

October 22, 2007: Recognizing the 60th Anniversary of the Mendez v. Westminster Decision

The Honorable Loretta Sanchez

RECOGNIZING THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MENDEZ V. WESTMINSTER DECISION

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Mr. Speaker, this historic case took place in my hometown and I get to represent that area of central Orange County. The case is really about many families. The Mendez family was the first family in the brief. It was also about many areas of Orange County, not just Westminster. It covered the central portion because in those days, of course, there were the white schools and there were the Mexican schools.

Now the Mexican schools were interesting because it wasn't just Mexicans who went there. It was anybody who looked different. Japanese Americans went there. Native Americans went there. Black Americans went there.

And the case in point was that when the Japanese family was interned and was able to hold onto their property by having Gonzalo Mendez farm it, he began to make more money and so he was in a position to hire lawyers, a lawyer out of Texas and a lawyer out of Los Angeles, to come and fight the issue of why do some children go to the white school and some go to the Mexican school.

You see, when Sylvia's aunt took her children and Sylvia down to the school that day, now that they had moved to a new property where they could farm, when they went down the block to the local school, the children of the aunt were allowed to go to the school because they were lighter in skin. But Sylvia was darker in her complexion, and she was told that those children must go to the Mexican school across town. And having taken these children back with her and saying that was not fair, the discussion went on in the family. And Felicitas, I know, like any mother and any wife would do, sat up all night and shook her husband Gonzalo and said: You're making money now, this isn't fair, do something about it. And that is how they came together as families to put forward such an important decision. And Thurgood Marshall was part of that, representing the NAACP at the time. And, in turn, when we were able to change the law in California, that law was part of the basis for Brown v. Board of Education at the national level.

Why do we pass such a resolution today? Because we have to keep reminding ourselves of our history and of the importance of change and what that means. I will tell you why. Sylvia Mendez, the darker daughter who was not allowed in the school, the very case around her, she didn't even know that this had occurred. Sylvia read it in college in a history book. And as she was reading it, she said, Could that be me and could that be my parents? And why didn't they ever tell me about it?

This is the reason we remember, so that all children across our Nation will understand that all of them will get the opportunity that is America.

