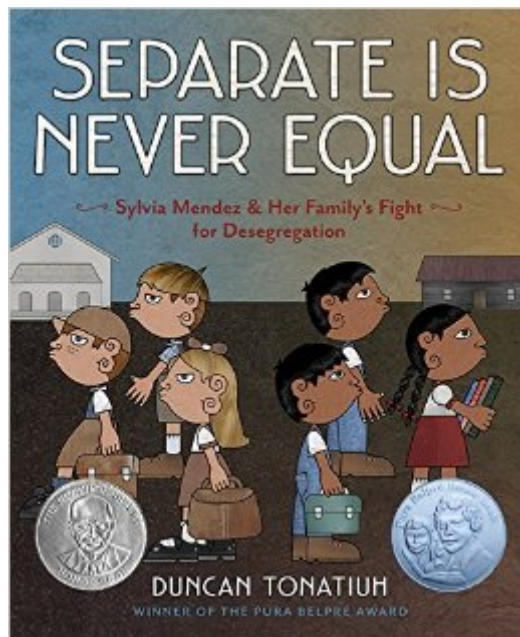


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# Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez And Her Family's Fight For Desegregation (Jane Addams Award Book (Awards))



## Synopsis

A 2015 Pura Belpré® Illustrator Honor Book and a 2015 Robert F. Sibert Honor Book Almost 10 years before Brown vs. Board of Education, Sylvia Mendez and her parents helped end school segregation in California. An American citizen of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage who spoke and wrote perfect English, Mendez was denied enrollment to a "Whites only" school. Her parents took action by organizing the Hispanic community and filing a lawsuit in federal district court. Their success eventually brought an end to the era of segregated education in California. Praise for *Separate is Never Equal* STARRED REVIEWS "Tonatiuh masterfully combines text and folk-inspired art to add an important piece to the mosaic of U.S. civil rights history." --Kirkus Reviews, starred review "Younger children will be outraged by the injustice of the Mendez family story but pleased by its successful resolution. Older children will understand the importance of the 1947 ruling that desegregated California schools, paving the way for Brown v. Board of Education seven years later." --School Library Journal, starred review "Tonatiuh (Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote) offers an illuminating account of a family's hard-fought legal battle to desegregate California schools in the years before Brown v. Board of Education." --Publishers Weekly "Pura Belpré® Award" "winning Tonatiuh makes excellent use of picture-book storytelling to bring attention to the 1947 California ruling against public-school segregation." --Booklist "The straightforward narrative is well matched with the illustrations in Tonatiuh's signature style, their two-dimensional perspective reminiscent of the Mixtec codex but collaged with paper, wood, cloth, brick, and (Photoshopped) hair to provide textural variation. This story deserves to be more widely known, and now, thanks to this book, it will be." --The Horn Book Magazine

## Book Information

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Age Range: 6 - 9 years

Grade Level: 1 - 4

## Customer Reviews

If I blame my childhood education for anything I suppose it would be for instilling in me the belief that the history worth learning consisted of a set of universally understood facts. One event would be more worthy of coverage than another. One person better positioned for a biography than another. It was only in adulthood that I started to understand that the history we know is more a set of decisions made decades and decades ago by educators than anything else. Why were weeks and weeks of my childhood spent learning about The American Revolution but only a day on the Vietnam War? Why did we all read biographies of Thomas Edison but never about Nicolas Tesla? And why did it take me 36 years before someone mentioned the name of Sylvia Mendez to me? Here we have a girl with a story practically tailor made for a work of children's nonfiction. Her tale has everything. Villains and heroes (her own heroic parents, no less). Huge historical significance (there'd be no Brown v. Board of Education without Sylvia). And it stars Latino-Americans. With the possible exception of Cesar Chavez, my education was pretty much lacking in any and all experience with Latino heroes in America. I'm therefore pleased as punch that we've something quite as amazing as "Separate is Never Equal" to fill in not just my gaps but the gaps of kids all over our nation. Sylvia is going home in tears. Faced with teasing at her new school she tells her mother she doesn't want to go back. Gently, her mother reminds her that teasing or no, this is exactly what the family fought so hard for for three long years. In 1944 the Mendez family had moved to Westminster, California. When the first day of school approached their Aunt drove five of the kids to the nearby public school. Yet when they arrived she was told that her children, with their light skin and brown hair could attend but that Sylvia and her brothers would have to go to the Mexican school. Faced with hugely inferior conditions, the Mendez family decides to fight back. They are inspired by a lawsuit to integrate the public pools and so they hire the same lawyer to take on their case. In court they hear firsthand the prejudices that the superintendent of their district holds dear, but ultimately they win. When that decision is appealed they take it to the state court, and win once more. Remembering all this, Sylvia returns to school

where, in time, she makes friends from a variety of different backgrounds. Backmatter consists of an extensive Author's Note, a Glossary, a Bibliography, additional information About the Text, and an Index. When I say that Sylvia's story adapts perfectly to the nonfiction picture book form, I don't want to downplay what Tonatiuh has done here. To tell Sylvia's story accurately he didn't have a single source to draw upon. Instead the book uses multiple sources, from court transcripts and films to books, websites, articles, and reports. Culling from all of this and then transferring it into something appropriate and interesting (that is key) for young readers is a worthy challenge. That Tonatiuh pulls it off is great, but I wonder if he could have done it if he hadn't interviewed Sylvia Mendez herself in October 2012 and April 2013. Those who know me know that I'm a stickler for non-invented dialogue in my children's works of nonfiction. If you can't tell a real story without making up dialogue from real people then your book isn't worth a lick. At first, it appears that Tonatiuh falls into the same trap, with Sylvia wondering some things and her family members saying other. Look at the backmatter, however, and you'll see a note "About the Text". It says that while the trial dialogue comes from court transcripts, the rest of the book came from conversations with Sylvia herself. So if she says her parents said one thing or she thought/pondered another, who are we to doubt her? Well played then. Librarians like myself spend so much time gushing over content and format that often we forget one essential element of any book: child-friendliness. It's all well and good to put great information on picture book sized pages, but will any kid willingly read what you have? In this light, framing this book as a flashback was a clever move. Right from the start Tonatiuh places his story within the context of a child's experience with mean kids. It's a position a great many children can identify with, so immediately he's established sympathy for the main character. She's just like kids today . . . except a hero. At the end of the book we have photographs of the real participants, both then and now. As for the text itself, it's very readable, keeping to the facts but, aided by the design and the art, eclectic enough to maintain interest. When we talk about Tonatiuh's art it's important to understand why he's chosen the style that he has. In interviews the artist has discussed how his art is heavily influenced by ancient Mexican styles. As he said in an interview on the blog *Seven Impossible Things Before Breakfast*, "My artwork is very much inspired by Pre-Columbian art, especially by Mixtec codices from the 14th century. That is why my art is very geometric, my characters are always in profile, and their ears look a bit like the number three. My intention is to celebrate that ancient art and keep it alive." Heads of participants are always shown from the side. This is combined with the decision to digitally insert real hair, of a variety of

shades and hues and colors, onto the heads of the characters. The end result looks like nothing else out there. There are mild problems with it, since the neutral expression of the faces can resemble dislike or distaste. This comes up when Sylvia's cousins are accepted into the nearest public school and she is not. Their faces are neutral but read the wrong way you might think they were coolly unimpressed with their darker skinned cousin. Still, once you've grown used to the style it's hardly an impediment to enjoying the story. I think it's important to stress for our children that when we talk about integration, we're not just talking about African-American kids in the 1950s and 60s. Segregation includes Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and more. At one point in this book the Mendez family receives support from the NAACP, the Japanese American Citizens League, and the American Jewish Congress amongst others. Sylvia's mother says, "When you fight for justice, others will follow." For children to understand that freedom is never a done deal and that increased rights today means increased rights in the future is important. Books like "Separate is Never Equal" help drill the point home. There is absolutely nothing like this book on our shelves today. Pick it up when you want to hand a kid a book about Latino-American history that doesn't involve Chavez for once. Required reading. For ages 7-12.

Every school should have this book and its lessons should be taught in elementary schools and at home. When my attention was drawn to this book and the fact that the desegregation fight began with the Latino community I had to buy this book. I am a lawyer and was a child during the civil rights fight yet I was unaware that the first desegregation victory was not brown vs. board of education. A third grader could read this book him/herself. It is appropriate to read to second graders at the same time black history month is celebrated. It describes how persistent one has to be to attain justice, but that other good citizens will help you, and that justice (sometimes--my edit) will prevail. The artwork is Latino style and the text is straightforward. I am buying 2 copies -- one for each of my upcoming third grade teachers--in the hopes they will cover this in class. Though we live in a community with a substantial Guatemalan population, the vocal parent have succeeded in excluding Latino-American history from the agenda. I am Caucasian and my children are from Guatemala. And the more things change the more they stay the same.

It is important that we find ways to pass on to generations current and next the importance of inclusion for all and what those in our past have endured in the quest for equal rights for all. This book and story nails it. Thank you, Duncan Tonatiuh, for your accepting and exceeding the

challenge to tell.

Wonderful book! Many of us are really not aware of the plight of the Mexican pioneers who fought for desegregation! It is part of our history, told with the honesty of the writer who portrays the emotions and reality of its characters. It is enhanced through beautiful illustrations...that make this story compelling-- both for young readers as well as adults. It allows us to look into the window in the life of a Mexican family and of their determination to bring us the singular opportunity to enjoy the equality of human rights, within the context of our singular culture. I highly recommend you have a copy of this book in your library!

Prior to reading this book, I didn't know that school desegregation started with Mexican-American children. This book tells the story of an important and not well known part of American history. Children will relate to Sylvia Mendez's feelings. I particularly appreciated that the book showed that her parents had to work hard to secure justice for her, and that they didn't give up. Cleverly illustrated. This is a good book for an adult and child to read together and discuss.

What a great book for students to read about separate is not equal. I have Hispanic students in my class and they should know this story about Sylvia. This is an important story for young people to learn. I have never heard of the story until I went to a class on books and this is the first one I ordered for our school. I will do a lesson plan for this book for the fall.

One of the great untold stories. I love the illustrations and the story of Sylvia. This book helps students understand that it was not that long ago in our history an education was not something everyone received in the same ways. This book belongs in every elementary library. There are many elementary and secondary teachers who need to introduce their students to this book.

Very important story for students to hear. I use this book with my 4th grade students during our social issues reading unit. They often read a lot of books about the Civil Rights movement and this book gives a different perspective to add to their knowledge of the time period.

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