

# Inequity: A Cultural, Historical, and Present Account of Public School Funding Allocation within the State of Texas

By: Alicia Dorado

This research examines public school funding inequities and the ways in which judicial and legislative decisions have influenced the history, culture, and future of education within the state of Texas. This study consists of field visits to public schools and government centers within Bexar County, interviews with retired faculty members and U.S. Representative Joaquin Castro, database research, and a personal narrative of the findings. This study embodies the current state of public school inequity and illustrates how bills and cases such as “The Robin Hood Plan,” *San Antonio ISD v. Rodriguez*, and *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby* have had lasting effects on the issue. The portraiture style of this research allows the author to use a blend of social science methodology and personal narrative. This hybrid creates an academic environment which illustrates the author’s point of view while opening a door for readers to form their own opinion. This study was conducted with the intention to observe funding allocation practices not only from an economic perspective, but through a lens that humanizes the effects of inequity found in Texas K-12 public schools.

**A** Kindergarten-12th grade schooling is an integral part of everyone’s lives. For parents, it is a process of their child’s development through adolescence to adulthood. For students, it is a symbol of growth and higher achievement. School provides students with early social skills. Some of our most sacred memories were made inside classrooms and playgrounds. As we grew older, we began to find our niche. Some of us became athletes, some musically inclined, artistic, militaristic, or positively individualistic. School provided us the chance to find ourselves all while working to receive a noteworthy education. School molded us into who we are today and who we will become in the future. School,

as we have been taught, is a big deal.

The importance of education is heavily stressed throughout our culture. It’s rare that a child grows up free of pressures to “stay in school” or continue in higher education, and one’s degree of success is now heavily determined by their academic achievements. However, it is rare that a student gracefully upholds these standards without exterior forces hindering their academic success. The question then is: what exactly are the forces that work against them?

When a student shows declining progression in academia, many presume it is due to a lack of motivation, willingness to learn, or self-discipline.

Others may argue that educators are the issue, concerned that many are unhappy with their jobs, or that they aren't qualified for their positions. Culturally, we view the education system on a micro-level scale. Student blame for failure is not often directed towards entire school districts or education boards, but rather individual schools. Many people, I have found, have forgotten about the role of state government in the system of education.

## Context/Background

The state of Texas has a history of instances where its educational practices and functions have been challenged. For the purposes of this study, I have observed and researched the ways in which Texas' public school funding allocation has historically and currently affects its students. Due to my findings, I have created an emphasis on landmark legislative and judicial decisions which have particularly taken place within Bexar County. Using said decisions, I have observed and analyzed the lasting economic and cultural effects they have placed within the Texas education system.

Growing up as a military dependent, I have had my fair share of moving from one place to another. With each move came a new city, new friends, a change of scenery, but most importantly, a new school. As a younger child, I can distinctly remember the economic differences between elementary schools. I remember going to a school that provided us fancy name cards to put on our little desks, a place that threw pizza parties and reward banquets for those who practiced good behavior, had nicely trimmed hedges and lawns, and had after-school activities such as the fifth-grade chess club. I also remember going to a school that would send us home with letters to give to our parents asking for donations of wide-ruled paper, glue sticks, pencils, and crayons, because they couldn't afford to provide supplies for us. Another one where our daily incentive to behave was a single piece of candy bought out-of-pocket by our schoolteacher; a school that had nothing but a former parking lot with added basketball hoops and lined four square courts to serve as a playground. As an elementary school student, I was exposed to economic disparities without consciously understanding why things were the way they were.

As an adult, I still don't think I understand why things are the way they are. I haven't been able to rationalize why it is that one district can provide its students with take-home tablets, while another struggles to provide basic textbook materials. I couldn't help but feel that

these issues have been over-simplified and looked over by our culture. I have never been pleased with the idea of accepting these conditions for what they are. What I have found in my search for clarity has been a profound disconnect between students and the political institutions in which they are governed.

Through analysis, I discovered that landmark cases including *San Antonio ISD v. Rodriguez* and *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby*, and legislation like the "Robin Hood Plan," have directly influenced the inherent structure, culture, and attitudes toward Texas public school education despite whether they are currently enacted or not. My discoveries have thus led me to question how much control students have over their academic success. Do our children's school experiences lie in the hands of politicians or of their educators? Do parents or children have any control of the destiny of their educations? What will it take to establish equitable conditions for all public school education facilities within the state of Texas?

## Methodology

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and the methodology of portraiture heavily inspired the design of my research. Portraiture in its essential form captures the "complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life," allowing one's research to relay the author's experience in a qualitative and ethnographic manner (Lawrence-Lightfoot Pg. XV).

**"Many people, I have found, have forgotten about the role of state government in the system of education."**

This unique blend of art and science creates an academic environment which illustrates the author's point of view while simultaneously opening a door for readers to experience and formulate their own thoughts on the conducted research.

There are four key components to the method of portraiture. These components consist of extensive literature reviews in the field of study, interviews with subjects relevant to the topic, physical site visits, and a personal narrative of the overall experience of the research process. With each of these methods, the author artistically weaves his or her collected data into one qualitative, yet personal account. This design is intended

to engage the reader, creating a mode for accessible understanding.

My literature review research was taken from multiple fields of study. I quickly discovered the topic had been heavily addressed in political science and economics. The interviews conducted were taken from one retired principal of a Texas public school, and from the United States Representative Joaquin Castro. I found the authoritative differences of these interviewees extremely

**"San Antonio ISD v. Rodriguez was one of the first United States Supreme Court cases to truly exemplify the spatial divide between property-rich and property-poor public schools."**

beneficial in that it provided my study with points of views from both sides of the issue. The site visits, one of which was the area surrounding John F. Kennedy High School in San Antonio, relayed similar characteristics.

### **Fighting for the Right to Education**

In observing current literature, I noticed this topic had already been heavily discussed and studied from predominately economic viewpoints. Most of the articles I came across emphasized the state budget system and the difficulty its having with providing enough for public schools. This ultimately led me to the repetitive exposure of the "Robin Hood Plan"—a piece of legislation enacted by the state of Texas in 1993, otherwise officially titled Senate Bill 7. In its purest form, it was designed to keep wealthier public school districts from being able to completely trump poorer districts in regards to providing more expensive benefits. Essentially, any excess funding that exceeded the allotted cap of \$1.50 per \$100 of assessed property value was taken from the property-rich districts by the state government and distributed among property-poor school districts.

While on paper this legislation seemed to balance the inequities of funding distribution, many believed otherwise. Taken from "The Political Economy of Public School Finance," Dr. Linda M. Loubert, a professor of economics at Morgan State University, suggests that "to some extent, the situation appears to be a vicious circle—inequities in funding cause poor performance, driving property values lower, leading to a smaller tax base, and therefore, less funding" (pg. 1-2). Dr. Loubert,

as well as many other academic scholars, believes the dispute over the "Robin Hood Plan" is strictly a matter of the state overpowering its system of education. She again addressed the severity of this inequitable balance of power as she discussed how:

"The debates and lawsuits that accompanied this piece of legislation clearly illustrate the separation of political power in our nation. The legislative body may set the rules and laws for property taxes, but it is the court system that defines the constitutionality of those laws. This is the dance of powers that surrounded Senate Bill 7."

Though she was reluctant to address the favorable features of this bill, there were some who believed Texas had been heading in the right direction. Shelley Dahlberg, a former lawyer for the Texas Attorney General Office, claimed "districts and parents received the vast majority of what they requested" (Koppel). Christopher Diamond, a representative of a coalition of business groups in Texas also added that "money isn't the only issue and it's not the only solution" (Koppel). Article 7 of the Texas Constitution states, "...it shall be duty of the legislature of the state to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools." So, if money isn't the only issue or solution, what is, and what can be done about it?

In a review of the decision of *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby* titled "*The Edgewood Drama: An Epic Quest for Educational Equity*," J. Steven Farr and Mark Trachtenberg give background on increasing financial disparities between schools within Edgewood ISD and schools within the Alamo Heights area. In the review, they identify the differences between romanticism and reality in state legislation in discussion of how "the motivations for education equity includes lofty, romantic ideals of equality and excellence" (Farr and Trachtenberg). *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby* was but one of the first cases that truly identified how little the voices of the people meant when it came to dollar signs and politics. "Many Texans realized for the first time that years of discussion and proposals had actually done little to affect the inequity of the state's system," said Farr and Trachtenberg. The idea that the voices of those being directly overpowered by the actions of legislatures quickly became a trend in my research. It became even more apparent that the lower the class a person belonged to, the more silenced their voiced became.

## What You Can Afford, You Become

*San Antonio ISD v. Rodriguez* was one of the first United States Supreme Court cases to truly exemplify the spatial divide between property-rich and property-poor public schools. This case is historical because it observed how popular rhetoric and attitude toward education conflicted with true narratives of the state of education. In “A Right to Education?: *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* and the Need to Re-Examine the Discourse of Equality in Education,” Shan Mukhtar observes these cultural conditions, stating that, “...in arguing that education is a fundamental right and wealth is a suspect identity category, the parents and children in *Rodriguez* were also implying a racialized pattern across these wealth disparities and educational disadvantages... The Supreme Court’s decision... limited the importance of education as a ‘fundamental right’ or even a significant component of the fundamental rights guaranteed to all Americans.”

The conditions of property-poor and property-wealthy school districts do not parallel. I heard about John F. Kennedy High School from a friend in San Antonio, a school in Edgewood ISD. I asked what areas were perceived as more “ghetto” or less-developed and he along with many of his friends, agreed JFK High School was perceived as a poorer school. I decided to visit the area to observe the aesthetics of the school.

I had many issues reaching out to Edgewood ISD administrators, and even those directly from JFK High School, to ask permission to do a site visit inside of the school. I was directed to many different offices, asked to email many different people, and was never granted any sort of comprehensive response. I had to resort to merely driving around the area and stopping by the school to observe its physical characteristics. To say the least, I was surprised with what I found.

The school did not look run down at all with its illuminated, modern signage and logos. However, I did notice a drastic difference between neighborhoods in the actual area. On one side of the campus were very nicely developed neighborhoods, noticeably middle to upper-middle class homes and cars. But to the other side, there were two complexes that appeared to be low income housing.

Upon further research on the school and the area, I found that Edgewood ISD played a major role in suing the state government regarding school financing (*Edgewood ISD V. Kirby*). They were once noted as one of the poorest school districts in the state due to the prices of local property. It seems this area is expanding,

although the school is still labeled as “property-poor.”

This site visit justified the complexity of spatial divides within school districts. As cities in Texas begin to expand, and children from various socioeconomic backgrounds begin to immerse within same districts, how will Texas’ current fund-allocating practices affect the quality of public school education? Most importantly, will Texas government allow previous legislation to continue to hold firm in its cultural attitude toward education, or will it evolve by enacting new methods of progression?

## Actions Speak Louder Than Words

My experience interviewing U.S. Representative Joaquin Castro of the 20th district was far less stressful and more enlightening than I had anticipated. When I arrived at his office in San Antonio, I looked around and found personality, rather than intimidation. On his bookshelf were pictures of him at schools, thank you notes with pink and purple stick figure drawings that were clearly the artwork of small children. There were multiple trophies and plaques, all with lettering too small for me to read from my seat. There was an apron with graffiti on it that read “Joaquin,” and multiple

**"Property-poor schools still receive about \$1,000 less per student than property-rich schools."**

photos of his family and mother, Rosie, whom I had researched to be a very influential Mexican-American activist in the 1970s. He also told me about his father, who had taught in Edgewood ISD for over 35 years.

Congressman Castro had attended Thomas Jefferson High School during a time when many education reforms were proposed within the area. He discussed how easy it was to tell which schools were well funded and which weren't, and emphasized the cultural and ethnic demographics of those differences. He discussed the geographical inequities within our state and how the locations of where students live have a large impact on the schools and quality of their education. He believes people, specifically people of color or lower class, are “constrained by their resources” and forced to make do with what they have.

I asked him then what he thought were the main factors of student success in the class setting. He responded by stating he believes schools should provide the same resources across districts. He also said that

while student success heavily relies on monetary expenses, it also has to do with independent students' desire to learn, the devotion of well-rounded educators, and counselors. He reiterated how disturbing it is that property-poor schools still receive about \$1,000 less per student than property-rich schools.

I proceeded to ask Congressman Castro about court cases he believed would be relevant for the issue at hand. He recommended cases such as *San Antonio v. Rodriguez*, and *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby*, cases I had already found to be extremely helpful. I continued to ask him what hardships he faced during his time as a Texas representative, and also a U.S. representative. He was straight and to-the-point in saying Texas legislature never wanted to budge on education bills because they were not willing to spend money on education. Castro, a Democrat, believes that one of the main reasons why education reform has taken such a long time is because the Republican-led House and Senate are not allowing such actions to take place. He did, however, state that he was optimistic and it was "only a matter of time."

It was apparent Congressman Castro had his own reservations on the current status of Texas public school education, but it is even more noticeable that there is

**"In its purest form, our government is designed to ensure that the concerns of the public are addressed and acted upon."**

growing discontent among Texas educators. Although this is a common concern among school administrators, educators, parents, and students, I had a hard time finding current teachers willing to talk on the issue. It was interesting to find that even while promised confidentiality, many were uneasy about discussing daily problems they face as educators in their current school districts. Also noteworthy is that I was constantly redirected back and forth by the three school districts I reached out to in my request for interviews, ultimately making my search unsuccessful. Between the three districts, only one responded saying, "I will try to gather information for you as soon as possible and get back to you." I never heard back.

Luckily, I tracked down a retired assistant principal who, after thirty-seven years in education, became frustrated and disappointed with the direction of the Texas public school system. In contrast to the

congressman's interview, this experience was much more casual. Discussing this issue with a person who had been both an educator and administrator allowed me to gain insight on the conditions of these public schools through the lenses of the individuals who run them.

He began by giving me background on his experience as both an educator and an administrator, describing how he went from a young track coach to an assistant principal over the course of thirty-seven years. I noticed passion in his voice. He spoke passionately about his experiences within education, including his own personal development. The mood of our discussion quickly shifted as I began asking questions about the current state of Texas public school education.

It became apparent that my interviewee's top concern involved the disparity between those in the classroom and those suggesting how the classroom should be run. Directed toward those in higher administrative positions, he angrily stated:

"...you've been out of the classroom for so long you have no inclination of what it's like to be a teacher in a classroom, teaching these kids what they need to learn. You're worried about how much it's gonna' cost for this, how much it's gonna' cost for that. Why aren't you worried about how much the education is gonna' cost for our future leaders of America? Why are we not paying teachers a good enough salary when it's the biggest profession that we have? That's raising our kids to be the leaders of America?"

After a brief moment of silence, he went on to discuss what admirable traits of leadership looked like. First and foremost, he identified the importance of strong communication between leadership positions, stating "...that's what makes you a better leader, when you take advice, or you take comments from the people under you... The people who are in the know, the people who know what's going on in the classroom, those voices are not being heard."

Though Congressman Castro appeared optimistic about the future of education, the retired principal did not. He claimed his fear of the increasing greed and individualistic gain within Texas public schools is what ultimately led him to retirement. While I wish I were able to discuss these issues with current educators or administrators, perhaps the common unwillingness is telling in of itself. Throughout the process of my research I have found that issues regarding education are often viewed through lenses of politicians or people of

higher administrative positions. It has become apparent that those physically in the classroom are the ones who have very little say in the discussions among those at the top of the hierarchy.

## Conclusion

In its purest form, our government is designed to ensure that the concerns of the public are addressed and acted upon. In reality, this is not necessarily so. Like a loaded gun with a silencer, so is the ongoing issue of funding inequities within the state of Texas, yet it continues to take shots at the future of students' success in education. Students and parents complain about unacceptable school lunches, the lack of educational resources, and unavailability of extracurricular activities, yet few legislators are willing to discuss the inequitable allocation of funding between school districts. The actions of state legislatures are speaking much louder than the words of its constituents.

It has become clear to me that many focus on minuscule issues in relation to public schools rather than the larger picture. Until educators, administrators, parents, students, and communities muster up the courage to speak louder than the actions of government, the issue of funding inequities will thrive within the state of Texas. I hope Congressman Castro was right when he suggested that it is "only a matter of time" before state education policies are reformed.

## Works Cited

*The Art and Science of Portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. Print.

Campoy, Ana. "Funding Rules Test Schools; State Laws Keep some Districts in Oil-boom Areas from Reaping Full Benefits." *Wall Street Journal (Online)* Nov. 21, 2012. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Sep. 2015 .

Farr, J. Steven, and Mark Trachtenberg. "The Edgewood {Edgewood Independent School District V. Kirby, 777 S.W.2D 391 (Tex. 1989)} Drama: An Epic Quest For Education Equity." *Yale Law & Policy Review* 17.2 (1999): 607-727. *Legal Source*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Fryar, Alisa Hicklin, and Daniel P. Hawes. "Competing Explanations for Minority Enrollments in Higher Education." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 22.1 (2012): 83. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Sep. 2015.

Koppel, Nathan. "Texas School-Funding Trial Begins; Case Looks at Whether State is Spending enough on

Public Education." *Wall Street Journal (Online)* Jan 21, 2014. *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Sep. 2015 .

Loubert, Linda M. "The Political Economy of Public School Finance." Order No. 9975917 The University of Texas at Dallas, 2000. Ann Arbor: *ProQuest*. Web. 16 Sep. 2015.

McCown, Scott, and (CPPP) Center for Public Policy Priorities. *Equity Analysis Of The Governor's Educational Excellence & Property Tax Relief Plan (April 2004)*. Testimony Before The Joint Select Committee On Public School Finance, 78Th Texas State Legislature (April 19, 2004). n.p.: Center for Public Policy Priorities, 2004. *ERIC*. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

Mukhtar, Shan. "A Right To Education?: San Antonio V. Rodriguez And The Need To Re-Examine The Discourse Of Equality In Education." *International Journal Of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences* 6.7 (2012): 89-98. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 18 Oct. 2015.

Russo, Charles J. "Litigation And School Finance: A Cautionary Tale." *School Business Affairs* 76.8 (2010): 20-23. *ERIC*. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

*Texas Constitution and Statutes* - Home. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2015.