

Equal education's a community job

Providing access to education for Mexican-American children in Texas, funding their schooling and determining the curriculum are as controversial today as they have been the past 160 years.

The community's responsibility for educating these children resulted from the incorporation of a Hispanic population through expansion and conquest in the early and mid-1800s and through the use of Mexican immigrant laborers.

That responsibility falls on public agencies, argues Guadalupe San Miguel in "Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981" (University of Texas Press). When public agencies shirked that duty, ethnic self-help organizations or churches stepped up to the plate.

In the past century, public education, which was the task of city or county governments, was plagued with corruption. "The taxpayer who assured the political boss the greatest number of voters," one observer remarked, "was sure of getting (teaching) certificates for all his sons and daughters."

Additionally, local schooling was minimally financed. Some rancho schools were housed in jacales (mud-and-stick, thatched-roof huts) with only benches.

Still, some sense of obligation to educating South Texas children was evident in the "baronial belt empires" of the Mexican and Mexicanized ranch lords.

By contrast, the entrepreneurs of "baronial cotton and vegetable empires" and early 20th-century city builders felt no responsibility for the laborers who constructed their homes. Consequently, "workers and their families became a 'Mexican problem.'"

A handful of major studies in the 1920s revealed the neglect of the schooling of Mexican-American children. This population, the researchers found, was unscreened, often neglected, out of view of Anglo Mexican child has no school open to him."

The main reasons for so few Mexican-Americans lacked equipment and had poorly trained teachers and low teaching salaries. As late as 1957 a Texas Education Survey concluded: "School boards believe that educating Mexican-American children was the responsibility of the state. Texans, the commission declared, have "no right to expect San Antonio, El Paso, and other places to conduct this educational task at local expense."

The challenge presented to Texans was not altogether altruistic. The campaign of the 1920s sought to reduce crime and to assimilate the newcomers educationally first, and to incorporate them culturally — that is, prepare them “to live as Americans.” Anything that retarded this process appeared as “foreigners.”

To remedy this, the Texas Legislature passed several English-only bills, the most comprehensive of which stated: “No one may be required the use of English by every child in attendance in the schools.” Moreover, some Texans went further, arguing that English should be the first language other than English.

Many reformers found irony in their attempts to integrate this region. They proposed new and, over time, radical ways of teaching English. Some even recognized the strengths among Mexican children.

But few admitted that Mexican children, basically, were asked to surmount resistance of their fellow students and that of their white parents and teachers.

Reformers were convinced that their Mexican children would not become a distinct minority — properly educated. But many districts offered only minimum programs for children, some segregated the gifted, some offered English as isolated “sink-or-swim” programs with little success. Since the 1920s and 30s, Mexican-American parents and their children have battled this system, occasionally winning noteworthy reforms.

The challenge, then and now, has been how to best serve an increasing population of Hispanic population and how to convince the community that has the resources of its responsibilities,