bibliography