



Anti-Defamation League®

# Book of the Month

Presented by ADL's Education Division

**About the Book of the Month:** This collection of featured books is from our Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children. Intended for educators, parents and other caregivers of early childhood and elementary aged children, these books promote respect for diversity, teach about bias and prejudice, encourage social action and reinforce themes addressed in education programs of [A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute](#), ADL's international anti-bias education and diversity training provider. Reading the children's books listed on this site with your children and incorporating them into instruction is an excellent way to talk about these important concepts in your classroom.

## Separate Is Never Equal

Duncan Tonatiuh (Author and Illustrator)

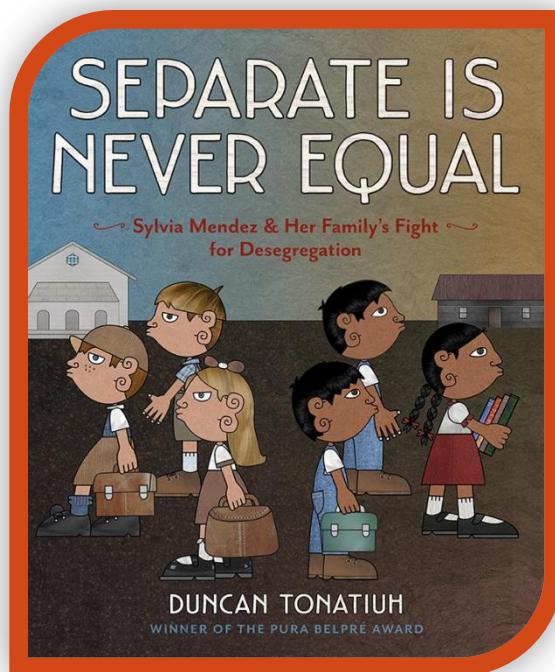
When her family moves to the town of Westminster, California, young Sylvia Mendez is excited about enrolling in her neighborhood school. But she and her brothers are turned away and told they have to attend the Mexican school instead. Sylvia cannot understand why—she is an American citizen who speaks perfect English. Why are the children of Mexican families forced to attend a separate school? Unable to get a satisfactory answer from the school board, the Mendez family decides to take matters into their own hands and organize a lawsuit. In the end, the Mendez family's efforts help bring an end to segregated schooling in California in 1947, seven years before the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* ended segregation in schools across the United States.

ISBN: 978-1-4197-1054-4

Publisher: Abrams Books for Young Readers

Year Published: 2014

Grade Level: 1–5



## Key Words

Discuss and define these words with children prior to reading the book and remind children of their meanings as they come up in the book. You can also post the words and point out to students when they appear in the story. See ADL's [Definitions Related to Name-Calling, Bullying and Bias](#). Note that

there is a comprehensive glossary in the back of the book which also includes many of these words.

- backgrounds
- degrading
- ecstatic
- enrollment
- field-workers
- inferior
- injustice
- lawsuit
- opportunity
- petition
- segregated
- superintendent
- superior

### Discussion Questions

Pre-reading questions: What is the title of the book? Based on the title, what do you think the book might be about? Does the picture on the cover give us any clues? As you read the book aloud, ask a few discussion questions periodically throughout the reading of the book to check comprehension and keep the students engaged.

After reading the book aloud, ask the following questions:

- How did Sylvia feel when the Westminster School said she could not attend the school?
- Why do you think she felt this way?
- What were the reasons that the school gave for why Sylvia and her brothers had to attend the “Mexican school?”
- What did Sylvia infer about the reasons for her and her brothers not being able to attend the school?
- How did Sylvia’s father react? What did he do?
- What did you learn about Sylvia and her family that showed something about their personalities?
- Why do you think some people did not want to sign the petition written by Sylvia’s father?
- Why did Mr. Mendez hire a lawyer to help him and what did they do together?
- Why do you think they found other families who were experiencing segregation?
- What happened at the trial?
- What is your opinion of Mr. Kent, the superintendent of the school district? What was his attitude about Mexican people?
- What was the outcome of the trial and what did it mean for Sylvia and her brothers as well as other Mexican children in the district?
- How did people work together to bring about changes in the schools?
- What was your favorite part of the book? What part didn’t you like?
- How did Sylvia feel at the end of the book?

For additional information about the case upon which the book is based, watch PBS/WGBH’s 8-minute video [Mendez v. Westminster: Desegregating California’s Schools](#) or listen to NPR’s [Before ‘Brown v. Board of Education’](#).

## Extension Activities

Below are activities that you can do with children in order to extend the learning from the book.

### 1. Write and Illustrate Additional Pages of the Book

In the last scene of the book, we see Sylvia finally attending the Westminster School. There are whispers and name-calling but she also notices that some children are smiling at her and by the end of the day, she makes a new friend. Read aloud the last page of the book again and ask students: *What do you think might happen next for Sylvia? What do you think is happening with Sylvia's brothers, Jerome and Gonzalo Jr.? What is it like in the school now that they have allowed the Mexican students to attend?* Have students imagine what would happen in the book if it continued for a few more pages. Instruct them to continue the story by writing three to five more pages and draw pictures that go along with those pages, using the unique style of the illustrator (see more of his illustrations [here](#).) Share the new additions with the class and consider inviting parents and other classes in for a reading of the book and sharing the students' additional pages.

### 2. Write a Persuasive Letter About Fairness in School

Have students reflect on the actions the Mendez family took in ensuring school segregation. Ask students: *What did Sylvia's father do when he found out that she and her brothers could not attend the Westminster school? Why did he decide this was an important rule for him to fight? Are there any school/community rules or decisions which you think are unfair?* Help students brainstorm a list of things they think are unequal or unfair and with them, prioritize the most important ones. Then have them write a persuasive letter to the principal, superintendent (in the case of a school issue) or their town's mayor or someone who is relevant to the issue. In the letter, they should include what their position is, why they think it is unfair (with evidence, quotes or stories) and what they would like to change.

### 3. Learn More About the History of School Desegregation

May 17, 2014 marks the 60th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruling that ended school segregation in the United States. With your students, undertake a research project about school segregation. Use the Author's Note (in the back of the book) about school segregation and specifically the *Mendez v. Westminster School District* case. See ADL's *Curriculum Connections* "[Looking Back... Reaching Forward: Exploring the Promise of Brown V. Board of Education in Contemporary Times](#)," a secondary curriculum that can be used for background information on *Brown v. Board of Education*, important dates and photos from that time period in history. With your students, learn more about Linda Brown, the African American third-grader whose father sued the Topeka, Kansas school system and which led to *Brown v. Board of Education*. You may want to focus on Ruby Bridges, a young girl who confronted hostility when she became the first African American student at a New Orleans school in 1960. There are many children's books about Ruby Bridges including *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles and a movie, [Disney's Ruby Bridges](#). A project for older students is to compile and analyze segregation statistics about today's schools and reflect on the progress we have made and not made.

## ADL Resources

The following are curriculum and resources on anti-bias education, activism and school segregation.

- [Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children: Prejudice and Discrimination \(Racism\)](#)

- [Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children: Cultural and Religious Groups \(Hispanic/Hispanic-American\)](#)
- [Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children: Biography \(Social Justice Activists\)](#)
- [Recommended Multicultural and Anti-Bias Books for Children: Prejudice and Discrimination \(Anti-Immigrant\)](#)
- [Curriculum Connections “Looking Back... Reaching Forward: Exploring the Promise of Brown V. Board of Education in Contemporary Times”](#)
- [Curriculum Connections “A Time for Sight: The Debate Over Color Blindness and Race Consciousness in School Integration Policy”](#)
- [Anti-Bias Education Programs and Resources](#)
- [Early Childhood Anti-Bias Education Programs and Resources](#)