



# News Release

Orange County Department of Education • City of Westminster



OCDE contact  
Ian Hanigan  
ihanigan@ocde.us  
714-966-4008

Westminster contact  
Christine Cordon  
ccordon@westminster-ca.gov  
714-548-3177

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 27, 2020

## **Park honoring Mendez v. Westminster case awarded \$1.29 million state grant**

WESTMINSTER, Calif. — California State Parks has awarded a \$1.29 million grant to the City of Westminster to construct a park and memorial honoring Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, plaintiffs in the historic Mendez v. Westminster civil rights case.

The park, to be located along Westminster Boulevard at Olive Street, will feature a monument created by artist Ignacio Gomez. Statues will depict Gonzalo and Felicitas Mendez, who in 1943 sought to enroll their daughter Sylvia and sons Geronimo and Gonzalo, Jr. at Westminster's 17th Street School, then known as "the white school." Their children were turned away and told to go to Hoover Elementary, a segregated campus for students of Mexican heritage.

"I am so thrilled for this funding and so thankful for everyone who helped, especially the Orange County Department of Education, the City of Westminster and other community leaders," said Sylvia Mendez, who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. "This case represents part of the history of our country. Students will learn that the struggle for civil rights happened here in Orange County."

The park is part of the City of Westminster's Mendez Freedom Trail and Tribute Monument project, which will include four interactive stations that will span a walking path along Hoover Street. The City has partnered with the Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) to create content and curriculum for the park and the trail. Visitors will be able to read interpretive panels, see themes captured on banners hung from historic light poles, read messages embedded in the sidewalks, and access audio, video and augmented reality content on their smartphones. Groundbreaking for the Mendez Freedom Trail and Tribute Monument is scheduled for this spring.

"Growing up in Westminster my whole life, I never heard about the Mendez case until I was in college. I learned of the story of the Mendez family and their struggle for equality and that it happened in my hometown, but there were no murals or monuments to commemorate the achievement or mark Westminster's place as one of the birthplaces of civil rights," said

Westminster Council Member Sergio Contreras. “Through years of hard work and support from the community, this grant will move us further to the finish line and help memorialize Mendez v. Westminster so that future generations will remember this important moment in history.”

The \$1.29 million grant is part of the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018 (Proposition 68), which directed \$254.9 million to State Parks for competitive grants to create new parks and enhance recreational opportunities for all Californians. City of Westminster Transportation Manager/City Traffic Engineer Adolfo Ozaeta served as the grant writer and applicant for the project. Including the state grant and donations, a total of \$1.64 million has been raised for the park portion of the Mendez Freedom Trail and Tribute Monument.

“The case of Mendez v. Westminster brought transformative change to Orange County and paved the way for the desegregation of schools across the nation, yet for decades there has been no memorial or public space to honor its place in history,” Orange County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Al Mijares said. “This grant funding from the state ensures that visitors from all over the country will have a place to learn about the history of the case and to reflect on the courage of the Mendez family and others who fought for access and equality for generations of students.”

The Mendez v. Westminster case was initiated in 1945 by the Mendez, Estrada, Guzman, Palomino and Ramirez families, who argued that segregated schools violated their rights as American citizens. At the time, Mexican-American children were directed to separate, uniformly inferior schools. That policy was ultimately found to be unconstitutional by the federal courts, laying the groundwork for the desegregation of all California schools and, eventually, the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision, which struck down school segregation nationwide.

The Mendez case has been included at several grade levels in the “History Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten through Grade Twelve,” which was adopted by the state Board of Education in July 2016.

###