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Mendez v. Westminster set legal precedent for national desegregation laws

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez introduced H.Con.Res.200 in the House of Representatives today recognizing Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez for ending segregation in schools in Orange County, California, and for setting the precedent for the historic Brown vs. Board of Education case, which ended segregation in schools across the United States.

"Most people know about the historic legal case in Topeka, Kansas that ended segregation on a national level, but many don't realize that the fight for equality began in Orange County and involved Latinos," said Congresswoman Sanchez. "This is an event in our history that should be honored and remembered."

The Mendez family moved to Westminster, California in 1943 to tend a farm they were renting from a Japanese family that had been sent to an internment camp during World War II. They attempted to register their children in school, but were denied because of segregationist policies. They organized other parents facing the same fate and took their case to court against the Westminster, Anaheim, Santa Ana, and El Modena school districts in an attempt to integrate schools in Orange County.

The case, Mendez v. Westminster, was decided in favor of the Mendez family and the other plaintiffs in 1946. The Mendez family also won the appeal in 1947.

This historic case brought together a number of civil rights organizations that contributed amicus briefs, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Jewish Congress, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Lawyers' Guild, and the Japanese American Citizens League. Eight years after the first Mendez case was decided, Thurgood Marshall argued the Brown vs. Board of Education case before the U.S. Supreme Court, relying in part on the Mendez vs. Westminster case as legal precedent.

"As we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision next year, I hope to honor a family of pioneers that opened the possibility for all children, regardless of race or ethnicity, to enjoy a quality public school education," added Sanchez.