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Inland Empire Schools and *Mendez v. Westminster*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
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in

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by

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December 2012

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The Thesis of Amanda Marie Liang is approved:

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## **Inland Empire Schools and *Mendez v. Westminster***

The ruling from the Orange County case *Mendez v. Westminster* is generally given credit for the end of de jure segregation of Mexican American<sup>1</sup> students in California. The case declared that segregating Mexican American students based on national origin or ethnicity was illegal and led to California Education Code changes that abolished sections which formerly allowed school districts to segregate students with different racial backgrounds. Events leading up to *Mendez v. Westminster* have been researched, but little attention has been given to the events after the case, especially in school districts that were not a part of the *Mendez* lawsuit. In this paper I focus on the actions taken by schools and different communities' members in the Inland Empire during and after *Mendez v. Westminster*.

Schools segregating Mexican American students from their Anglo peers were common throughout the Inland Empire and the *Mendez v. Westminster* ruling demanded attention from the Inland Empire school systems. Throughout this paper I briefly outline the history of "Mexican schools" focusing on the impact of *Mendez v. Westminster* and other factors on desegregation. I look at the reactions of both Anglo and Mexican American community members to the process. Finally I show how and why some school districts, such as Ontario, were able to move relatively quickly in integrating Mexican American students after the *Mendez v. Westminster* ruling. Ontario school district, I believe, was able to move quickly in desegregating their schools due to a number of

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<sup>1</sup> The term Mexican American is used herein for convenience to designate all persons of Mexican descent who lived in the United States regardless of whether where they were born or their citizenship.

factors. First, they had been considering desegregating their schools prior to *Mendez v. Westminster*. Second, they were influenced by the changing academic thought regarding segregation. Third, government programs introduced during World War II encouraged schools and educators to rethink their treatment of minority groups and encouraged them to aim for more equality in education. Finally, Mexican Americans in the Inland Empire actively and successfully worked for equal treatment and they made it clear that they expected full access to public facilities.

### **Historiography**

The events leading up to *Mendez v. Westminster* have been researched, but little attention has been given to the events after the case. There are, though, several researchers who have detailed the events leading up to *Mendez v. Westminster* and the events that occurred during the case. Their research is important to examine in order to fully understand the process which led to the segregation of Mexican American students and the eventual desegregation of them.

Looking at the impact that *Mendez v. Westminster* had on California and Inland Empire schools requires looking at the history of legal statutes and Education Code in California that addressed the education of minority children. It also requires looking at the history of institutions such as school districts around the Inland Empire. Examining the history of Mexican families' immigration into California and the Inland Empire is essential to understanding the reactions of both the Mexican Americans and the white members of the communities. It is also important to look at national and international events happening during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly during the 1940s.

Since World War II occurred during part of this time period, this and events afterward influenced and changed the thinking of many Americans regarding racial and ethnic equality.

One main area I focus on is the decision reached in *Mendez v. Westminster*, the case that declared segregation of students due to national origin illegal in California. While the events preceding, during, and after the monumental *Brown v. Board of Education* case have been widely studied and written about, the case *Mendez v. Westminster* has received much less attention. Both cases argued the injustice of school segregation and ended in the desegregation of schools. While *Brown*, since it was taken to the Supreme Court, carried legal weight across the United States, *Mendez* only did so in California. Still, the *Mendez* case and ruling directly impacted the legal strategies taken in *Brown* and therefore affected schools nationwide.

One of the most comprehensive resources about the *Mendez* case is Phillipa Strum's *Mendez v. Westminster: School Desegregation and Mexican American Rights*. Strum traces the events that took place before and during the *Mendez* trial she points out the significance the case had in desegregating schools in California. While Strum does mention some of the desegregation efforts that took place after the court's decision, few details are given and the impact the decision had on schools outside Orange County is largely left unmentioned.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at the development of segregated "Mexican schools" in California, understanding why they were formed, and the reasons communities supported them is

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<sup>2</sup> Phillipa Strum, *Mendez v. Westminster: School Desegregation and Mexican-American Rights* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2010).



also critical. This allows a better understanding of the communities' support or lack of support for them during and after *Mendez* and allows me to examine why changes in support for them occurred. Looking at the increase in immigration from Mexico from 1910 until the 1940s and the relationship that Mexican American communities and Anglo communities had is also important to understand the reasons segregated schools were developed. A few sources have successfully done this. Gilberto Gonzalez's article "Segregation of Mexican Children in a Southern California City: The Legacy of Expansionism and the American Southwest" looks at the political and social relations of the Mexican American and Anglo communities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His article examines the first "Mexican schools" established in California and the reasons communities cited for creating them. Gonzalez's comparisons of the subjects studied and the learning conditions in the "Mexican schools" compared to those in the schools for Anglo children are valuable, since they show how education of students in these schools differed and gives insight as to why it was important for desegregation to occur in order to provide equal education opportunities for Mexican American students. Gonzalez also looks at the dismantling of segregated schools in Santa Ana after *Mendez* and the reactions from both the Anglo and Mexican communities. Gonzalez's article gives good information on the impact that *Mendez* had on schools in Santa Ana.<sup>3</sup>

Other authors have also focused on the events leading up to the *Mendez* case and the trial's proceedings. Charles Wollenberg wrote about the case in both the article "*Mendez v. Westminster*: Race, Nationality and Segregation in California Schools" and in

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<sup>3</sup> Gilbert G. Gonzalez. "Segregation of Mexican Children in a Southern California City: The Legacy of Expansionism and the American Southwest," *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 16 No. 1 (Jan. 1985).

the book *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1885-1975*. Particularly helpful to my investigation is the information Wollenberg provides regarding “Mexican schools” in surrounding counties, including those in Ontario and Riverside. He briefly mentions the circumstances that led them to segregating students and the actions taken by the districts after the *Mendez* ruling. Both schools decided to desegregate the “Mexican schools”, but information on the reactions of the community and educators is not given.<sup>4 5</sup>

Another researcher who has provided information on “Mexican schools” in the Inland Empire is Irving Hendrick. While the information is limited, his research looks at instances of the segregation of Mexican American students in the Inland Empire. Hendrick’s report about education and minority children in California looks at all minority ethnicities, including Mexican Americans.<sup>6</sup> The report examines the increased segregation of Mexican American students in California in the 1920s, which mirrored the increased immigration from Mexico, and the “Mexican schools” that were eventually built. Not only does Hendrick look at schools in the Orange County area, as many of researchers have focused on, but he examines schools in Ontario, San Bernardino, and Riverside. Looking at board minutes of the school districts he discusses the reasons districts gave for creating the schools, which, according to the districts, were to provide

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<sup>4</sup> Charles M. Wollenberg, “*Mendez v. Westminster*: Race, Nationality and Segregation in California Schools,” *California Historical Quarterly*, 53 (Winter 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Charles M. Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1885-1975* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>6</sup> Irving G. Hendrick, *The Education of Non-Whites in California, 1849-1970* (San Francisco: R & E Research Associates, 1977),

“Americanization” classes and to specialize instruction for students who lacked proficiency in English. Hendrick briefly mentions the *Mendez* trial and the ruling, but little information is given about the process of desegregating the schools, except a mention of the reluctance of school boards who wanted to please their constituents. It is clear that the period of time immediately after *Mendez* has received little scholarly attention.

The *Mendez v. Westminster* decision declared that it was not legal to have separate schools for students based on their national origin and home language. It led to the repeal of California Education Code that had permitted segregated schools in California. The decision impacted students all over California and directed school districts to begin the process of desegregation. The Inland Empire was one of the areas in California where a large number of “Mexican schools” had been created and *Mendez* surely affected the region, yet little research has been done to examine how the schools and students in the Inland Empire were impacted by the decision. Discovering how the school districts, community members, and students were affected and what changes were made will allow a better look into the education of Mexican Americans and other minority students during the 1940s and 1950s. It will also show what influences community support of policy changes in schools and how community support or lack of support can affect the way and to what extent the law is followed.

### **Background and *Mendez***

Before looking at *Mendez v. Westminster* and the elimination of “Mexican schools” in California, I will first examine the history of Mexican Americans in

California and their relationships with the Anglo communities. I will also trace the beginning of segregated schools for Mexican American students, looking at why they were formed and how they became widely used in many California school districts.

While Mexican Americans were always present in California, immigration from Mexico increased in California during the early twentieth century. According to the United States census, in 1910 there were 58,188 Latinos living in California. In 1940 the number of Latinos had increased to 368,013.<sup>7</sup> The acceleration of immigration from Mexico was influenced by situations in both Mexico and in the United States. Pushing Mexicans out of their native land were political and economic factors including the loss of farmland by many Mexican farmers, the increase in the cost of living, a surplus of labor, and a decline in wages. During the same period of time, advances in irrigation and the ability to transport food, using refrigerated railroad cars, to the east led to a demand for laborers to work in California citrus groves and vegetable fields. The need for laborers in California gave many Mexicans the pull leading to their immigration to California.<sup>8</sup>

Mexican immigrants often settled in small *colonias*, or villages, located next to the citrus groves or vegetable fields where they worked. At first many of the laborers who came to California were men who had left their families in Mexico and planned to return to visit their families often. Later, though, as border crossing became more difficult, the circular migration lessened and many of the workers brought their families

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<sup>7</sup> David E. Hayes-Bautista. *La Nueva California: Latinos in the Golden State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>8</sup> Strum, 4-5.

from Mexico to live in the *colonias*. As families moved in and the workers set up permanent residences they developed communities that included churches, sports teams, entertainment groups, and *mutualistas*—mutual aid societies—which took care of the community members and helped provide funds for labor organizing.<sup>9</sup>

While California's Anglo population heavily relied on Mexican immigrants for farm labor, they were often treated with the same suspicion that was given to other immigrants to the United States. One reason for this was the economic situation that many of Mexican immigrants lived in. Most Mexican immigrants were poor and many Americans assumed that if you worked hard enough you would succeed and if you weren't successful, you probably deserved your situation. This belief led many Americans to blame the economic status of Mexican immigrants on Mexican culture and thus treat the immigrants in a less-than-welcoming manner.<sup>10</sup>

One common complaint that California's Anglo communities often cited about Mexican immigrants is that they were unhygienic and disease ridden. The Mexican *barrios*, where many of the immigrants lived, were often in the poorest sections of town and they frequently lacked sewers, heating, and access to clean water. Flushing toilets, bathtubs, refrigerators, and stoves were also often not found in the immigrants' homes. Without these things, it was difficult to maintain good sanitation. Diseases such as tuberculosis affected Mexican American communities at much higher rates than in Anglo communities. Death rates among infants and children were also much higher among

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<sup>9</sup> Gilbert G. Gonzalez, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Villages in a Southern California County, 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994) 2-7.

<sup>10</sup> Strum, 7-9.

Mexican Americans.<sup>11</sup> While these problems were more an indication of the poverty rates among Mexican American communities, many Anglos believed that it was due to shortcomings of the Mexican culture.

Believing that Mexican Americans were considerably different and inferior to Anglo Americans led to widespread discrimination and segregation. It became common for Mexican Americans in California to be denied the right to serve on juries. They also were not given full access to public facilities such as restaurants, movie theaters, and swimming pools. Pools such as those in San Bernardino allowed Mexican Americans access one day a week, which was called “Mexican Day.” Usually it was on Monday and afterwards the pool would be drained and cleaned before it would be opened for the rest of the community. Housing restrictions kept Mexican Americans from buying or renting homes in many neighborhoods. In many neighborhoods the real estate restrictions were written into housing ordinances or listed on the house deeds.<sup>12</sup> Middle class Mexican Americans often were not able to move to the neighborhoods of their choice, but instead their only option was to stay in the *barrios*. The restrictions kept Mexican American and Anglo communities from intermingling and eventually these restrictions would lead to the segregation of Mexican American students in public schools.

As more of the immigrants from Mexico included women and children, the population of school age Mexican American children began changing the demographics of California schools. By 1927, about ten percent of California’s public-school

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<sup>11</sup> Gonzalez, *Labor and Community*, 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret E. Montoya, “A Brief History of Chicana/o School Segregation: One Rationale For Affirmative Action” *La Raza Law Journal* 12 (2001): 159-172.

population was of Mexican descent. In Southern California counties the percentage of students of Mexican descent ranged from seventeen to thirty-six percent.<sup>13</sup> Just as California had done with other minority groups which reached significant numbers, schools quickly began to segregate Mexican American students.

While separate schools for Mexican American students began appearing as early as 1913, it was more common before the 1920s to set aside special classes for “Spanish” elementary school children. The “Spanish” classes were housed in the same schools attended by Anglo students. These classes often had a very different curriculum than the other classes in the schools. According to author Philippa Strum, the boys in the classes often studied “gardening, bootmaking, blacksmithing, and carpentry”, which were considered appropriate trades for the boys. The girls would be educated in sewing and homemaking.<sup>14</sup> Soon, though, as the population of Mexican Americans increased in districts, separate schools began being built for the Mexican American students.

Different reasons have been given for the segregation of Mexican American students. Grace Stanley, a California educator during the 1920s, wrote that the supporters of segregated schools based their viewpoint on the idea that “the Mexican race is a menace to the health and morals of the rest of the community.”<sup>15</sup> Other researchers have cited the opposition that farm owners had with providing education to their laborers’

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<sup>13</sup> Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed*, 110-111.

<sup>14</sup> Strum, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Grace Stanley, “Special School for Mexicans,” *The Survey* (September 15, 1920): 714.

children. Education, they believed, would lead the students to become dissatisfied with idea of working in the fields and result in a less subservient attitude.<sup>16</sup>

Some members of the Anglo communities felt less objection to the education of Mexican Americans as long as the focus was on manual training, instead of the academic training, and was done in either separate classrooms or schools. Many of the people with this opinion justified this view by citing the popular and, at the time, academically supported belief that “Mexicans were inferior intellectually, socially, economically, culturally, morally, and physically.”<sup>17</sup> Schools for Mexican American students, they believed, should have a different curriculum and purpose than schools for Anglo students. English language instruction and “Americanization” were often cited as the main objectives for the education of Mexican Americans. This was clearly the view of a principal at a San Fernando Valley “Mexican school” who, when asked by a social worker about his thoughts about educating Mexican American students, responded by saying, “Why teach them to read and write and spell? Why worry about it? ... They’ll only pick beets anyway.”<sup>18</sup>

A common justification for segregating students involved the belief that non-white students were mentally inferior. The use of intelligence testing during the early 1900s became common and it often was used to explain why minorities should be segregated. This belief affected many groups including African Americans, Asian

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<sup>16</sup> Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1930), 78-84.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Clifford Carpenter, “A Study of Segregation versus Non-Segregation of Mexican Children” (master’s thesis, University of Southern California, 1935), 152.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Starr, *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 97.



Americans, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans. According to historian Irving Hendrick, the results of testing were particularly devastating for Mexican Americans since educators became increasingly convinced that segregation was warranted for educational reasons and it gave them support from local communities which often demanded it for less lofty motives.<sup>19</sup>

Ontario's Superintendent Merton E. Hill used the results of tests done on Mexican American students to support his plans for an "Americanization Program" which involved segregating Mexican American students in order to provide them with "separate instructional programs... by adapting procedures to meet their particular needs." Hill's ideas were widely referred to by other school districts in order to support their desire for separate "Mexican schools." Hill's study used test results to conclude that Mexican American pupils only made 42.4 percent as much progress in school as Anglo children. He believed, and others during this time agreed with him, that separate programs of study could solve this lack of progress.<sup>20</sup>

Although segregating California's Mexican American students would become a common practice in many school districts, it was not a practice that was done in accordance with California Education Code. California Education Code allowed segregation of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian children, per section 8003, but this did not include Mexican children, as they were considered white. Although attempts were made to classify children of Mexican descent as Native Americans, for the purpose

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<sup>19</sup> Hendrick, 89.

<sup>20</sup> Merton E. Hill, *The Development of an Americanization Program* (Ontario, California: Board of Trustees of the Chaffee Union High School, 1928).

of segregating them, this never occurred. Since no laws allowed for the segregation of Mexican American students based on their race or ethnicity, the “Mexican schools” were usually justified by explanations that they were providing specialized instruction according to the needs of the students. Another way schools justified the segregation was by citing the section of education code that allowed for segregation or exclusion from schools “children of filthy or vicious habits, or children suffering from contagious or infectious diseases.” Anglo community members and school boards often cited cases of tuberculosis or poor hygiene as reasons to exclude students from schools attended by Anglo students.<sup>21</sup>

While Mexican Americans in many communities quietly accepted the segregation of their children, others did not. In 1916, when Santa Ana’s school board decided to have Mexican American students attend a different school than its Anglo students, the parents of the Mexican American students strongly objected. Many demanded that their children remain enrolled in the “white” school. Santa Ana’s school board consulted with an attorney who advised them that although the students could not be separated based on race, they could be separated based in different educational needs. Despite the protest of Mexican American parents, their children were placed in a separate school in 1919.<sup>22</sup>

Another early example of Mexican Americans resisting segregation was in Lemon Grove, a small community near San Diego. In 1931, the principal of Lemon Grove Grammar School informed its Mexican American students that they would no longer be

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<sup>21</sup> Strum, 13-15.

<sup>22</sup> Gonzalez, “Segregation of Mexican Children,” 55-76.

able to attend the school and must attend a separate “Mexican school.” Parents of the children refused to send them to the Mexican school, an old building that they referred to as “La Caballeriza,” or the barnyard. Instead they fought the school board’s decision and eventually filed a lawsuit against the district. The Superior Court of California judged in favor of the Mexican American community and ordered the district to reinstate the children in their previous school, as they found that California law did not authorize or permit separate schools for students of Mexican parentage.<sup>23</sup> The ruling in *Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove District* was not appealed and did not become a precedent setting ruling that affected other schools in California. However, it did show that Mexican Americans were willing to challenge school segregation that they did not feel was in their children’s best interest.

In 1943 the case *Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.* was brought forth by five families who had attempted to send their children to schools in either Westminster, Garden Grove, El Modena, or Santa Ana, all cities in Orange County, California and instead were told that their children must attend the “Mexican schools” in their respective cities. The lawsuit claimed that by segregating the students based on their ethnicity the school districts were depriving the students of equal protection of the law as American citizens, and thus violating the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution.<sup>24</sup> The case was instrumental in changing laws that

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<sup>23</sup> Robert R. Alvarez, “The Lemon Grove Incident: The Nation’s First Successful Desegregation Court Case,” *The Journal of San Diego History*, 32 no. 2 (Spring 1986).

<sup>24</sup> *Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.*, 64 F. Supp. 544, (S.D. Cal. 1946).

permitted de jure school segregation and would lead to the desegregation of schools throughout California, including those in the Inland Empire.

The leading plaintiff, Gonzalo Mendez, brought forth the case against the school districts after his three children were unable to enroll at Westminster Main School in September 1943. Instead, the school principal referred him to Hoover, the “Mexican school,” and told him that his children would have to attend there. Mendez attempted to talk to the school board numerous times, but was told that his children must attend Hoover. Unsatisfied with their response and the reasoning behind it he hired attorney David C. Marcus, a Los Angeles lawyer known for his work on *Lopez et al. v. Seccombe et al.*, the 1944 San Bernardino segregation case involving a public swimming pool. Soon the other plaintiffs, Guzman, Palomino, Estrada, and Ramirez joined Mendez in filing the lawsuit against the four California school districts. The petition was filed on March 2, 1945 with the District Court for the Southern District of California, which was located in Los Angeles. The judge assigned to the case was Paul J. McCormick.<sup>25</sup>

Mendez and the other plaintiffs argued that the school districts purposefully designed a system that kept children out of specific schools solely because of their “Mexican or Latin descent or extraction.”<sup>26</sup> This meant that race was not the issue, as students of Mexican descent were considered white, but ethnicity was. Segregation based on ethnicity, the plaintiffs contended, had no legal backing. The plaintiffs also argued

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<sup>25</sup> Strum, 65.

<sup>26</sup> *Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.*

that there was no educationally sound reason for the segregation, and instead, it was harmful to the students' education.<sup>27</sup>

The school districts challenged the case by arguing that the district court lacked jurisdiction, since the court could only hear cases that involved a state's denial of rights. The defendants argued that the plaintiffs had not been denied any rights. The school districts also argued that the segregation was not based on ethnicity, but was done because the children were "unfamiliar with and unable to speak the English language"<sup>28</sup> when they began school. Because of this, they contended that the students needed to be educated separately in order to focus instruction on their specific needs. They also referred to *Plessy v. Ferguson*, citing the decision's ruling that "separate but equal" was constitutional. With these arguments, Judge McCormick needed to decide if the segregation of Mexican-American students was done only because of the students' ethnicity or whether it was done for educationally valid purposes.

On February 18, 1946, Judge McCormick ruled in favor of the plaintiffs declaring segregation of Mexican American students to be illegal and a violation of their Fourteenth Amendment rights. In making the decision he took in account the viewpoint of many educational theorists and social scientists of the 1940s that believed students assimilated and learned English more quickly when taught in an integrated setting. McCormick's decision expressed his view that segregation was unconstitutional and did not help the students make academic gains. He made it clear that he did not believe that the school boards' motives for segregating the students were based on good educational

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<sup>27</sup> Strum, 69.

<sup>28</sup> *Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County et al.*

practices. McCormick challenged the ideas of *Plessy v. Ferguson* by questioning the ability of students to get an equal education in separate schools. McCormick stated:

The equal protection of the laws' pertaining to the public school system in California is not provided by furnishing in separate schools the same technical facilities, text books, and courses of instruction to children of Mexican ancestry that are available to the other public school children regardless of their ancestry.... A paramount requisite in the American system of public education is social equality. It must be open to all children by unified school association regardless of lineage.<sup>29</sup>

Almost immediately after McCormick's decision was announced, the school districts decided to appeal the decision and it was sent to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. While awaiting the new trial and its verdict, the four Orange County districts responded in different ways to McCormick's ruling.

One of the districts, Westminster, began the process of integrating its elementary schools at the beginning of the next school year. Westminster, though, was the only district to quickly comply with the judge's orders. El Modena, like the other districts, resisted and instead planned to wait for the appeal's decision. At an El Modena board meeting it was made clear that the district would not change its policies, even deciding to continue starting the "Mexican school" at a later time so that the Mexican American children could help with the walnut harvest. Parents of children attending the "Mexican school" protested and in response the board decided it would begin testing Mexican American children entering the first grade. Those who spoke English would not be

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

segregated. This was merely a token reform and would do nothing for students already attending the “Mexican school.” Later, at the request of parents of children at the “Mexican school,” Judge McCormick ordered the board to desegregate the schools using a strategy similar to Westminster’s where all students from grades one through four would attend one elementary school and students in grades five through eight would attend another. The district cited budgetary concerns as a barrier to complying and no further action was taken until after the appeal’s decision.<sup>30</sup>

Santa Ana was similarly in compliance in following the ruling. It refused to dismantle the “Mexican schools” and announced that the only change it would make would be to allow some Mexican American students to transfer. The ability to transfer, though, came with a stipulation that made the offer unhelpful. Students wishing to transfer would have to be first deemed “socially acceptable” and the number granted the transfer was limited based on how many Anglo students transferred out of the school. The Mexican American communities did protest Santa Ana’s refusal to comply and although the protests did not convince Santa Ana to change its policies before the appeal’s decision, it did spark the formation of more community organization and activism throughout Southern California, including the Inland Empire.<sup>31</sup>

Except for Westminster School District, little action was taken to desegregate the schools until the appeal’s ruling on April 14, 1947. The appeal’s ruling affirmed the decision of Judge McCormick, but only on the grounds that California law did not

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<sup>30</sup> Strum, 128-130.

<sup>31</sup> Strum, 131-132.

include Mexican Americans among the listed groups that could be segregated in schools. The decision did not attempt to decide whether segregated education was constitutional.<sup>32</sup> Later, in response to the ruling, Governor Earl Warren decided to tackle the question of whether segregation should be allowed. On June 14, 1947 he signed a law repealing the provisions that allowed segregation in California schools.<sup>33</sup>

After the appeal, the school districts complied with the ruling. Transfers were allowed in Santa Ana and by the 1947-1948 school year nearly fifty percent of the students in the previously all Anglo Franklin School were Mexican American. Garden Grove and El Modena also desegregated their schools, although parents in El Modena resisted desegregation and many of the Anglo parents transferred their children to other districts.<sup>34</sup>

The ruling did not only affect the schools involved in the lawsuit, but also schools throughout California. Nearby cities had to decide how they would react to the ruling and whether they would begin to desegregate their schools. While desegregation in schools has often been a process that is slow and where school boards or community members resist changes, some of the nearby cities complied relatively quickly. One example of this is quick compliance is Ontario, a nearby city in California's Inland Empire. The quick movement of Ontario's school board to desegregate their schools, I argue, was due to a variety of factors that made the school board, Superintendent, administrators, and community willing to accept the idea of desegregating its schools.

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<sup>32</sup> *Westminster School District of Orange County et al. v. Mendez et al.*, 161 F.2d 774, (9d Cir. App 1947)

<sup>33</sup> Wollenberg, "Mendez v. Westminster," 329.

<sup>34</sup> Strum, 147-148.



Here I will address Ontario's decision, the factors which led to it, the community's reaction, and the desegregation process.

### **Inland Empire's Response to *Mendez***

McCormick's ruling was reported in many California newspapers and in some newspapers in other areas of the nation. School boards, educators, and Mexican American activist groups in the Inland Empire, many who had been following the case since its inception, were now in the position of deciding how the schools in the Inland Empire would react to the ruling. Many of the school districts, such as Ontario, had already been considering desegregating their schools, although no final decisions had been made and the issue had not previously been considered a priority. The ruling urged a decision and made the discussion of desegregation a priority of school boards. Even though an appeal was expected, the news encouraged Mexican American activist groups to continue fighting for local schools to be desegregated and protests were quickly organized in order to speed along the desegregation process in cities around the Inland Empire. Here I will look at the response of one Inland Empire community, Ontario, to the *Mendez* ruling. To do this I will first look at the history of Ontario's "Mexican school."

Ontario, California is located in San Bernardino County and in 1940 it had a population of 14,197. Located between Los Angeles and San Bernardino, Ontario's economy consisted of agriculture and industry. After World War I, as increasing numbers of Mexicans began migrating to the Southwest, they began arriving in Ontario, usually to work in the citrus groves or fruit and nut orchards. By 1940, the Mexican American

population in Ontario reached 1,450, about ten percent of Ontario's population.<sup>35</sup> As with other Southern California cities of this time, the population of school age children of Mexican descent was also increasing and Ontario's school board needed to decide how they would incorporate these students into their school system. Ontario decided to do this by following the lead of a small, but growing number of Southern California schools and have the Mexican American students attend a separate school from the Anglo students.

In 1921, on recommendation from Ontario Superintendent Merton E. Hill, Ontario's school board unanimously approved the selection of two new school sites. One of the sites was acquired in order to build a school for Mexican American students.<sup>36</sup> The first "Mexican school", Sultana, was quickly built and opened in 1921. It was comprised of a kindergarten class and grades one through three. According to board minutes "all children unable to speak and understand the English language" attended the school. The superintendent could grant exceptions to the policy "whenever he thought best."<sup>37</sup>

Ontario's Superintendent Hill was an adamant supporter of "Mexican schools" and besides implementing his ideas in Ontario he also advocated for them to be used throughout Southern California. In 1928 Hill wrote about Ontario's "Americanization" program saying that such programs should be developed whenever there are enough

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<sup>35</sup> Enrique E.M. Lopez, "Community Resistance to Injustice and Inequality: Ontario, California, 1937-1947" *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 17, no. 2 (1986): 4.

<sup>36</sup> Mary M. Peters, "The Segregation of Mexican American Children in the Elementary Schools of California: Its Legal and Administrative Aspects" (master's thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1948), 37.

<sup>37</sup> Ontario School Board Minutes. September 6, 1921.

Mexican students to warrant segregating them. He expressed that the students in these schools needed a special curriculum that took in account “those qualities and abilities that a recognized as peculiar to the Mexican people.” He felt that the curriculum should be developed so “capacities to perform different types of service should be set forth [so] that their employers may utilize them to the best interest.”<sup>38</sup>

Other cities around Ontario also began to segregate Mexican American students shortly after Ontario, even when the numbers were not as significant as in Ontario. In many of the nearby cities it was costly to maintain separate schools, but the communities were still supportive of the idea. In the small city of Cucamonga a separate “Mexican school” was maintained which was situated far from the other school, which was in the center of town. The “Mexican school” was located in the southern end of town near where many of the Mexican American families worked on farms.<sup>39</sup> Fontana also opened a separate “Mexican school” after determining that they had more Mexican American students than a separate classroom at the elementary school could handle. Fontana’s Declez School, as the “Mexican school” was named, was located on a hog farm that the Board believed would make it convenient for the students since they could still work on the hog farm while attending school.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Gilbert Gonzalez, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation* (Philadelphia: The Balch Institute Press, 1990), 27.

<sup>39</sup> Hendrick, 102.

<sup>40</sup> Nelda B. Van Engen, “Fontana and Fontana Schools.” (master’s thesis, California State University, San Bernardino, 1988).

Nearby San Bernardino also opened a “Mexican school.” Ramona Elementary was located in the middle of San Bernardino’s Mount Vernon *barrio*. Having the school located in the middle of the *barrio* made it easy to separate Mexican American students using the neighborhood school concept involving school assignment. In 1926, Ramona Elementary fifth graders planning to move on to Sturgis Junior High for sixth grade were informed that they would have to stay at Ramona Elementary for another year of fifth grade. Sturgis Junior High was located in downtown San Bernardino and by delaying the Ramona students’ entrance into Sturgis, San Bernardino was able to segregate them from its Anglo population for longer.<sup>41</sup> While parents of the Ramona students protested, their efforts were unsuccessful.

Ontario’s Sultana quickly filled up and in 1928 the city built another segregated school, Grove, to replace Sultana. The school’s enrollment policies were the same as those at Sultana. Enrollment was for those who did not adequately speak English, although language tests were not given to determine English proficiency. Instead, a student’s ability to speak English was inferred from their surname. While most of the students attending Grove were from Ontario, Mexican American children from the nearby Claremont area were transported to the school by bus.<sup>42</sup>

Little is known about Grove during the years of 1928-1940 since Ontario’s board meeting records from this time are missing. Records available do show that in 1930 the school offered classes from kindergarten through grade six. Upon entering the seventh

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<sup>41</sup> Manuel R. Delgado, *The Last Chicano: A Mexican American Experience* (Bloomington, Indiana: Author House Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>42</sup> Peters, 40.

grade, Mexican American students from Grove attended junior high at the same school as Anglo students. The number of students attending Grove steadily increased as Ontario's population increased and by 1940 there were 344 students attending Grove. While the number of Mexican American students had only been seven percent of the student population in 1926, they now made up twelve percent of Ontario's student population.<sup>43</sup>

Ontario's elementary schools remained segregated until 1946. Following Judge McCormick's ruling in *Mendez v. Westminster*, Ontario's school board decided to quickly integrate Grove School and change school zoning designed to separate Anglo and Mexican American students. The board's decision was swift and did not propose to comply only with token reforms. This contrasts the efforts of the Orange County schools involved in the *Mendez* lawsuit, which made little, if any, attempt to comply with Judge McCormick's ruling.

After the decision to desegregate Ontario's schools was made, a letter was sent out to inform the parents of students in the district. The letter cited the court's decision in the *Mendez* case and gave this as the reason that the schools must "establish attendance areas on a geographic basis...." The letter stated that it would no longer have a separate school for Mexican American students saying, "children of one nationality or race cannot be sent to one building in the same school district and those of another nationality or race, to a different building." The school board also made it clear that students would not be allowed to transfer schools, something that many districts allowed as a way to effectively keep schools segregated. Parents were advised, "the boundary lines for the various

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

schools will be rigidly adhered to.”<sup>44</sup> While the letter did explain that the district’s changes were due to Judge McCormick’s ruling, its firm tone suggests that the district was unwavering in its decision to quickly comply. This stands in sharp contrast to the districts in Orange County who were apologetic to parents when actions were taken, if they were taken at all. The response of Ontario’s Anglo community, though, was similar to the response of the parents of students in the Orange County school districts. Many parents were opposed to the changes and were happy to voice their fears regarding desegregating schools. They hoped the new policy would be reversed.

Initially, when the school board voted for the changes, there was very little protest among the Anglo community. This seems to have been, though, due to the lack of awareness of the community, because after *The Ontario Daily Report* wrote an editorial supporting the schools board’s decision, the Anglo community quickly organized actions to convince the board to reverse the new policy.<sup>45</sup> A special meeting was called by the school district after a petition was sent to the district having over 1,400 signatures of community members in opposition to the integration of the schools. The meeting allowed the board the opportunity to explain the changes and also allowed community members the chance to voice their opinions.

At the meeting many community members voiced severe opposition to the planned school boundary changes that would effectively end segregation. One concern

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<sup>44</sup> Ontario School District Letter, August 21, 1946, as found in appendix of Mary M. Peters, “The Segregation of Mexican American Children in the Elementary Schools of California: Its Legal and Administrative Aspects” (master’s thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1948).

<sup>45</sup> *The Ontario Daily Report*, August 23, 1946.

was that upon changing schools according to the new boundaries “the white students would be among the minority” in some schools. Other parents cited health concerns saying that “Grove Elementary, formerly a segregated school, was unhealthy.” Some comments expressed academic concerns that their “children’s progress might be retarded by backward Mexican American children.”<sup>46</sup>

People who agreed with the board’s decision to desegregate also attended the meeting. Supporters of the boundary changes did not quietly sit back at the meeting. In response to concerns about the intermingling of Anglo and Mexican American children one attendee pointed out that segregation had not been an issue in calling men to the armed forces during the war and that many Mexican Americans had given their lives in service to the United States. An Ontario teacher, and veteran, supported this point by declaring that, “their blood is as red as my own.” Another attendee asked, “What kind of Christians are we if after collecting funds for foreign missions we take a stand against Mexicans and Negroes?”<sup>47</sup>

Ontario’s schools board and Superintendent responded to the concerns of community members who were opposed to the boundary changes, but did not give any indication that the changes would not occur. The school board made it clear that the school boundary changes were required in order to abide by the law. When protesters mentioned that many Orange County schools were not taking actions until the outcome of the case’s appeal was known, the Superintendent responded by saying that he was convinced that they did not have “a ghost of a chance of reversing the non-segregation

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<sup>46</sup> *The Ontario Daily Report*, September 14, 1946.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

rule.” The board addressed concerns with the Grove Elementary facilities by talking about planned improvements and said that student academic growth would not be stunted by desegregation since students would be placed in classes according to their ability. The meeting ended with a plea from the board that community members give the program a “fair trial.”<sup>48</sup>

While there was some initial resistance by many of Ontario’s Anglo population to desegregation, after the board and Superintendent addressed many of the concerns in the September 13, 1946 public hearing the process moved along relatively smoothly. The school year began three days later with the proposed boundary changes in effect. Grove Elementary was led by a new Principal, Mary Peters, who was chosen, in part, because of the research she had done regarding school integration and her full support of the changes.<sup>49</sup>

A bumpy transition could have easily stalled the dismantling of Ontario’s “Mexican schools,” so what made Ontario’s transition so successful? I propose four factors: a Superintendent and school board who, prior to *Mendez*, already considered and investigated desegregating the schools, a change in the view of education scholars on segregation, an emphasis on inter-American and intercultural education led by the United States government during World War II, and active and well organized Mexican American political organizations in and around Ontario. While the *Mendez* ruling gave legal standing to the Ontario school board’s decision, it was not the only factor in the relatively quick desegregation of its schools.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



### *Support for Desegregation Prior to Mendez*

A primary reason for Ontario's quick move to integrate was that the school board had already been considering the action prior to the *Mendez* ruling. During the early 1940s Ontario's teachers, administrators, and parents were becoming aware of the negative effects of segregating Mexican American students. Junior high teachers in Ontario often cited the difficulty that the students had when moving to the non-segregated Junior High. One principal explained that the children had not been provided with the opportunity to mix with Anglo children and that Mexican American children from the segregated school had difficulty adjusting to Anglo children. Since students from Grove Elementary had attended the school from first grade until the sixth grade, they had not been in a school setting among Anglos and Junior High was the first time most of the students were in an integrated setting. According to the principal they either became "shy, timid, and retiring, or aggressive and on the defensive"<sup>50</sup>

Besides the difficulty of adjusting to Junior High, the high school graduation rates of Mexican Americans in Ontario were also an area of concern. While Chaffey High School District, the high school district serving Ontario students, had graduated 3,134 students from the years of 1932 to 1941, only ten of those students, or .3 percent had been Mexican American.<sup>51</sup> This low number did not parallel the difference in the Anglo versus Mexican American population in Ontario for in the 1930 and 1940 census,

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<sup>50</sup> Peters, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Ruth D. Martinez "The Unusual Mexican: A Study in Acculturation" (master's thesis, Claremont College, Claremont, California, 1942), 28.

Ontario's Mexican American population made up about ten percent the of population.<sup>52</sup> The low numbers of graduating Mexican Americans was not unique only to Ontario, but was also common throughout the cities that Chaffey High School District served, which included cities from the western edge of San Bernardino County to the city of San Bernardino. Among the entire district, only thirty Mexican American students graduated from high school between the years of 1932 to 1941.<sup>53</sup>

While the region still had a significant amount of jobs related to agriculture, more industrial jobs were moving to the Inland Empire at the time and the region's leaders recognized the need for students of all backgrounds to have a high school education in order for them to fill the growing employment needs in the area. Ontario's school board was particularly troubled about the lack of Mexican American high school graduates and many of the members felt that having a segregated elementary school may be one of the reasons few of the students adjusted well to junior high and high school. In 1944, these concerns led Ontario's superintendent to appoint a committee to study the problems related to segregated schooling at Grove Elementary. Upon its completion, the study, including options for desegregating the school, were to be presented to the school board for consideration.<sup>54</sup> This step was two years before the *Mendez* ruling and while the process extended until after the ruling, it marks the beginning of a course of action which would lead to the desegregation of Mexican American children in Ontario schools.

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<sup>52</sup> Ontario Chamber of Commerce Reports. 1948. *Annual Report*.

<sup>53</sup> Martinez, 120.

<sup>54</sup> Peters, 46.

### *Change in Academic Thought on Segregation*

While many educators supported the idea of segregated schools for Mexican American students during the 1920s and early 1930s, others questioned the practice and voiced their concerns. Some members of the education community believed that the practice was morally wrong. In 1931, when legislators considered adding Mexican American children to the groups of students who could be legally segregated, some educators, such as Los Angeles's Superintendent Frank A. Bouell were vocal in their opposition to the bill. Bouell lashed out at the bill calling it "un-American." Los Angeles's Board president J.L. Van Norman also opposed the bill on grounds that the public schools serve "the children of all residents regardless of race, color or creed."<sup>55</sup> These instances of members of the education community speaking out against segregation were rare, though, and did not become a common topic until the 1940s.

During the late 1930s prominent anthropologists actively began working with the education community to spread the view of racial equality. On the forefront, anthropologist Franz Boas began drawing media attention as he challenged the ideas of eugenicists who claimed that the white race was racially superior to other races. Boas advocated teaching a scientific view of race that viewed "human diversity not as fixed inherited "racial" differences, but as learned, and therefore malleable, "cultural" differences."<sup>56</sup> Boas, along with other anthropologists used speeches, lectures, radio, and

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<sup>55</sup> Hendrick, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Zoë Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race 1900-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 46.

pamphlets to spread the word to educators that there was no scientific correlation between race and intelligence.

In the early 1940s, as World War II was being waged, these ideas sat well with many educators, as they believed that it was their job to teach democratic ideas of equality in order to combat ideas of racial superiority associated with Nazi doctrine. Teacher's organizations such as the National Education Association disseminated information on fighting racial intolerance, often using scientific publications by anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict's *The Races of Mankind* to support their view of racial equality and paired them with others, such as *Together We Win* and *Intolerance Is a Crime Against Democracy*, that took a more patriotic stance. At a conference in 1944, the NEA made the quest for teaching against intolerance in schools a teacher's patriotic duty by stating, "it was just as important...to get rid of intolerance in this country as it is to crush the Nazi armies or sink the Japanese fleet."<sup>57</sup>

Early on one of the arguments for educating Mexican American students in separate schools was that they lacked the same level of intelligence as Anglo students. Studies that gave IQ tests to Mexican American students often concluded that since the students consistently scored lower than Anglo students they were intellectually handicapped. Instead of attributing the lower IQ scores to environmental factors most believed IQ was due mainly hereditary factors. These beliefs were used to support the idea that separate schools were needed for Mexican American students.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>58</sup> Wollenberg, "Mendez v. Westminster", 320.

During the mid 1930s education researchers increasingly started to question the ability of segregated schools to provide an adequate education to minority students and also questioned the need for them. In 1935, Otto Klineberg's book *Race Differences* was published. According to Klineberg there was no adequate proof that intelligence varied between races. Instead, Klineberg pointed to variations in social and cultural environment as reasons that test scores differed. He also believed that the attitude of educators towards minorities and racial isolation played some role in the test results.<sup>59</sup>

During this time some scholars began looking specifically at Mexican American students and the claims, used to support separate schools, that they were less intelligent than other groups. They began questioning whether the scores were due to hereditary factors and instead began to look at environmental factors and cultural bias as the cause of the difference in scores. An outspoken advocate of the environmental explanation was George I. Sanchez, who at the time was the director in the New Mexico Department of Education. Sanchez believed that the low IQ scores of Mexican American students needed to be looked at differently by taking into consideration the environment in which the students lived. Sanchez believed that the low scores could be explained by "the dual system of education presented in 'Mexican' and 'white' schools, the family system of contract labor, social and economic discrimination, [and] educational negligence on the

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<sup>59</sup> Otto Klineberg, *Race Differences* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935).

part of local and state authorities....”<sup>60</sup> Other research cited bilingualism or poverty as the reason for lower IQ scores.<sup>61</sup>

Education researchers began looking at differences in educational achievement between Mexican American students who had been educated in segregated schools and those who had not been segregated. The findings of the researchers mirrored many of Ontario’s concerns that students from segregated schools were leaving the schools less prepared and less likely to graduate than students from non-segregated schools. One study, done in the mid 1940s, looked at the achievement test scores of students in Southern California junior high schools and found that Mexican American students from segregated schools scored as much as twelve points lower than Mexican American students who attended mixed schools.<sup>62</sup> Another similar study looked at Stanford Achievement Test scores of junior high students and had nearly identical findings and concluded that Mexican American children from segregated schools suffer a greater handicap academically than those who attended a mixed school.<sup>63</sup>

The 1945 Yearbook of the California Elementary School Principals’ Association devoted the issue to cultural unity and an entire section addressed segregation in public

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<sup>60</sup> George Sanchez I. (Winchester 1944) (M. W. Hill 1945), “Bilingualism and Mental Measures, a Word of Caution,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* (December 1934): 767-769.

<sup>61</sup> Wollenberg, “*Mendez v. Westminster*,” 323.

<sup>62</sup> Marguerite W. Hill, “A Proposed Guidance Program for Mexican Youth in the Junior High School” (master’s thesis, Claremont Colleges, 1945), 60.

<sup>63</sup> Gertrude K. Winchester, “Achievements, Social Concepts and Attitudes of Three Racial Groups” (master’s thesis, Whittier College, 1944).

schools and questioned its practice.<sup>64</sup> In the yearbook, Helen Heffernan, who was the chief of elementary education in the California State Department of Education and Coreen Seeds, a principal working with the University of California, wrote that segregated education had not worked and said that they considered it “a practice which schools must eliminate.”<sup>65</sup>

Studies concluding segregation was not beneficial for Mexican American students and outspoken educational experts were becoming common. These studies were acknowledged by administrators and teachers in Ontario and may have given the district more confirmation that its segregated schools may not be in the best interest of the students and schools of Ontario.<sup>66</sup>

### *Inter-American and Intercultural Education Programs and World War II*

Before World War II, Mexican Americans, according to one federal agency, were “probably the most submerged and destitute group in the United States.” They had high rates of illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, and disease, and were treated poorly by the people among whom they lived. They presented, according to one report, “perhaps the most striking need for economic rehabilitation and cultural assimilation in the entire

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<sup>64</sup> Martha Seeling, “Segregation in Our Public Schools,” *Education for Cultural Unity*, Seventeenth Yearbook, California School Principals’ Association (1945).

<sup>65</sup> Helen Heffernan and Coreen A. Seeds, “Inter-cultural Education in the Elementary School,” *Education for Cultural Unity*, Seventeenth Yearbook, California School Principals’ Association (1945), 84.

<sup>66</sup> Peters, 60-61.

United States.”<sup>67</sup> Despite the dire situation of Mexican Americans during this time, the United States government paid little attention to them and generally seemed unconcerned with their plight. This changed when the United States began preparing for its involvement in World War II.

During the early 1940s, the United States were preparing for the possibility of war and policy makers wanted to make sure that all ethnic groups in the U.S. felt that victory was in their best interest. The United States government, through the Office of Inter-American Affairs in the Southwest, began promoting desegregation efforts as a way to ease racial tensions that they feared could keep Americans from being united in the war effort. Also, the United States government believed that any grievances due to poor treatment of its Spanish-speaking citizens could damage relationships with Latin American countries during World War II. The OIAA’s efforts, initially focused on improving U.S. Latin American relationships, eventually broadened its aim to include improving relations among the Mexican population within its borders. The agency became involved in reducing discriminatory practices that could damage Anglo and Hispanic relationships, coordinating programs to “help the Southwest’s Mexican population participate more effectively in American life and economy, and educating Anglo Americans about minority cultures in order to promote better appreciation of

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<sup>67</sup> George Gallup, “An Analysis of American Public Opinion Regarding the War,” September 10, 1942, in President’s Personal File 4721, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.



them.”<sup>68</sup> The OIAA’s aim to reduce discrimination and improve treatment towards Mexican Americans was considered a matter of national security.

A similar, yet more focused, agenda was also pursued by the U.S. Office of Education’s intercultural education program. This program was developed during the 1940s and was concerned with building peaceful relations between minorities and nonminorities in the United States.

The OIAA did not have an easy job ahead of them. Most Anglo Americans in the Southwest were somewhat familiar with the Mexican American population, but still considered them foreign and treated them with ignorance and hostility. In 1942 a poll was conducted in which white Americans were asked to rate the qualities of a list of “peoples or races of the world ... in comparison with the people of the United States.” While most of those who responded categorized English, Dutch, and Scandinavians as being “as good as we” and ranked Irish, French, and German as somewhat inferior, Mexicans were ranked at the bottom of the list, even below the Japanese, with whom the United States was at war. Only twelve percent of those surveyed believed that Mexicans were “as good as Americans” and fifty-nine percent believed they were “definitely inferior.”<sup>69</sup>

One way that the OIAA believed they could improve relationships between Anglos and Mexican Americans was to encourage assimilation, mainly through education. The OIAA encouraged the integration of schools in order to aid the

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<sup>68</sup> Joseph E. Weckles, “Spanish Speaking People in the United States Plans for Promoting Their Participation in the War Effort,” *Interpreter Releases* 20, no. 10 (22 March 1943): 81-82.

<sup>69</sup> George Gallup, “An Analysis of American Public Opinion Regarding the War,” September 10, 1942, in President’s Personal File 4721, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

assimilation of Mexican American students and to appease Mexican American political organizations, which had been protesting the segregation of Mexican American students in schools throughout the Southwest. The OIAA did not wield any real power and relied on voluntary actions on the part of schools and communities. Instead of using punitive sanctions, the commission published pamphlets urging schools to integrate, organized conferences and workshops, and funded research about minority education.<sup>70</sup>

The OIAA's sponsorship of regional and local educational conferences aided in getting the education community rethinking Mexican American education and school segregation. It also encouraged more research in the area, which was severely needed. The conferences were organized by a leader in the field of education of the Mexican community, Dr. George I. Sanchez. Dr. Sanchez had been a longtime critic of segregation in schools and had written about the fallacies of the idea of racial intelligence. Conferences throughout the Southwest brought together researchers, educators, and administrators and looked at different aspects of the education of Spanish-speaking people. While most importantly to this paper the conferences criticized segregation as method of educating Mexican American children, it also examined "bilingualism, vocational guidance and training, relevant textbooks, and curriculum."<sup>71</sup> Since one aim of the OIAA was to assimilate Mexican Americans it also emphasized the

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<sup>70</sup> Gonzalez, *Chicano Education*, 124.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

idea that it was impossible for “children to learn the ways of American living when they are not in contact with people who live in that manner.”<sup>72</sup>

The influence of the OIAA’s campaign was surely felt by the Inland Empire’s education leaders. In 1942 the OIAA sponsored a conference at the nearby Claremont College on Hemispheric Solidarity.<sup>73</sup> The conference was well attended by education leaders in the region and educators supporting the desegregation of Ontario’s schools later cited the information discussed in the conference.<sup>74</sup> While Ontario’s decision did not happen until after the *Mendez v. Westminster* verdict, the conference led other school districts, including nearby San Dimas School District, to immediately begin desegregating their schools. These efforts were reported for other districts and their administrators in a statewide publication.<sup>75</sup> San Dimas was not only physically close to Ontario, but very similar demographically. Its move to desegregate its schools would have made Ontario’s decision to desegregate less risky since it would not be the first in the region.

### *Active and Strong Mexican-American Political Organizations*

Though the actions and discussions of Ontario’s School Board, the change in academia’s view of segregated schooling, and actions by the federal government played a

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<sup>72</sup> George I. Sanchez, *First Regional Conference on the Education of Spanish-Speaking People in the Southwest*, Inter-American Education Occasional Papers 1. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1946).

<sup>73</sup> Gonzalez, *Chicano Education*, 130.

<sup>74</sup> Peters, 46.

<sup>75</sup> Ellis M. Tipton, “The San Dimas Intercultural Program,” *California Elementary School Principals Association Yearbook 17* (1945): 94.

role in Ontario's quick move to desegregate its schools, it would be an error to assume that Mexican Americans did not play a vital part in the elimination of Ontario's "Mexican schools." The political behavior of Mexican American communities in the Inland Empire was a key factor in the process of desegregation. Protests, boycotts, and legal action had been used in Inland communities since the 1930s as a way for the Mexican American population to combat the widespread practice of segregation practiced in local businesses, community organizations, and public facilities. The Mexican American community had formed strong organizations with powerful leadership that enabled its voice and wished to be heard in the Inland Empire. Through the early actions of these organizations the Mexican American communities proved they could not be simply ignored.

The Mexican American community in Ontario had a few well-developed organizations whose aims were to fight for the civil rights of the Mexican Americans in Ontario. The community had strong leadership as well as a widely read community newspaper, *El Espectador*. The leaders and the newspaper helped Mexican Americans spread the word about injustices and allowed planning for actions meant to show their strength.

One of the most influential Mexican American activists in the Inland Empire was Ignacio Lopez. Lopez, who ran *El Espectador* and led many of the boycotts and lawsuits in the Inland Empire, was born in Mexico and raised in the United States. His newspaper helped highlight many issues involving Mexican American civil rights. Lopez helped form the Unity Leagues in Southern California. Possibly his largest contribution to helping the Mexican American communities in the Inland Empire was his encouragement of local activism as a way to fight discrimination. Lopez mobilized Mexican Americans

during the case of a wrongful death of a Mexican American by a police officer. Later Lopez became the primary petitioner in *Lopez v. Seccombe*.

*Lopez v. Seccombe* successfully argued against discrimination against Mexican Americans in San Bernardino's public swimming pool. San Bernardino's pool, the Perris Hill "plunge" had been denying Mexican Americans the opportunity to swim, except on one designated day a week. Ignacio Lopez, along with Eugenio Noguerras, Father Nuñez, Virginia Prado, and Rafael Muñoz, as part of the Mexican American Defense Committee, filed a lawsuit against San Bernardino's Mayor Seccombe claiming that the city's policy was unconstitutional under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments. Their attorney, David C. Marcus, would later go on to represent the petitioners in *Mendez*. The defendant, Mayor Seccombe, denied the claim saying that the Mayor and City Council had the "authority to acquire, own, and maintain public libraries, common museums, gymnasiums, parks and baths."<sup>76</sup> On February 5, 1944 Judge Leon Yanckwich ruled on behalf of the petitioners.<sup>77</sup> The Mexican Americans' organization and resistance had led to a clear victory that would later be cited in the *Mendez* case.

The successful *Lopez v. Seccombe* lawsuit made it clear to Ontario's school board that the Mexican American community would not stand by patiently and wait until Ontario was ready to comply with *Mendez*. They were willing and ready to challenge instances where their civil rights were being infringed on.

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<sup>76</sup> *Lopez v. Seccombe*, Defense, paragraphs I-III, 3. Records of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of California, RG 21. Southern California Central Division (Los Angeles). Civil Case Files 1938-1969. National Archives and Records Administration Pacific Region (Laguna Niguel), box 578, folder 3158.

<sup>77</sup> *Lopez v. Seccombe*, 71 F. Supp. 769.

*Lopez v. Seccombe* was not the only instance of successful activism by the Inland Empire Mexican Americans, nor the first. The Mexican American community in Ontario had many successes in fighting for better treatment during the 1930s. During this time they organized a separate Chamber of Commerce for Mexican American businesses as a way to increase political and economic power when the Anglo community had excluded them from Ontario's Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club. While Mexican American communities were a large group of potential customers for Anglo businesses, they often were not treated with the same respect as Anglo customers. The Chamber of Commerce and the editor of *El Espectador*, Ignacio L. Lopez, successfully used boycotts as a way to show their power and importance to Ontario's economy. Not only did the boycotts often lead to better treatment by retail and service establishments, but it also gave businesses an incentive for employing Mexican Americans.

One example of Ontario's Mexican American community working together to fight segregation happened in 1939 when an Upland theater refused to let a couple sit in the "white section" of the theater. After leaving the theater the couple went to inform *El Espectador* of the incident. Ignacio Lopez quickly consulted with another community organizer and attorney, Richard Ibanez. While California law did not prohibit segregation in public places, the leaders decided that the community could yield their power using a boycott against "un-American theatre managers who discriminated against Mexican patrons."<sup>78</sup> After nearly two weeks of boycotting, the theater manager agreed to treat Mexican American customers with "equal consideration." *The Ontario Daily*

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<sup>78</sup> *The Ontario Daily Report*, February 22, 1939.

*Report*'s headline read "No Discrimination Pledge: Mexican Organizations Win in Controversy over 'Jim Crow' Sear in Movie Theaters."<sup>79</sup> Later that same year the Mexican American community protested their limited access to the public swimming pool at Chaffey Junior College. The Superintendent of Chaffey schools quickly apologized and changed the policy so that Mexican Americans had full access to the pool.<sup>80</sup> While during World War II the civil rights of Mexican-Americans took a back seat to other community efforts, when Mexican-American veterans returned the issue of civil rights quickly rose to the forefront again.

These examples show that the Mexican American communities in the Inland Empire, particularly Ontario, were fighting against segregation and being successful for years leading up to *Mendez*. Ontario's school board was aware that the Mexican American political organizations were well organized and informed. Mexican Americans in the Inland Empire were unlikely to let the school district move slowly in complying with the law after the *Mendez* decision. The Superintendent made it clear in meetings regarding the decision to desegregate that he did not believe that attempts to avoid desegregation would be ignored by the Mexican American communities and the law.<sup>81</sup> The school board and citizens of Ontario likely knew this and it is likely this knowledge propelled them to move more quickly and with less resistance.

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<sup>79</sup> *The Ontario Daily Report*, March 3, 1939.

<sup>80</sup> Lopez, 15.

<sup>81</sup> *The Ontario Daily Report*, September 14, 1946.

## Conclusion

While Ontario's decision to desegregate its elementary schools was an important step towards whether Mexican American's in Ontario would receive equality in the city's schools, it is difficult to assess whether it was effective in helping Mexican American students receive a better education. It is clear that before *Mendez* and the closing of the "Mexican school" few Mexican American students from Ontario were moving on to high school and graduating. It would be helpful to determine the effects of desegregating Ontario's schools to look at the number of Mexican American students after *Mendez* who moved on to junior high, high school, and then graduated. Unfortunately after *Mendez* many school districts, including Ontario, began avoiding any mention of their students' race in student and school records. While there is no record of a specific order that Ontario school officials stop recording ethnic or racial information, it is absent on most records until much later. This lack of information makes the effects of desegregation unclear. It is clear, though, that the move to close Ontario's "Mexican school" was an important step in bringing a more equitable education system to students in Ontario.

*Mendez v. Westminster* was vital to the desegregation of Ontario's schools, but it is important to note that many important factors made it happen relatively quickly and smoothly. School leaders in Ontario had been aware that segregated schools were disadvantaging its students since it became a barrier when students attempted to move on to junior and senior high. Leaders were aware that the system was not in their best interest if it wanted to prepare its population for a newly emerging economy, which relied less on agriculture. Ideas in education had evolved and now emphasized the need for racial equality and many educators were beginning to accept that students of different



races were equally capable. These ideas were echoed in the Inter-American and intercultural education programs supported by the United States government during World War II. Americans had seen the what ideas of racial superiority had done when it was used by the Nazi party in Europe and many believed that it was imperative for America to show it treated all it citizens fairly. Also, the politically active Mexican Americans of the Inland Empire had already shown that they were aware of their rights and were ready to fight for them. *Mendez v. Westminster* was an important catalyst in the closing of Ontario's "Mexican schools" and all of these factors made Ontario ready when it was made clear that separate schools for Mexican American students would no longer be allowed.

Changes in education are constant and understanding how to help those affected accept and implement new ideas is important to their success. By understanding how schools and communities reacted to change in the past and knowing what aided in the transition process we can better plan and implement important changes in education in the future.

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