In 1916, public schools in the South were segregated into White and Black schools under the “separate but equal” doctrine (Anderson, 1988) sanctioned by the Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Mexican families and their children were entering a region of the nation where very little was known about them, where their numbers were small, where their racial/ethnic status was uncertain, and where rigid boundaries were drawn between Black and White communities in all avenues of life.

**The Cheneyville (Louisiana) Incident**

The incident in Cheneyville began with the exclusion of four Mexican children from a White school by a local school trustee. It is important to understand who the school trustee, Walter P. Ford, was in the community and why he was so adamant about keeping Mexican children out of the school… Raised on a plantation, Walter P. Ford had steadfast beliefs about race and segregation. After he learned that Mexican children were attending the White school in Cheneyville in the fall of 1915, he forced them out because he saw them as racially mixed…. Mr. Ford and Mr. John, two of the three school trustees, were refusing to admit Mexican children into the school because they had “negro blood” (Cannon, 1915).

There is much to learn from this case study. It supports some things already known about the racialization of Mexicans in the Southwest. Mexicans were generally not viewed as White in their schools in their communities. But the case raises new questions about Mexicans in the South. In the Black/White racial world of Central Louisiana, there was no consensus on how people like Mexicans, who did not fit into the binary system, should be classified. School officials and community members were divided on how Mexicans should be “raced.” Indeed, there were disagreements about whether Mexican children had “Negro blood.” Ford claimed the Mexican children had Black blood while [others] disagreed. But no one in this case claimed Mexican children were White, the legal classification that was given to them by the American government at that time (Gomez, 2007).”
At the start of the trial, both sides [the Mendez attorney and school district attorney] agreed that Mexican Americans were “white.” California’s school segregation law did not approve the separation of white students from other white students…

Arguing that Mexican Americans are white was a strategic move… Describing them as “white” allowed the Mendez attorney to present the judge with the option to rule against the school districts without having to rule against California’s segregation statutes…

At the end of the trial, the judge decided that California law [said ‘Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and Mongolian’ children could be segregated]. Students of Mexican descent were not included on the list, so the Mendez children could not be segregated. The court decided against Mexican American segregation, but it did not end the state’s school segregation laws…

Source: Adapted from Mark Brilliant’s *The Color of America has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (2010). Mark Brilliant is a professor and a historian at U.C. Berkeley.
Source: Excerpt from James Kents’ “Segregation of Mexican School Children in Southern California,” written in 1941. James Kent was the Superintendent of Garden Grove School District at the time of the Mendez case. He wrote this research four years before testifying in favor of segregation at the Mendez trial in 1945.

In suggesting segregation for the Mexican children, there is no thought they are unwanted people. … However, Mexicans seem to possess some undesirable attitude and characteristics...

Their racial language handicap seems to be a severe limitation to their advancement in school. …

The language handicap causes the Mexican to have difficulty with reading and comprehension. This probably could be overcome by having a special staff of teachers trained for remedial work and well aware of the problems presented by language handicaps…the segregation of Mexicans would be of advantage to both them and the white children…

The Mexican children have bi-lingual handicap when they come to the United States….

The white children are slowed in their educational progress because of the slowing down the class as a whole in order to allow the Mexican pupils to progress at their own rate.

Vocabulary
Remedial: intended for students who are experiencing learning difficulties
The only reason for segregation practices is the English language deficiencies of some of the children of Mexican ancestry.

The evidence clearly shows that Spanish-speaking children are retarded in learning English by lack of exposure to its use because of segregation…The mixing of the entire student body develops a common cultural attitude among the school children, which is important for the continuation of American ideals. The methods of segregation in the school districts foster **antagonisms** in the children and suggest inferiority among them.

Segregation of children of Mexican ancestry because of language handicaps is not always necessary. The tests applied to Mexican students are hurried and not reliable. In some instances separate classification was determined by the Latinized or Mexican name of the child.

**Vocabulary**

**Antagonism:** hostility
“School pairing was based on the premise that Mexican American children were white for desegregation purposes; it directed the district to pair Mexican American schools with black schools. The appeal was predicated on the belief that Mexican Americans were not white but rather a distinct ethnic minority group. Thus, more Anglo schools had to be included in the pairing of schools in order for the district to achieve equitable integration.

Generally speaking, the new plan ignored their new identity and continued the injustice of the earlier plan by viewing them as legally white for desegregation purposes and by pairing them with blacks. Seven of the schools in the proposed pairing plan were predominantly Mexican American in student enrollment, and twelve of them were predominantly black. Despite these shortcomings, the superintendent and the board supported the plan because it was not as disruptive as the earlier plan—that is, it did not offend many Anglos. It also helped to maintain the neighborhood school concept intact by limiting the number of schools involved to those in the minority communities.

Romualdo M. Castillo said that he and others were angry that the district failed to consider Mexican Americans a separate ethnic minority group within the white population. “We are legally white,” he noted, “but we have not had all the opportunities of the whites.” Others such as Maggie Landron accused HISD of using Mexican Americans for political purposes. HISD officials, she argued, could not afford to develop a “just” integration plan during an election year because it would upset Anglo voters and parents. “Politically for HISD,” noted Landron, “the Anglos were more important.” Leonel Castillo supported this theme of political expediency. “In other words,” he said, “the Mexican American does not matter because he doesn’t have very many votes.” School officials, he continued, have been “playing games with us for five months, they never intended to change the pairing plan.”