

A CURRICULUM GUIDE



FREE TO LEARN

How Alfredo Lopez Fought for the Right to Go to School

By Cynthia Levinson • Illustrated by Mirella Ortega

ABOUT THE BOOK

When a young boy, who had immigrated illegally from Mexico to live with his family in Tyler, Texas, was barred from attending school, his parents fought back. The impact of this distressing situation and its ultimately uplifting results are brought vividly to life in this picture book, based on a true story, by author Cynthia Levinson and illustrator Mirelle Ortega.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What news did Alfredo learn when school started? How did he feel about the news? How did he show his feelings?
2. What was Alfredo's life like when he was living with his parents in Mexico?
3. Why did Alfredo's parents decide to go to Texas? How do you think they felt? How can you tell? Do you think they made the right decision? Why? How did Alfredo's life change after his parents left and he was living with his grandparents?
4. When Alfredo asked his abuela when his parents would return, what life was like in the United States, and whether he could go there, she did not answer. When Alfredo asked questions about going to school, his amá did not answer. When Alfredo asked his parents why they were worried about having to return to Mexico, they did not answer. Why do you think these adults did not answer his questions? Was that the right thing to do? Why?
5. How did Alfredo finally get to Texas? When he first arrived in Texas, how was his life different from his life in Mexico? Why did it seem to him that Texas was a world of wonders?
6. What did a new state law in Texas decree (order)? How did this law affect Alfredo? What did Amá and Apá think of the law? What did they decide to do about it? What risks did they take?
7. What does "unconstitutional" mean? What is the US Constitution? What is an amendment? What does the Fourteenth Amendment say?
8. When the case came before Judge William Wayne Justice, what did the family's lawyer, Peter, say to show the judge that the Texas law was unconstitutional? What did he say about fairness? What was his argument about the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution? Are his arguments convincing to you? Were they convincing to the judge? Why or why not?
9. What did the school district's lawyer, John, argue? What did he say about the Fourteenth Amendment? Were his arguments convincing to the judge? Are they convincing to you? Why or why not?
10. When Alfredo returns to school in Tyler, Texas, how do the words and illustrations show you how Alfredo feels to be back in school?
11. Imagine you could interview Alfredo. With a partner, discuss questions you could ask. Then take turns being the interviewer who asks the questions and being Alfredo answering them. Here are some topics you could talk about:
 - When Alfredo learned he could not go to school
 - Living with his grandparents when his parents moved to the US
 - Traveling to the US
 - The Texas state law that prevented Alfredo from going to school
 - Going to court
 - Alfredo's return to school
 - What he thought about the court's decision

Also consider doing the same interview activity with the other people mentioned in the book—Judge William Wayne Justice, Alfredo's parents, the lawyer for the family, the lawyer for the school district, Alfredo's teacher when he returned to school.

12. What does author Cynthia Levinson think about Alfredo's case? How do you know? What do you think about the case? How would you feel if you couldn't go to school?

13. **Stop, Think, & Jot.** As you read, reread, or listen to the book, jot down your thoughts about (1) new information you have learned, (2) "terrific specifics," or details that stick in your mind, (3) new or important words that help you think about Alfredo's experiences, and (4) end-of-the-book thoughts. *See the reproducible activity Stop, Think, & Jot at the end of this guide.*

EXAMINING THE AUTHOR’S CRAFT

1. **Showing Cause and Effect.** In this book, author Cynthia Levinson explains how one situation caused something else to happen. The situation that came first is the cause. It explains why something else happened. The effect is what happened afterward. Knowing causes and effects helps you understand the connection between events in the past.

Find the relationship between different situations in the book. For each of the causes listed below, fill in the missing effect. The first example is completed for you.

Why did something happen?	What happened?
Alfredo’s parents could not find work and the family sometimes went hungry.	Alfredo’s parents went to Texas, leaving Alfredo in Mexico with his grandparents.
After Alfredo joined his parents in Texas, a new state law was passed, decreeing that non-citizens without proper documents could not attend schools.	
Alfredo’s parents decided to stay in Texas and fight the new law.	
Both Alfredo’s family’s lawyer and the lawyer for the school district argued their side of the case in front of the judge.	

After you complete the chart, discuss how knowing causes and effects helps you understand what happened to Alfredo and his family.

2. **Providing Readers Additional Information in the Back Matter.** At the end of Alfredo’s story, the author gives the reader additional information. This information helps readers understand more about Alfredo’s experience and how the author learned about it.

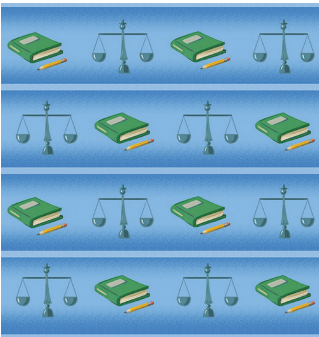
Examine this additional information, then discuss what you learned about the following:

- What the law passed by the Texas legislature in 1975 said.
- What the Tyler school district did in 1977 after the law was passed.
- How a social worker helped Alfredo’s family and other families.
- The people involved in the case:
 - The four families
 - Judge William Wayne Justice
 - The lawyers
- The US Supreme Court’s decision.
- The Fourteenth Amendment.
- How the author found out about the case.

Discuss how back matter in the book adds to your understanding of the story.

EXAMINING THE ILLUSTRATOR’S CRAFT

1. **Providing Readers Additional Information in the Endpapers.** Illustrator Mirelle Ortega provides additional material to think about in her illustrations. The first place to look for this information is the endpapers—the illustrations on the inside of the front and back covers. Endpapers usually give clues about what the book is about. In this book, the endpapers are filled with scales of justice, books, and pencils.



To find out more about the scales of justice, check the following sources:

- Michigan State Supreme Court: A Symbol of Justice at:
www.courts.michigan.gov/4af46e/siteassets/msc-learning-center/justitia_ladyjustice.pdf

Discuss how the scales of justice are connected to Alfredo's story. Then discuss how a book and pencil are connected to the story. What other illustrations could have been included in the endpapers? Think about designing your own endpapers for the book. What illustrations would you include?

2. Continuing to Use the Scales of Justice in the Book's Illustrations. In addition to showing the scales of justice in the endpapers, the author uses them to illustrate Alfredo's story. Examine the illustration below and then discuss what this illustration tells you about Alfredo's story. Discuss why you think the illustrator included the scales of justice here. How does it help readers understand what the lawyer is saying? Discuss how the illustrator added to and supported the written content of the book.



EXAMINING THE WRITING IN THE BOOK

1. Reread *Free to Learn* and list out all the ways Alfredo shows he is excited to go to school. What words and punctuation does Levinson use to make it clear to readers how much Alfredo wants to go to school? When Alfredo is excited about starting school, or going to the United States, he asks lots of questions. Discuss with students what new events or activities they are excited about, and what kind of questions they ask their parents or teachers before starting something new, and why they want to know these things. Consider assigning a short writing prompt about how students feel about the first day of school, and if they feel similarly to Alfredo and why.

2. Write a newspaper article that might have appeared after the decision of the case *Doe v. Plyler* in 1977. Include information about the five Ws—who, what, when, where, and why. Also include how. Write about these questions:

- Who was involved?
- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How did it happen?

Inform your readers of what happened, and the results of the court's decision. Tell how Alfredo Lopez and his family were affected. Use the newspaper template, which has a space for writing and illustrating your article. See the *Newspaper Activity at the end of this guide*.

Now write a newspaper article that might have appeared after the decision of the case *Doe v. Plyler* in 1982. Use the five Ws and be sure to explain:

- How this decision was different from the decision 1977.
- Why the case was important.

3. Writing Through a Mask. Write a poem pretending to be someone or something in the book. Here are some of the people you could pretend to be:

- Alfredo
- His mother (Amá)
- His father (Apá)
- His grandmother (Abuela)
- His uncle (Tío)
- Peter (lawyer)
- John (lawyer)
- Alfredo's teacher

- Alfredo's friend Jaime
- Judge William Wayne Justice

Here are some things you could pretend to be:

- The scales of justice
- The courthouse
- The pickup truck that took Alfredo from Mexico to Texas

Here is an example of writing through a mask, pretending to be the pickup truck that brought Alfredo and his tío to Texas:

The Pickup Truck

I am a brave mover of people.
 I move people from one country to another.
 I work where it is dark and sometimes dangerous.
 I carry the poor, the hardworking, and the hopeful.
 When I succeed, people are happy.
 I help them reconnect with their families.
 Because of me they can find work and get enough to eat.
 Sometimes my work is dark and dangerous.
 But I am a brave mover of people.
 I am proud.

EXTENDING THE READING EXPERIENCE

Learn More About the Plyler v. Doe case

Go to the website of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund to learn more about the case and its impact on its fortieth anniversary:

www.maldef.org/2022/06/maldef-statement-on-the-40th-anniversary-of-plyler-v-doe

Read other books about children and their families who fought for their rights to an education:

- *Small Shoes, Great Strides: How Three Brave Girls Opened Doors to School Equality* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, illustrated by Alex Bostic
- *Through My Eyes* by Ruby Bridges
- *I Am Ruby Bridges* by Ruby Bridges, illustrated by Nikkolas Smith
- *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* by Duncan Tonatui
- *Nasreen's Secret School* by Jeanette Winter
- *Fighting for YES! The Story of Disability Rights Activist Judith Heumann* by Maryann Cocca-Leffler, illustrated by Vivien Mildenberger

Read other books by author Cynthia Levinson:

- *The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist* illustrated by Vanessa Brantley-Newton
- *The People's Painter: How Ben Shahn Fought for Justice with Art* illustrated by Evan Turk
- *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March*

Read other books illustrated by Mirelle Ortega:

- *Small Room, Big Dreams: The Journey of Julián and Joaquín Castro* by Monica Brown
- *Pepe and the Parade: A Celebration of Hispanic Heritage* by Tracey Kyle
- *Magic: Once Upon a Faraway Land*

Learn more about author Cynthia Levinson:

Visit her website at www.cynthialevinson.com

Learn more about illustrator Mirelle Ortega:

Visit her website at www.mirelleortega.com

Guide written by Myra Zarnowski, a professor in the Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at Queens College, CUNY. This guide has been provided by Simon & Schuster for classroom, library, and reading group use. It may be reproduced in its entirety or excerpted for these purposes.



DON'T FORGET TO...

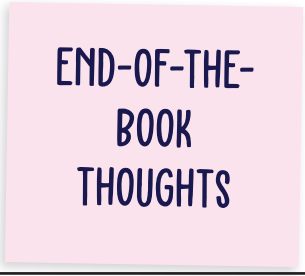


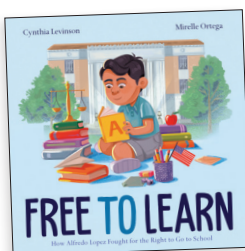
STOP,

THINK,

& JOT

As you read, or reread *Free to Learn*, jot down your thoughts about (1) new information you have learned, (2) “terrific specifics,” or details that stick in your mind, (3) new or important words that help you think about Alfredo’s experiences, and (4) end-of-the-book thoughts.

	What new facts and ideas have you learned?
	What words help you think about and discuss Alfredo’s experience in school and in court?
	What details about Alfredo’s experience stick in your mind?
	Now that you have finished the book, what are your thoughts about all US residents being free to learn?



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REPRODUCIBLE

WRITE A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE USING THE FIVE W'S

Write a newspaper article that might have appeared after the decision of the case *Doe v. Pilyer* in 1977. Include information about the **five Ws**—**who, what, when, where, and why**. Also include **how**. Write about these questions:

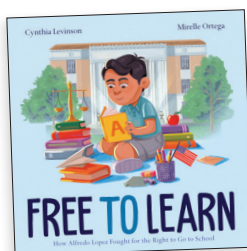
- Who was involved?
- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How did it happen?

Inform your readers of what happened, and the results of the court's decision. Tell how Alfredo Lopez and his family were affected. Use the newspaper template below, which has a space for writing and illustrating your article.

Now create another copy of the template to write a newspaper article that might have appeared after the decision of the case *Doe v. Plyler* in 1982. Use the five Ws and be sure to explain:

- How this decision was different from the decision 1977.
- Why the case was important.

Daily News

A blank worksheet template for a story arc. It features a large rectangular box at the top for a title, and three smaller rectangular boxes below it for the beginning, middle, and end of a story. Each box contains horizontal lines for writing.

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