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# The Little School of the 400: A Mexican-American Fight for Equal Access and its Impact on State Policy

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THE LITTLE SCHOOL OF THE 400:  
A MEXICAN-AMERICAN FIGHT FOR EQUAL ACCESS  
AND ITS IMPACT ON STATE POLICY

by

Erasmo Vázquez Ríos

A THESIS

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THE LITTLE SCHOOL OF THE 400:  
A MEXICAN-AMERICAN FIGHT FOR EQUAL ACCESS  
AND ITS IMPACT ON STATE POLICY

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University of Nebraska, 2013

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Founded in 1957, the Little School of the 400 (LS400) was a Mexican-American led effort to acculturate and assimilate Mexican schoolchildren in Texas to the dominant Anglo-led society. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, more than a hundred years of discrimination and racism had produced an environment where Mexicans were treated as second-class citizens. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century activism had replaced armed and violent resistance such as the Cortina Wars of the 1850s but Anglo institutions ensured that any opposition from Mexicans and Tejanos toward the status-quo was met with indifference and perhaps worse.

My argument centers on the fact that the Little School, formulated by Mexican Americans, was an Americanization project designed to incorporate Mexicans into Texas society. It was a product of its times and that time being Cold War-Era Texas, a period where opposition to the status quo was dangerous. This thesis explores the genesis of this interesting and forgotten project, an effort that may have had nation-wide implications. The LS400 was a middle-class idea that sought to alleviate enormous injustice being perpetuated on children in late 1950s and early 1960s Texas, thus gaining grassroots support. Yet while it may have functioned to perhaps train loyal and future citizens for the Lone Star State, the project had its genesis in an environment of racism and

violence. The LS400 was instrumental, I argue, in proving that Mexican Americans could negotiate Americanization for themselves in an environment of confrontation and Jim Crow laws.

The Little School of the 400 came about because Mexican Americans in Texas, faced with rampant discrimination, decided to adapt and “Americanize” and this included language instruction in English. The Cold War’s accommodationist pressures also helped push the LS400 into existence. If any, the LS400 was an American enterprise for Mexicans to become Mexican Americans in a time when Mexicans were delegated second-class citizenship. And Texas adopted policy to accommodate the increasing educational needs of Spanish-speakers across the state.



Para mis Marías y Gaél

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## INTRODUCTION

The Little School of the 400 (LS400) was a product of its times. It came about because Mexican Americans in Texas, faced with rampant discrimination, decided to adapt and “Americanize” and this included language instruction in English. The Cold War’s accommodationist pressures also helped push the LS400 into existence. If any, the LS400 was an American enterprise for Mexicans to become Mexican Americans.

Founded in 1957, the Little School of the 400 was a Mexican-American led effort to acculturate and assimilate Mexican schoolchildren in Texas to the dominant Anglo-led society. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, more than a hundred years of discrimination and racism had produced an environment where Mexicans were treated as second-class citizens. While upper-class Mexican-Americans, or Tejanos, benefited from Anglo-controlled Texas for the most part, poor and working class Texans of Mexican descent as well as Mexican immigrants and their children lived in impoverished communities and attended decrepit schools, if any. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century activism had replaced armed and violent resistance such as the Cortina Wars of the 1850s but Anglo institutions ensured that any opposition from Mexicans and Tejanos toward the status-quo was met with indifference and perhaps worse. Yet external events such as World War II influenced changes in the Texas racial landscape. These changes were many; the LS400 was one of them and is the subject of this thesis.

My argument centers on the fact that while the Little School was an Americanization project designed to incorporate Mexicans into Texas society, it was formulated and led by Mexican-Americans. It was a product of its times and that time being Cold War-Era Texas, a period where opposition to the status quo was dangerous and perhaps could end in violence or worse. This thesis thus explores the genesis of this

interesting and forgotten project, an effort that may have had nation-wide implications. Essentially, the LS400 was not a Chicano experiment in opposition or an effort influenced by the 1910 Mexican Revolution. It was a middle-class idea that sought to alleviate enormous injustice being perpetuated on children in the late 1950s and early 1960s Texas. Therefore, it should be recognized and respected as such. Yet, while it may have functioned to perhaps train loyal and future citizens for the Lone Star State, the project had its genesis in an environment of racism and violence. Born out of these pressures, the Little School was a unique project for a unique era and represented a vanguard for Mexican Americans in taking charge of their own future in terms of public education. The LS400 was instrumental, I argue, in proving that Mexican Americans could negotiate Americanization for themselves in an environment of confrontation and Jim Crow laws.

This thesis begins with a discussion of Texas history through the lens of public education. One important realization is that schooling for Mexican children in Texas dates back to the nineteenth century and was for a time self-contained. However, the imposition of an agricultural economy and a racist political structure led to the creation of second-class schools for the children of Mexican immigrants as well as those whose parents were dispossessed of their Texas properties. Tejanos and Mexicanos, lumped together as Mexicans, struggled to cope with a new apartheid-like structure.

Chapter 2 focuses on the development of segregated schools for Mexican-descent children as well as the broader environment Mexican-Americans lived in during the early to middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. While some Mexican-American leaders challenged this reality, the segregationist structure of Texas communities and schools worked to keep Mexican-American schoolchildren in second-class status. This reality was however,

challenged by a middle-class Mexican-American organization, LULAC, whose efforts to promote civil rights eventually gave birth to the LS400. The founding and development of this program is the subject of Chapter 3. Yet like all programs that operated in the politically-charged environment of 1950s Texas, the LS400 needed support. This was achieved but at a high cost. Chapter 4 discusses consequences of the State of Texas's eventual adoption of the LS400, a development that had significant implications for the Mexican-American community of Texas and the American Southwest, or what I call, the Brown Belt.

Finally, I will explain my terminology. I call the American Southwest, and other parts of the United States, where Spanish is a dominant language and/ or where people of Hispanic descent (especially Mexican) have a sizeable population, the Brown Belt. I use this phrase in lieu of the American Southwest. I do this because geographers label the American Southwest indiscriminatively and encompasses all territorial ground of several states, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado, and do not take into account that Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Chicanos did not live in much of this area. Instead, I focus on the areas where these peoples are in sizeable amounts.

The term Brown Belt is in tune with geographical terms already in wide usage such as the Black Belt which is used to identify the area of the Southeast where African Americans are concentrated, Church Belt which identifies the area of the South where churches are of great social force, and the Salt Belt which identifies the area around the Great Lakes that uses salt to melt the snow during winter.

The Brown Belt is not a fixed geographical area. It was born after the Mexican-American War when the United States defeated Mexico and took over Mexico's northern

part of the country in 1848. At first the Brown Belt was thin, ran along most of the new border, and was actually dotted, not continuous as are other geographical belts. It was spotty where it included urban areas such as San Francisco, CA and Santa Fe, NM where Mexicans lived in northern communities but were ways from neighbors to the south. Through time the Brown Belt has received many waves of Mexican immigrants filling in these gaps. During the later part of the twentieth century, other Hispanic Americans, especially those from Cuba, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, and Honduras, have helped expand the Belt into other parts of the United States. These Hispanic Americans make up respectable sizes of the populations of states away from the border, such as Michigan, Illinois, New York, New Jersey, and Florida.

I use the term Tejano only to distinguish those Mexicans in Tejas from Mexicans who emigrated from central Mexico. I use this term for those persons up to the 1850s when the Mexican label became the norm to identify all Spanish speakers. I use the term Mexican for all of those persons of Mexican descent from the time of Mexican independence until the 1950s when the term Mexican American was adopted, or at least, accepted by most.

Consistent with historians, such as Cynthia E. Orozco, I use the term Mexican American to identify those persons that are born in the United States but that are of Mexican parents and they retain some elements of Mexican culture while being acculturated to American mainstream. The term Mexican American emerged during the 1920s but not until the 1960s did it become widely used.<sup>1</sup> Historian Guadalupe San Miguel

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia E. Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 10-12.



explains Mexican-American identification as those, “individuals [that] remained culturally Mexican but [are] philosophically and politically American.”<sup>2</sup>

I join historian José Ángel Gutierrez in labeling whites with the term Anglo, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Although many ethnic white groups existed across Texas, including Czech, English, French, German, and Irish, when juxtaposed with Mexicans, they would consider themselves a privileged aggregate group and thus by their choice, are lumped together.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987). xvii.

<sup>3</sup> José Ángel Gutierrez, “La Raza and Revolution: The Empirical Conditions of Revolution in Four South Texas Counties” (Master’s Thesis, St. Mary’s University, 1968), 25.

## CH 1: TEJANOS AND EDUCATION

José Tomás Canales, who would become, “the most important Progressive figure in the [Texas] Valley,” in the early twentieth century received his primary education in the Mexican states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. Canales obtained his secondary education in Kansas and post secondary at the law school of the University of Michigan. He knew English well, and once finished with his education, returned to southern Texas to become a prominent lawyer opening up his own practice in Brownsville in 1903.<sup>1</sup>

Canales participated in Valley civics, was widely known and respected, and quickly rose in local politics. He supervised Cameron County tax surveys in 1904 and a couple of years later he was elected as the only Tejano State House Representative. During his tenure in the House, Canales defied the power of the South Texas political machine. He voted for corporate taxes and the establishment of regulating agencies such as the Texas Department of Agriculture. Canales also supported regulating the insurance industry and establishing mine safety standards. He had progressive ideals, and saw the arrival of the railroad as an opportunity for Tejanos to jump on the bandwagon to economic empowerment.<sup>2</sup>

But Canales’s success was unique, for seldom did Tejanos achieve the point of success that he had. Unlike most Tejanos from the Valley who were small business owners, merchants, or ranch laborers, Canales came from parents tied to landed aristocrats going back centuries. Canales was the son of successful ranchers, of which Mexicans were becoming a dying breed. His family roots extended back at least to the formation of

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 43-46.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 43-46.

Brownsville itself. This allowed Canales to receive a first-class education. His family's economic and political reach expanded far beyond the Valley and these privileges surely facilitated Canales's political endeavors. Most Tejanos were not so lucky however; Canales was an exception to the rule.<sup>3</sup>

Most Tejanos viewed him as part of the elite class and instead of causing admiration, he was seen with indifference. It was not until later when Canales actively began to reach out to the working and poor classes, in the form of activism and political progressivism, did he inspire others to progress and demand improved conditions. Arguably the most important of Canales's activist efforts came in 1929 when he became a founder of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the Hispanic equivalent of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Canales, LULAC, and other activists began long and difficult battles for improvements for Tejanos and Mexican Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Canales's success, although extraordinary, is not what is important here though. What *is* important here is that most Tejanos lived lives unlike his. They endured hardships within communities that although had been founded by Mexicans, more and more were being socially, economically, and politically controlled by Anglos. Anglos nefariously deceived Mexicans of their lands and sources of wealth and sustenance. Segregated public facilities and institutions became a norm during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Tejanos were subject to wide-spread alienable rights, inequality, obstructed pursuit of happiness, and lack of education for its posterity. *These* conditions became the norm for

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 44-46.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 185.

Tejanos.<sup>5</sup> Opportunity for advancement for Tejanos was hard to come by if at all. And education, according to LULACers, was the most effective instrument for combating those conditions in Texas.

Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Texas however, have historically faced peculiar challenges with education. Texas, with its vast lands and long history contains a multitude of different types of communities it calls its own: agricultural and ranching towns, sea ports, small cities, and megalopolises among others. Therefore, it is impossible to generalize the experiences of most Mexican-American students within the historical context of Texas for they encountered different experiences within their respective communities and eras. Besides geographical location, other elements such as economic classes and gender also shaped experiences. Nevertheless, most shared some common experiences through time and space. Anglos created and later exacerbated most racial problems between Anglos and Mexicans by practicing political neglect, social discrimination, moral humiliation, de jure and de facto segregation, mass exclusion, dehumanization, disenfranchisement, demoralization, and low-quality education. These issues affected the daily lives of most Tejano, Mexican, and Mexican-American students within Texas.<sup>6</sup>

Texas, up until the recent past, had a long history of armed conflicts and political instabilities which disrupted education for all. The difficulties that plagued the *barrios* across the state differed only in severity throughout the different historical eras. Not only did political changes and armed conflicts become influential causes for the difficulties

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 26-27, 46-47.

<sup>6</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, xviii.

Tejanos faced, cultural differences, economic changes, and the lack of state support made it at times impossible for schooling to take place more so in Texas than in any other part of the Brown Belt. Tejanos experienced this phenomenon of difficulty to educate its posterity sooner, to a much deeper degree, and affected a larger population than did the rest of the Brown Belt.

Little opportunity for education existed under Spanish and Mexican governments. Later, education for Mexicans under the Republic of Texas did not fare any better despite state wide changes and improvements to public schooling. Mexican children fared horribly vis-à-vis Anglo children in schools under American control. Both federal and state governments allowed Anglos a system segregating Mexicans from Anglos. Mexican-American children along the Brown Belt received inferior education and were constantly being held back for lack of English skills, resulting in many dropping out after only the third grade. The few who entered high schools with Anglos soon found out that they were considerably older and scholastically behind which further made most drop out before graduating.<sup>7</sup> It was this method of constant and formulated discrimination that made civil rights protest, in the form of activism, a must within the Mexican communities in the mid-twentieth century.

This practice persisted for many decades until activists like Felix Tijerina and the League of United Latin American Citizens, eventually began grass-roots movements in the mid twentieth century to combat the lack of quality education for Spanish speakers in Texas. Tijerina, a Houstonian, began forging much needed change in Tejano education in

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick J. Carroll, *Felix Longoria's Wake: Bereavement, Racism, and the Raise of Mexican American Activism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 100.

1957 with his program, the Little School of the 400 (LS400), which he piloted in southeast Texas. This program sought to teach Mexican and Mexican-American children 400 basic English words. This was an important initiative since schools discriminated against children who did not know English and ultimately it was discrimination that led to Mexican children being discouraged from and being “pushed” out of learning environments.

The LS400 was extremely successful and expansion, adoption, and implementation of the program in other areas of the state quickly proved fruitful. Its curriculum grew, attendance expanded, and government agencies recognized the achievements the programs made. The State of Texas adopted this program in 1960 as its own and the LS400 may have even inspired the nationwide pre-kindergarten educational component that was implemented within President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Head Start.<sup>8</sup> Children benefited in many ways from the LS400, most notably in their transition into English-only primary schools. Many of these children became the first of their families to complete grade school and enter high schools; some were lucky enough to attend college. The experience that the LS400 offered sufficed to move a whole generation into educational mainstream.

In order to fully grasp the context of the setting in which Tijerina and others took their initiative for action, an explanation of Texas history, the times, situations, and the lifestyles of the working-class Tejanos leading up to the 1950s is needed. The background on the Texas education system and how it treated and affected Mexican Americans is also important in order to explain in detail the development, implementation, components, and

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Márquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 49-52.

achievements of the LS400. Only then can the importance of the Little School of the 400 be appreciated.

### **Schools under Spanish and Mexican Rule**

Spaniards entered Texas in the early sixteenth century with the intent of settling and claiming the land as their own. The government established several missions along the *Rio Bravo del Norte* (Rio Grande) and in strategic central and eastern Texas places to deter French settlement. Very few, if any, Spanish families moved to the new settlements; even fewer children came with them.<sup>9</sup> The Spanish government gave the Catholic Church, and its ecclesiastical clergy, the responsibility of educating the local Native population and with the advent of the Bourbon reforms, Spain implemented educational systems that encouraged the Church to teach its lay people to read and write. The clergy's main purpose was to "Christianize" the local Natives. They believed that progress was obtainable through education.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, children were seen as "educable agents of change" to promote Spanish interests.<sup>11</sup> By the eighteenth century, an example of this type of mission with teaching clergy could be seen at San Antonio's missions. Spaniards and Natives from the area attended schooling within the different local missions.<sup>12</sup> Spain's efforts to teach America's masses were more of a political move than a humanitarian one. Spain believed

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<sup>9</sup> Arthur J. Rubel, *Across the Tracks: Mexican-Americans in a Texas City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 35-36; Gilberto Miguel Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town in Transition: Laredo 1755-1870* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Buitron, Jr., *The Quest for Tejano Identity in San Antonio, Texas, 1913-1920* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 9; Laura M. Shelton, *For Tranquility and Order: Family and Community on Mexico's Northern Frontier, 1800-1850* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010), 42-44.

<sup>11</sup> David J. Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 129-131.

<sup>12</sup> Shelton, *For Tranquility and Order*, 42-44.

that in order to have a more docile and submissive populace, its subjects needed to “learn” Spanish ways and culture.

During Spanish rule, the Catholic Church was in charge of educating its lay people in lieu of state-sponsored education. However, if there was no church nearby, women in Tejas were usually in charge of their children’s education.<sup>13</sup> The viceregal government, which was located in Mexico City, intervened very little in the education of its northern frontier. Historians, including Carlos E. Castañeda, recognize that the clergy had some success teaching Spanish to local natives.<sup>14</sup> Around the San Antonio de Bexar region, Natives were accustomed to speaking Spanish and were fluent by 1777. This was due to an order in 1724 from the viceroy of New Spain directing all missions established in the northern territories of Nueva España to teach *Español* because it was the logical form to evangelize the local Natives. Although unsuccessful, efforts for formal classroom education in San Antonio had been made as early as 1731 and a petition by Francisco de la Mata, a Spanish administrator, for the construction of an edifice that would be dedicated to education was made in 1789.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the Bourbon Reforms created a Spanish-only instruction method that resulted in Franciscan missionaries claiming that most of their

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<sup>13</sup> Shelton, *For Tranquility and Order*, 120-121.

<sup>14</sup> Carlos E. Castañeda, *The Mission Era: The Missions at Work, 1731-1761. Volume III, Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 15-19-1936* (Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones Company, 1936), 33.

<sup>15</sup> Guadalupe Campos Quintanilla, “The Little School of the 400 and its Impact on Education for the Spanish Dominant Bilingual Children of Texas.” D. Ed. Diss., (University of Houston, 1976), 13.



locals had indeed learned how to speak and read Spanish by the 1790s.<sup>16</sup> In reality however, most Tejanos only received basic Spanish and catechism.

Soon education became highly esteemed and during the early 1800s Tejanos valued it very highly. Educators employed the Lancastrian system in which huge classes, sometimes numbering 150 or more, would be taught by one instructor with the assistance of advanced students. The employment of this system may have come to use for two reasons. First, there existed a lack of qualified or willing teachers in the region. Second, families' desires to have their children go to school increased. By the early 1800s attendance was made mandatory by statutes proving just how much the Spanish government wanted its subjects to learn how to read or write.<sup>17</sup> It is difficult to surmise if by this time the motive for more education was still a top-down desire to educate to keep the masses controlled, or were people genuinely wanting their children to be literate. Even though the Bourbon reforms withered and the masses remained illiterate at the beginning of the century, education was still being handed out to more people.

The Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821) was a setback for educational progress. However, after Mexican independence from Spain, the state of Coahuila y Tejas, created in 1824, established its constitution which provided articles focusing on education. The articles passed the responsibilities to the *ayuntamientos*, the town councils. The articles required that towns reserve a town block for the purposes of public education and the formation of local school boards comprised of local citizens, which we see across Texas

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<sup>16</sup> Carlos Kevin Blanton, *The Strange Career of Bilingual Education in Texas, 1836-1981* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2004), 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education*, 12-14; Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 13.

in the current independent school districts. But even when several towns, including Gonzalez, Bastrop, and Victoria, abided by this requirement these efforts too proved unsuccessful. Many blamed insufficient funds and the lack of efforts by citizens to see that the educational systems bear fruit.<sup>18</sup> For example, during the summer of 1835, Laredo closed its school due to lack of finances in addition to violence in the region. Tejanos left the school closed for at least one year; it reopened in 1836, but again closed its doors in 1837 during the Texas Revolution and the instability produced after Texas independence.<sup>19</sup>

Other forces also disrupted educational efforts. Native American raids were widespread since Europeans began setting up camps in the mid 1700s. It should be of no surprise for they were protecting what they had known as their lands for many generations back. Raids, especially in western regions of the state which were scarcely populated by new European settlers, quickly devastated colonization efforts. Raids by Janambres and Napanames tribes affected areas of what would later become southern Texas while Apache and Comanche raids affected central and western Texas. Stronger raids resurfaced in the early 1800s especially after the Hidalgo revolt and during the 1830s while Mexico's central government was busy with interior political conflicts. Indian attacks and Mexico City's long history of neglecting its northern frontier made any stable educational program impossible.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the Church, although not as strong a force as it was in central Mexico, may have also been a motivating agency that thwarted government efforts to

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<sup>18</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 14-15; Teresa Palomo Acosta and Ruth Winegarten, *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 146-147.

<sup>19</sup> Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, 3-4, 27-30, 44-45.

educate. As is commonly known, the Church wielded lots of power in communities but most importantly, within homes. Churches would have disapproved of local children leaving the Church's instruction.

### **Mexicans Under Anglo Rule to 1914**

While the desire for education within the new Texas Republic blossomed, formal state education failed to materialize. Texas declared its independence in 1836 and public education during the Republic of Texas, which endured only until 1846, took a downturn and seemed neglected at best. Although new constitutional provisions targeted school development, the Republic of Texas was financially bankrupt during its entire existence. Although motivation was high, few resources curtailed the implementation of new or expansion of existing schools, let alone school districts. The Republic did very little for a public education system.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of Manifest Destiny had been proliferating and was a major nexus of the Republic of Texas' formation. Once Texas, under the leadership of Anglos, gained independence from Mexico, Manifest Destiny took on a more powerful meaning within the state. And although these American immigrants in Texas did not claim the "new" lands for the U.S., they claimed it for themselves. Manifest Destiny is important to mention because this idea of superiority would prevail for many decades afterward, if not perpetually, and would be an underlying element to the inferior quality of education that was handed to Mexican-American children in Texas by the state at the turn of the century and thereafter.

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<sup>21</sup> Ann Marie Caldwell, "The French in Texas: History, Migration, Culture" Ed. by Francois Lagarde, *The Enduring Legacy of the French in Texas Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 240.

One of Texas' early administrators, Mirabeau B. Lamar, is credited as being the founder of its public education framework. Lamar sponsored several legislative bills, known as the Lamar Education Acts, that required, as did the articles of Coahuila y Tejas' constitution several years back, all counties to set aside land that would be used for public schools. The counties would then be allowed the option to set up their schools which would be overseen by a board made up of the county judges and their staff, as did the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas. However, because many of the counties were without major urban areas or densely populated areas, most went without any schools that were of lasting significance. Financing too, continued as an unresolved issue that plagued Texas.<sup>22</sup>

After American annexation of Texas in 1845 however, the education system seemingly received new light. The United States absorbed Texas' debt and gave it an enhanced republican political structure. As an American state, its public education systems that had previously existed under The Republic handed over its authority to new administrators. The Republic had adopted the Mexican norm of including educational aims within its federal constitution. When Texas became a state, its constitution as a sovereign country was nullified and a new one had to be drafted therefore, nullifying all of Lamar's educational acts.

Several changes to education resulted. One may expect that the most noticeable change made to Texas's educational instruction be that of language change, from Mexican Spanish to American English. Instead, the state solidified the status quo of having instruction taught in several languages. By the time Texas became part of the U.S., education in Texas was given in different languages since it was mostly an institution of the

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<sup>22</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education*, 17.

churches or local communities. By this time, churches had been established throughout the state by the Mexicans, French, Germans, and Americans, and they catered to regional or community needs. Therefore, new legislation did not target eradicating Spanish. In fact, Texas did not have an official language for its instructional pedagogy within its educational system until at least 1871. In that year, superintendent Jacob C. De Gress ruled that along with English and Spanish, curriculum could be instructed in German and French languages as well.<sup>23</sup> The administrators applied these practices not because they wanted to be inclusive and fair to all of the ethnicities or nationalities, but because of the lack of infrastructure for a state run public education system. In other words, it was practical and inexpensive. The local schools had existed for years and a state change would have warranted expensive investments that Texas was not willing or able to allocate.

The lack of effective state public schools encouraged communities to build their own non-church institutions where they were lacking. As they had done in Cincinnati, Ohio, Germans established schools for their communities such as the Free School Association in Austin in 1854 and a schoolhouse in Comfort, TX.<sup>24</sup> Germans were very quick in setting up schools, in many places as soon as one year after establishing a colony.<sup>25</sup> Although not as quick as the Germans to build schools, Mexicans in Laredo and Brownsville also built their own schools; the oldest ones being built in 1854 and 1875

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<sup>23</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education*, 19; Caldwell, *French in Texas*, 242-252.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Eby, *Education in Texas* (Austin: The University of Texas, 1919), 358; Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 11; Glen E. Lich, *The German Texans* (San Antonio: The University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio, 1981), 66-67.

<sup>25</sup> Lich, *German Texans*, 124.

respectively.<sup>26</sup> Although local schools popped up here and there, as late as 1870, the then U.S. Commissioner of Education, John Eaton Jr. described Texas's education as, "the darkest field," when compared to other states (most likely eastern states).<sup>27</sup>

Although no state-wide state-sponsored public schools existed in Texas during this time, Texas fared better than other Southwestern states when it came to educating its children. By comparison California in the mid 1800s, according to historian Carey McWilliams, had no state-wide educational system established and, "There were no schools."<sup>28</sup> Although Natives may have been excluded, in 1850, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that California's population was just fewer than 92,600.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Texas's population during the same time numbered approximately 212,600, about two and one half times as many as California.<sup>30</sup> Considering that Texas had a larger general population, comparatively greater number of white Americans, and closer proximity to both Mexico City and Washington D.C. (national capitals), it is understandable and logical for Texas to have had a pseudo system of schools established earlier than other southwestern states.

It is unclear if during this time Texas had standards for schools and if those schools in operation had connections to the state standards. Besides the Lamar Education Acts, there is no proof that any state-wide educational regulation and enforcement of laws existed

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<sup>26</sup> C. E. Evans, *The Story of Texas Schools* (Austin: The Steck Company, 1955), 342-343; San Miguel, *Heed*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Caldwell, 240.

<sup>28</sup> Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), 68.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Resident Population and Apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives: California." <http://www.census.gov>.

<sup>30</sup> Texas State Library and Archives Commission, "United States and Texas Populations 1850-2010." <http://www.tsl.state.tx.us> (accessed on 03 May 2012).

at that time. Texas schools, it can be assumed, existed mostly in local or regional settings. Historian Carlos Kevin Blanton states of education during this period, “Education was still viewed primarily as a home function or one of private and religious involvement... not a concern of the state or local government.”<sup>31</sup> Sociologist Robert H. Talbert, with his research on Fort Worth, corroborates this by stating, “the early schools in Fort Worth were operated privately... at that time, many people... favored private schools.” It was not until 1882 that Fort Worth set up the first effective public elementary schools and high schools came in 1883.<sup>32</sup>

In tune with previous trends during armed conflicts, during the Mexican-American War, 1846-1848, educational opportunities can be assumed to have been disastrous, haphazard, or completely lacking for most of Texas. Little is known about the education of Mexican Americans in Texas during the war; documentation and research of educational advancements for this period is lacking and needed. Furthermore, the war disrupted most, if not all, educational institutions in the state and further strained its public finances.

After the dust of the Mexican-American War settled, westward migration from the East Coast greatly increased. The Homestead Act of the early 1860s attracted those who looked west of the Mississippi as an open door for future opportunity. Railroads, such as the St. Louis, Brownsville, & Mexico Railroad, expanding into and through Texas after the 1870s facilitated movement from the east and Midwest. Americans moving to Texas migrated mainly from Southern states, such as Louisiana, Tennessee, and Alabama, where

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<sup>31</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education*, 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Robert H. Talbert, *Cowtown Metropolis: Case Study of a City's Growth and Structure* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1956), 242.

racism toward dark skinned people had been a way of life for centuries.<sup>33</sup> Once settled into their new habitat, Anglos focused their discriminating tendencies towards the “new” dark-skinned people, Mexicans. Historian Richard Buitron, Jr. talks about American sentiment towards Mexicans compared to European immigrants, “[Anglo-Americans were] much slower in receiving Mexican Americans into the cultural mainstream than they were with Germans, Italians, or the Irish.” A de facto system of discrimination against Mexican Americans quickly found its way into Texan society that, “has been more sustained, built into the customs and structures of the Southwestern culture, and was often more violent.”<sup>34</sup>

This system, coupled with the newly created identity confusion of Mexican Americans of neither being Native nor Spanish, led them to a profound feeling of being inferior to Anglos in many ways.<sup>35</sup> The inferior complex that Mexicans felt vis-à-vis Anglos becomes an important internal factor for the children that attend school in Anglo schools, be them private or public. This inferior complex became ingrained into the cultural development of many Mexican Americans for generations to come. Several scholars, including historian Richard A. Garcia, have put forth new research that has corroborated this idea.<sup>36</sup> Anglos became aware of this complex and used conniving maneuvers to take advantage of it.

One of the maneuvers that Anglos used was to take political power away from Mexican Americans. Many ranching towns of Texas developed under the watchful eye of

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<sup>33</sup> Joyce Appleby, et. al. *The American Republic: Since 1877*. (U.S.: The McGraw Hill Companies, 2005), 317.

<sup>34</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, xi; Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 27-34.

<sup>35</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, 5, 63.

<sup>36</sup> Richard A. Garcia, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 183.



immigrant Anglo politicians. Texas Anglos desired to create communities that allowed for their domination over other “less civilized” persons. The proliferation of Anglo-controlled towns led to concentrations of Anglos throughout the state. They then requested the state to carve out territories from Mexican-controlled counties to create their own. Counties were soon created in this fashion to allow Anglo autonomy and to increase Anglo representation in the Texas legislature. These new counties provided Anglos with new political havens, and they used political power in Austin to increase anti-Mexican policies.<sup>37</sup>

During the American Civil War education was again interrupted for not only Mexican-American children, but for all Texans. However, as in the period of the Mexican-American War, little has been published about the effects. One account about Fort Worth does exist however. Talbot explains that Fort Worth was a small town and relied on traveling tutors to educate its posterity before this era. But when the war came to Texas all educational efforts halted.<sup>38</sup> Another account from Blanton states that education in Texas was devastated during the war due to financial obligations that Texas had with the Confederacy.<sup>39</sup> It can be assumed that education was halted and not fully resumed until Reconstruction allowed for funding of public schools and the violence of the war receded. Instruction returned to Texas during the Reconstruction years. Similar to when the Republic existed, the governments not only allowed teaching to be conducted in Spanish, but it also encouraged instruction in different languages. It was not until 1884 that Texas

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<sup>37</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Talbot, *Cowtown*, 243.

<sup>39</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education*, 19-22.

legislators created requirements of English-only instruction denying Spanish speakers, and other non-English speakers, their bilingual education.<sup>40</sup>

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries racism increased nationwide. These times saw many changes with several economic recessions, American imperialism abroad, and the Gilded Age. The South saw the establishment of Jim Crow laws and increased Ku Klux Klan (KKK) activity and Texas was not spared. Mexicans in Texas too became increasingly targeted by whites simply for the color of their skin.

Post Civil War times saw other changes that affected education directly. For example, the KKK impacted housing availability for Mexican Americans and subsequently, educational availability and quality as previously mentioned. The KKK was highly active in The South, and in most parts of Texas, shortly after the Civil War. The KKK in Dallas would parade through town in their robes and hooded attire showing their power and stature in carnival fashion. There is no doubt that these Klansmen were out to intimidate not only African Americans, but Mexican Americans as well. As in many parts of the South, Klansmen served as elements of city administrations, police forces, and the local school boards.<sup>41</sup>

After the 1880s education became increasingly important. Reconstruction had ended and literacy was in demand as skilled jobs became available and the need for skilled labor to fill the labor market increased, especially in urban areas where the industrial revolution was taking shape. But before this time, as educator Dr. Guadalupe Campos Quintanilla wrote, “Residents of that Southwestern territory were... busy either fighting

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<sup>40</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education*, 19-22.

<sup>41</sup> Shirley Anchor, *Mexican Americans in a Dallas Barrio* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978), 62-63.

political, social, and economic battles or simply surviving.”<sup>42</sup> Education was not a high priority for many before this time.

At the turn of the century, Texas’s government performed inefficiently. This coincided with Mexico’s Revolution, which led Mexico into armed and political chaos. Local Texas governments were unable to implement successful educational systems during Mexico’s war years which lasted from 1910 to approximately 1920. Additionally, the Cristero Wars during the late 1920s contributed to Mexico’s upheaval. Most of the communities in Texas were unprepared for the mass migrations that took place when Mexicans migrated northward to avoid the war torn core of the country. One such ill-prepared community was Houston that took in a large wave of Mexican immigrants during that time.<sup>43</sup>

In general, Tejanas fared worse than Tejanos when acquiring education during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Within the patriarchal environment, male heads of households discouraged their daughters from attending school at all. The common, if not exclusive, mentality of Mexican-American fathers was that daughters would soon, as young as 13 years old, marry and become wards of their husbands. As most “Western” societies expected, girls’ eventual role was a domestic one of child-bearing, parenting, cooking, obedience and submissiveness to their husband. Education, therefore, was not useful for

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<sup>42</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> María Cristina García, “Agents of Americanization: Rusk Settlement and the Houston Mexicano Community, 1907-1950.” *Mexican Americans in Texas History*. ed. Emilio Zamora et. al. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2000), 125.

girls; they had no future need for it. Nevertheless, a small amount of girls, usually of within the elite class, did achieve some schooling but their achievements were minimal.<sup>44</sup>

Much of the schooling for girls took place in religious institutions that were all-girl schools. Such schools included the Ursuline Academy in San Antonio (1851), Rio Grande Female Institute in Brownsville (1854), and the Laredo Seminary (1880). Surely, sending their daughters to all-girl schools instead of co-ed schools became more palatable to patriarchs. But these schools were few and far between, expensive, and many were distant from most of the girls which lived in farming or agricultural communities.<sup>45</sup>

The Catholic Church established schools for indigent children throughout Texas. Ursulines, Marianists, Basilians, Oblates, and others established grade schools, secondary schools, and eventually universities. Mexican-American students must have overwhelmingly made up the student body in some of those cities such as Laredo, San Antonio, and Brownsville, for Mexicans made up a grand majority of the general population of those cities. For example, Brownsville's Tejano population is estimated to have been around "two-thirds to three fifths." Mexican children and parents must have been very pleased with the French services they received for the schools quickly became overpopulated and expansion was needed in all areas. This was much needed help, since San Antonio did not offer public schooling before 1868.<sup>46</sup>

But this would all change with the advent of the World Wars and the resurge of xenophobia and Nativism. These two cultural sentiments also altered the public education

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<sup>44</sup> Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 147.

<sup>45</sup> Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 149.

<sup>46</sup> Caldwell, *French in Texas*, 242-252; San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 11.

system in the early twentieth century. Texan administrators began using subtractive instruction which taught instruction solely in English and eliminated Spanish at school, even in leisurely student-to-student conversations, it was considered “un-American” not to speak English. Anglo rationale behind this prohibition laid in the belief that Spanish-speaking Americans had questionable allegiance to the United States and therefore, could not be fully trusted.<sup>47</sup> Subtractive instruction would later prove devastating to the learning ability of Mexican students and to their cultural pride, appreciation, and identity of being Mexican.<sup>48</sup>

Although all languages used in instruction were European, Mexican Spanish in Texas was seen differently than the others. Mexicans were not considered European, and were considered of a hybrid *mestizo* stock. Mexicans had darker skin tone, mixed with Native blood, and therefore, not worthy of equal standing with any other European. Other Europeans had lighter skin, hair, and other characteristics they used to unite with each other. For example, the Czechs and Germans united culturally after a generation or two within the communities of Edna, Ganado, Palacios, and Lolita, Texas. They shared physical commonalities and once their children spoke English, they became one in the same in appearance. Other Europeans, such as Italians and Scandinavians, which founded Ganado and Edna, could easily blend in together once they all acquired English.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Blanton, *Strange Career of Bilingual Education*, 59-60; John M. Nieto-Phillips, *The Language of Blood: The Making of Spanish-American Identity in New Mexico, 1880s-1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 1-2; Craig A. Kaplowitz, *LULAC, Mexican Americans, and National Policy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 147.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas E. Foley et. al., *From Peones to Politicos: Class and Ethnicity in a South Texas Town, 1900-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 65.

## World War I Up to the 1930s

The World War I era produced many changes. World War I created opportunities that positioned Anglos in never-before side-by-side positions with Mexicans. Mexicans had previously fought against Anglos in other wars, during WWI however, Mexicans for the first time went into military service alongside Anglos. During America's intervention, many Anglo-American recruits left voids in the American workplace which were filled by minorities and Mexican Americans filled these ranks within the Brown Belt. This allowed Mexicans the opportunity to enter, albeit in modest numbers, into working positions of lower and middle wage-rank labor, which Anglos had exclusively occupied.<sup>50</sup>

Those who wished to occupy newly vacant skilled and semi-skilled jobs needed some measure of formal education. Most Mexicans did not possess the education and skills needed for these positions however, and made only meager advancements. Nevertheless, a few Mexican Americans did make advancements and became aware of the benefits of education. Domestic and social changes during World War I gradually began taking place allowing for Mexican Americans some degree of social and economic advancement. These advancements were short lived however, for after World War I, Anglos returned to their communities, and most demanded their jobs back.<sup>51</sup>

The Great Depression exacerbated Anglo-Mexican relations and created environments where co-living was difficult, if not impossible.<sup>52</sup> As jobs and resources

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<sup>50</sup> Manuel G. Gonzáles, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 170-179.

<sup>51</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 177.

<sup>52</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 177.

became more and more scarce, Anglos only helped each other at the expense of others. Historian Julie Leininger Pycior explains, “Mexican-descent workers were among the first people fired as even menial jobs became attractive to the rising tide of unemployed Anglos.”<sup>53</sup>

President Franklin Roosevelt created the New Deal programs to alleviate some of the Depression hardships. And although some New Deal programs did benefit Tejanos, for example the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), more times than not, Anglos reluctantly, if at all, shared resources with them. Programs created to employ and relieve millions across the country only allowed for the proliferation of massive discrimination as Anglos rationed benefits almost exclusively to their own people. When Mexican Americans spoke out against discriminative distribution of aid, some Texans turned to violence. For example, as a result of a Mexican-American sharecropper who asked the Mexican Consulate to investigate the legitimacy of his share of a check received by his landlord from a New Deal initiative, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), the landlord paid him a visit. The landlord, who also served as the local sheriff at the time, beat the sharecropper’s daughter-in-law and proceeded to beat her child to death.<sup>54</sup>

To make things worse for Mexican Americans, mass deportations and other forms of protest ensued throughout the Brown Belt. Anglos blamed Mexicans and Mexican Americans for local economic difficulties. According to Anglos, Mexicans drained the economy and took much needed jobs from the labor market. In Malakoff, TX for example,

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<sup>53</sup> Julie Leininger Pycior. *LBJ & Mexican Americans: The Paradox of Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>54</sup> Carroll, *Longoria’s Wake*, 28; Pycior, *LBJ & Mexican Americans*, 28.

a group of angry Anglos bombed the headquarters of the Society of Mexican Laborers to persuade them to leave their jobs and self-deport to Mexico. As far north as Terre Haute, IN approximately one hundred Anglos stormed a work camp of Mexicans and threatened them with “consequences,” if they did not quit their jobs and leave. These types of situations happened across the country and regardless of being American citizens or not, Anglos forced Mexican Americans out of many communities.<sup>55</sup>

Outright racism became a normative practice in many places. For example in San Angelo, TX places such as parks, bowling allies, restaurants, movie theatres, and schools strictly segregated their services.<sup>56</sup> In Seguin which is approximately 30 miles east of San Antonio, schools, barber shops, swimming pools, and restaurants focused on accommodating Anglos only. Employment was also exclusive to certain races, with the less laborious and better paying jobs reserved for whites and drudgery and demeaning jobs reserved for Mexicans.<sup>57</sup>

## **World War II and Aftermath**

World War II was of greater social importance for Mexican Americans than was World War I. This war mobilized more American troops than the previous war and it employed many more Mexican-American soldiers. Historian Manuel G. Gonzalez estimates that, “between 250,000 and 500,000 Mexicans, both immigrants and native-born, out of a population of 2.7 million, engaged in active military service,” during the conflict.

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<sup>55</sup> Balderrama and Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 121.

<sup>56</sup> Salvador Guerrero, *Memorias: A West Texas Life* ed. by Arnoldo de León (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1991), pp. 14-15, 25-26, 54-55.

<sup>57</sup> David Maldonado, Jr., *Crossing Guadalupe Street: Growing up Hispanic and Protestant* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 13.



Mexican-American women also contributed to the cause, mainly in domestic duties such as selling war bonds. Regardless of where they participated, both Mexican-American men and women gained psychological benefits that would later become important in activist endeavors within their communities.<sup>58</sup>

Another social change involved immigration from Mexico. The Bracero Program, a labor initiative that began in 1942 and lasted twenty two years, allowed an estimated 4.8 million Mexicans to enter the U.S. to work in certain industries due to lack of available labor. This exacerbated racial tensions in the Brown Belt and other regions after the war was over.<sup>59</sup> These situations created conflicts for educating Mexican-American children. The Bracero Program brought Mexicans into areas of the U.S. where they had previously not been in great numbers. These factors encouraged xenophobia against Mexicans which became pervasive throughout the country.<sup>60</sup> Additional push-pull factors lured many Mexicans to Texas for example, growing industries and job opportunities in the railroads, mining and agriculture in addition to the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero Rebellion. By 1930 Mexican Americans in several cities, such as Houston and Dallas, had increased dramatically.<sup>61</sup>

Post World War II differed from post World War I in several aspects. First, the sheer number of Mexicans employed in the armed services was far greater. More Mexican Americans enlisted to serve in WWII than in any other war of the U.S. Second, more

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<sup>58</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 161-163.

<sup>59</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 170-173.

<sup>60</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 177.

<sup>61</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel, *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 4.

Mexican Americans entered higher rank employment capacities. Third, home ownership was facilitated with accessible financing. Fourth, with the creation of the G.I. Bill, more Mexican-American veterans applied for post-secondary educational benefits. Finally, Mexican Americans, both veterans and non-veterans received a psychological boost either from military training, military benefits, or job access.<sup>62</sup> Despite these facts, or more accurately, because of these advancements, racism against Mexicans persisted.

After each war, Mexican-American children staying home during both Wars began going to public schools, although still in modest numbers, for longer periods of time. Mexican Americans knew that they were behind academically when entering elementary schools. To get a head start on schooling, parents sometimes sent their children to preschool, or more commonly, home tutoring. As with Spanish-instruction private schools, preschools were only available to a select few such as Canales. Those that obtained education of any kind though, benefited greatly from it.<sup>63</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Since the founding of Texas by the Spanish colonists, educational opportunities were limited. Those opportunities benefited mostly the local elites, and to a lesser extent, those whom needed conversion into Catholicism by the Church. After the Mexican-American War, Mexicans saw their educational aspirations limited as education was all but exclusively reserved for Anglo children, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth. However, the World Wars created new doors of opportunities for Mexican Americans although they still received second-class treatment within society.

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<sup>62</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 161-164.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 40-45; Foley, *From Peones to Politicos*, 34, 42, 65.

The next chapter explains how Mexican Americans came together to form activist associations and movements for the betterment of their communities.

## CH 2: FROM TEJANOS TO MEXICAN AMERICANS

Tejanos owned much of the land in South Texas for decades after American annexation. Tejanos prospered with their modest-size ranches and farms. However, by the end of the nineteenth century Tejanos began losing their lands to Anglos. Many factors contributed to this loss. The advent of industrial cattle ranching and increased farm productivity drove land value up and Anglos began to take over Tejano-owned lands through legal and extra-legal means. Anglo-controlled Banks denied Tejanos financing thus forced them to find alternative ways to access funds. Heavy investments from eastern financiers backed Anglo business ventures in the lands between the Nueces and Rio Grande and elsewhere. Unlike Tejanos, Anglos easily obtained loans. Tejanos' only viable alternative was to sell their lands to Anglo ranchers. Kleberg, Cameron, and Hidalgo counties of south Texas, for example, are three of many counties that experienced this change of land ownership from Tejano hands to Anglo ones. This process continued for many decades and left many, if not most, Tejano ranchers throughout the state in the positions of hired laborer, migrant worker, and second-rate citizen.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned before, migration from the eastern United States increased after the 1870s with the expansion of railroads. At the turn of the century, Tejanos saw their communities inundated with anti-Mexican Anglos that preferred segregated communities. Anglos from the Midwest, known as "Snow Diggers," and New Englanders believed that the Mexican "mongrel" race was inferior to that of the Anglo. Anglos who despised the Spanish language, darker skin tone, shorter stature, backwardness, and the desire to not

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 17-20, 34, 176-177; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 63-70.

conform to Americanization increased with the influx. Anglos felt that these characteristics were un-American and it bred distrust of Tejanos.<sup>2</sup>

Race was an increasing reason for tension in Texas and the Brown Belt. The racialization of the Tejano, and other Mexican descendents across the Brown Belt, can be seen by the way the U.S. Census changed their labeling in the early 1900s. Up until 1920, the United States Census allowed Tejanos to classify themselves as whites. The agency allowed this because Mexicans did not qualify as blacks, and the argument was made that they had some Spanish blood in them. But ten years later, the Census categorized Spanish-speakers as Mexican, and thus began their racial subordination. Unfortunately, the change of racial relations in Texas was for the worse.<sup>3</sup>

Yet another aspect that was affected by the influx of Anglo immigration was education. While upper-class Tejanos prospered under the new order and were able to continue educating their children in private academies or Catholic schools, poorer Tejanos faced segregated public schooling if at all.

### **Segregation and Schooling**

Increased loss of land for Tejanos not only meant losing land that had been in many families' possessions for generations, it also meant that the sellers now had to find jobs to support their families. Many displaced Tejanos sought employment within cities instead of the country side. By the late 1940s many Tejanos lived in urban areas, and by the 1950s the majority of them were urbanized. For example, Tejanos flocked to Houston

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 19-20; Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 178; San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 3; Nieto-Phillips, *Language of Blood*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, 10, 27.

as it became an important producer of petrochemical, plastic, and metal products.<sup>4</sup> But new reasons also began resonating: increased familial connections, access to healthcare, improved infrastructure, and urbanization itself. As a result, their concentration as agricultural laborers decreased as they became unskilled and semi-skilled workers for the many industries in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth and other growing cities. This concentration of Tejanos in urban centers helped fuel the growth and strength of activist initiatives of the 1950s and 60s.

But urbanization had its disadvantages. Segregated housing became more common and whites became disdainful to Mexicans and Tejanos since their presence in cities increased. Historian Manuel G. Gonzales describes how segregated housing in cities for Mexicans migrating to the U.S. in greater numbers created sharper concentrations within specific areas in cities, creating many of the modern Mexican-American *barrios*. Much of this segregation was de facto. Anglos created ways to keep Mexican home ownership away from white neighborhoods, especially the suburbs. For example, Anglo-controlled federal financing denied mortgages for non-Anglos in suburbs even though it was deemed illegal in 1948. Apartments also denied leases to Mexican Americans in certain complexes that preferred to cater exclusively to whites. This discrimination was not exclusive to the Brown Belt; housing segregation against Mexicans was common in large cities across the country such as Chicago and Detroit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Arnoldo de León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 98-99.

<sup>5</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 165; Eric Foner *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 817.

But de facto-segregated enclaves existed in small Texas towns like Seguin, Ganado, and Edna as well, and municipalities used their infrastructure to accentuate it. Local governments used streets and railroads as separating mechanisms to keep Mexicans, and African Americans, from whites. For example, Weslaco, San Juan, Pharr, and McAllen local governments used railroads to separate Mexicans from Anglos. Governments also used geographical barriers, such as bayous, rivers, and mountains. Houston for example, used its many bayous in addition to railroads to segregate the races; Ganado its railroad; El Paso its mountains. By the early twentieth century cities such as San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Seguin, and Goliad, which were founded by Mexicans, had very few public places to accommodate them.<sup>6</sup>

Although de facto segregation was the norm across Texas, de jure segregation also existed. Weslaco's local ordinances for example, required that Anglos maintain their residences and businesses south of the town's railroad tracks. Those same ordinances required that Mexicans and dirty businesses, like factories and warehouses, be maintained to the north of the tracks. Anglos employed legal and financial measures against other minorities, especially African Americans in order to segregate them in terms of housing and keep them out of certain neighborhoods. This process, termed redlining, was practiced by banks.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 15, 29; Maldonado, Jr., *Guadalupe Street*, 37-41; Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 47, 178-179.

<sup>7</sup> Appleby, *American Republic*, 317; Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 178-179; Barbara Jones, interview by author, 17 October 2012, Edna, TX, digital recording, Lincoln, NE; For the practice of redlining, see Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999)

Economic and housing segregation went hand in hand. Housing segregation took place early in Texas as it was part of the Anglo agenda. Housing areas were directly connected to income levels, and therefore, opportunity for job advancement and placement became a critical and cherished asset that Anglos did not part with easily. Anglos kept the best paying jobs for themselves and seldom if ever, offered them to others. It is commonly known that even when working alongside Mexicans and doing the same job, Anglos received more pay and fringe benefits than did the Mexicans or other minorities. This ensured that Anglos would be able to afford better housing in newer neighborhoods established for whites only. Mexican Americans usually received opportunities to fulfill “inferior and poorly-paid jobs.”<sup>8</sup> The poor wages allowed Mexicans to have access only to poor dilapidated houses that usually existed within the same neighborhoods, and thus the barrios were created.

Housing played an important role in how Mexican residents received education in their respective communities. Mexicans were segregated and confined to their own sections of town. Segregated housing naturally led to segregated schools. It is no secret that Anglos purposely created the segregated environments to keep Mexican children in their section of town where the Mexican Schools were located. The Anglos promoted neighborhood schools where each of the three races (black, brown, and white) had their own school and remained separate. Public administrators defended segregated schools by claiming that the location of Tejanos was the reason for these segregated schooling. Administrators built schools in the barrios to keep Tejano children from going across town to the Anglo schools. Mexican schools, also known as “Zavala Schools,” in honor of

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 47.



Manuel Lorenzo de Zavala, the first vice-president of Texas, were common place across the state at the turn of the century. Towns with Mexican schools included Baytown, Pearland, Pearsall, Rosenberg, and Richmond, all near Houston. Mexican schools were run down, lacking of necessary utilities, and deprived Tejano children of quality education.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, some Mexican children in Texas did attend school with whites. In some small and mid-size towns, as mentioned above, schooling allowed for the integration of Mexicans with Anglos, albeit only in elementary schools. But in larger cities like Houston and San Antonio, where larger numbers of Mexicans allowed for their own schools, Mexicans remained separated throughout high school. School boards established or allowed de facto segregation in elementary schools that provided instruction for Mexicans, even if Anglo schools were closer to Mexican households. As time went on, children of Mexican descent saw themselves in schools that became more concentrated with their own kind, especially as “white flight” to the suburbs from the cities commenced in increasing numbers beginning as early as the 1920s.<sup>10</sup>

Coincidentally, the Dallas school board maintained that segregated schools were best for both the Anglo and minority communities and discriminatory practices within public schools towards Tejanos became common. One section of Dallas that suffered this fate was the west side where Anglos channeled Mexican Americans into specific enclaves using nefarious housing practices. Housing for Mexican Americans was reserved near Mill Creek. Mill Creek residences had dilapidated shack-like dwellings with open ditch

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<sup>9</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 18; San Miguel *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 11-13.

drainage and had been described as, “hardly fit for housing livestock.”<sup>11</sup> But in the eyes of Anglos, these were suited for housing Spanish speaking families.

For this and other reasons, some of the Mexican families within Texas did not care for public schooling and instead, wished to keep their children separate from Anglo ones. As previously mentioned, some Mexican families preferred to have their children attend church schools. In addition to these, families also sent their children to *colegios*, or private primary schools. These *colegios* taught cultural traditions and customs and those who could afford it, opted to send their children there. For example, in Hebbronville, Texas, a small ranching community in the Texas *Valle*, a Spanish-language school was established in 1897. It catered to Mexican families who wished to have their children instructed in *Español*. The ethnic makeup of Hebbronville was mostly of Mexican descent, but the new local public school had English-only instruction. At the Mexican school, *El Colegio Altamirano*, the well-to-do could send their children and have the comfort of not needing to have their children subject to Americanizations. This small school was popular in the region and continued servicing Mexican educational needs until 1958 when it closed its doors.<sup>12</sup> This is just one example of several schools of this type that existed in Texas during the early twentieth century. However, only those families who could afford to send their children to these types of private institutions were able to circumvent Anglo controlled public schools.

Most Tejanos though, endured the wrath of public education and Houston was one city where they experienced much difficulty. According to Historian Guadalupe San

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<sup>11</sup> Anchor, *Dallas Barrio*, 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, 86.

Miguel, Houston did not have many Mexican residents prior to 1880 unlike some of the other large cities of Texas such as El Paso, Laredo, Brownsville, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi.<sup>13</sup> This was due to the proximity to the Mexican border and to Spanish settlements before American annexation when Texas was still *Tejas*. This is important because unlike these cities, Houston's Mexican population was considered an immigrant one and it was quickly seen as an outsider community by Anglos. Anglos' unfriendly welcome and discriminating system kept Mexicans uneducated, unable to buy land, segregated, and working at the lowest paying jobs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mexicans in Houston quickly developed inferior complexes and Anglos managed to adapt their discriminatory system to keep this complex entrenched in their psych.<sup>14</sup>

According to San Miguel, Houston's Mexican community made up only two percent by 1910 and no race-based enclaves existed at that time.<sup>15</sup> Historian María Cristina García notes that Houston's Second Ward neighborhood, which later developed into one of Houston's three major Mexican *barrios*, was three-fifths Jewish, one fifth African American, and one fifth comprised from a multitude of ethnicities.<sup>16</sup> However, the mass influx of Mexicans during the 1910s and 20s created conditions where Anglos became xenophobic and began to implement race-based discrimination targeting the Spanish speakers. By 1930 there were several Mexican-American neighborhoods, including *El*

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<sup>13</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Buitron, *Tejano Identity*, 63-64.

<sup>15</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> García, María Cristina, *Americanization*, 125.

*Segundo Barrio, El Crisol*, and the largest of them, Magnolia Park.<sup>17</sup> These *barrios* were tightly contained and segregating Mexicans became a common practice. Housing segregation quickly led to school segregation, racism, and neglect on the part of the city and public school administrators. Once the Houston population exceeded the capacities of existing schools, Anglo administrators moved to build new segregated elementary schools for the Mexicans within their own *barrios*.

This practice was not an isolated movement during the 1920s and 30s. Throughout many of the ranching communities Anglos set up public schools that made clear distinctions between white students and Mexican ones. Anglos had better equipped schools with better qualified staffing. More teachers per students were employed and those teaching at both the white and Mexican schools were white.<sup>18</sup> This was important in creating an image of white superiority in the minds of Mexican children since teachers held a position of authority not only within schools but within the community as well. These practices reinforced the inferiority complex of the Mexican communities throughout the state.

### **Mexican Americans Arise**

It is worthy to mention that during the first half of the twentieth century, many Mexicans and Tejanos changed their identity to a Mexican-American one. The Brown Belters experienced this transformation at different times (some are still undergoing the transition today) and due to various reasons. Compared to those born in Mexico, children born in the U.S. Americanized faster, at an earlier age, and to a deeper degree. They

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<sup>17</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Foley, *From Peones to Politicos*, 33-34.

identified as bicultural or tricultural (Mexican, Mexican American, or American) more easily. Several conditions, or lack of, created the Americanized Mexican. For example, time away from Mexico, or the barrio, played a major role in Americanizing; as did the ability to speak Spanish; interaction with Anglos, access to American institutions, job placement; and income level all played a role in how Tejanos became Mexican Americans.

Many historians, like Mario T. García, claimed that experiencing World War II was the principal reason behind the Mexican-American transition; and that the Mexican-American generation developed in the time between the 1930s and 60s. This time frame coincided with the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War, and the Civil Rights Movement, of which, all affected Tejanos. García sees LULAC as the first organizational sign of this Mexican-American identity transition, pointing out the importance that the League gave to American citizenship. However, newer analysis by historian Cynthia E. Orozco, in her book *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, explains that she does not agree with García and critiques his neglect of early activism during the 1910s and 20s. Orozco implies that after the South Texas violence of the 1910s and 20s, for example the violent Texas Ranger response to Juan Cortina and the Plan of San Diego, these Mexican Americans may have wanted Anglos to accept them as Americans instead of seeing them as Mexicans. To disassociate themselves from Mexicans, Mexican-American activists therefore chose methods of peaceful confrontation that were akin to “civilized” Americans, including legal challenges to old discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, 4-5, 61.

Historian Benjamin H. Johnson claims that Mexican Americanism took place early in the twentieth century. His book, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans*, argues that the bloody and racist aftermath of the discovery of the Plan de San Diego turned Tejanos into Mexican Americans. Frustration with segregation, violent Texas Rangers, Jim Crow laws, and accentuated disenfranchisement placed Tejanos in precarious positions where they lived in perpetual fear for their lives, especially those living in South Texas. Additionally, the “indifference of the Mexican government, demonstrated so convincingly when it did nothing to stop the slaughter of 1915-1916,” that Tejanos had to fend for themselves and accepting Americanization, even if hyphenated (both in semantics and in citizenship), would eventually guarantee the protection of their lives. Johnson states that LULAC solidified Tejano Americanization with the LULAC constitution in 1929 which stated that LULAC would develop in every member a, “loyal citizen of the United States of America.”<sup>20</sup> This is important for Anglos saw Tejanos as very disloyal members of society, mainly because of their *Español*.<sup>21</sup>

Yet George J. Sánchez, in his book, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, takes other factors into consideration for this identity transformation of Los Angeles Mexicans. Sanchez argues that Mexican Americaness is, “not a fixed set of customs surviving from life in Mexico, but rather a collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the United States.” The change from, “temporary sojourner to permanent resident,” during the Mexican Revolution

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<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 181, 189-191.

<sup>21</sup> Nieto-Phillips, *Language of Blood*, 52.

and the Cristero War made it clear that staying in the U.S. was not merely an attractive economic journey, but also a necessity for survival. Sánchez also correctly points out that non-Mexican events also shaped Mexican Americaness. The Great Depression, the repatriation of thousands of both Mexican and American citizens, and the New Deal also contributed to the change.<sup>22</sup> Although Sanchez analyzes Mexicans in California, comparisons can be made to Tejanos in similar situations. Tejanos, for similar reasons as did Californios, would also be experiencing similar attitudes towards this transition to Mexican Americaness.

The identity of some Tejanos dramatically changed from previous generations and transitioned into a Mexican-American identity for different reasons at different times and places. However, it was during this era, just before mid century, when many Tejanos decided to become Mexican Americans and ceased romanticizing of a Mexico they would never permanently return to. Unlike radical Progressives that challenged these same practices via violence and open aggression, Mexican Americans united to fight racism and Anglo-American bigotry and control, through rationally-conservative methods.

### **Scholastic Comparisons and Early Activism**

During the mid 1930s studies of school districts showed that enrollment for Mexican-American students was extremely low in comparison to the general population. Additionally, enrollment was concentrated in the lower elementary grades. For example, the elementary school in Pleasanton, TX, a small town about 35 miles south of San Antonio, showed that 190 Mexican-American students enrolled in the school year 1934-

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<sup>22</sup> George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10-13.

1935. The distribution was outrageously disproportionate throughout the seven grades. Fifty seven Mexican-American students enrolled in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 42 in 2<sup>nd</sup>, 17 in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 13 in 5<sup>th</sup>, 3 in 6<sup>th</sup>, and 2 students in 7<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>23</sup> Kindergarten is not mentioned here because it was not a service that was part of public schools yet. Although by 1965 kindergarten was part of the public system, only 42% of the country's 5-year olds were attending. Additionally, it was the middle and upper classes, not the working class as were most of the Tejano population, whom normally sent their children to these "gardens," of preparation before entering first grade.<sup>24</sup>

Wilson Little conducted a broader study of Mexican American attendance in schools during the 1944 school year. He found the same pattern across 122 Texas school districts. Of the more than 40,000 students that he surveyed, a great majority were concentrated in the first three grades of elementary school. Mexican-American students usually had to repeat some, if not all, of the first three grades. Once their age became a constant reminder of their failure, they chose to quit before entering the fourth grade. Student attendance dramatically dropped in the fourth grade and gradually waned off to almost zero towards high school's final years.<sup>25</sup> The need for "Mexican" high schools never materialized within smaller communities not because of the smaller numbers compared to big cities, but because most Mexicans never made it to high school.

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<sup>23</sup> Everett Ross Clinchy, Jr., *Equality of Opportunity for Latin-Americans in Texas* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 108.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Zigler and Sally J. Styfco, *The Hidden History of Head Start* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> Clinchy, Jr., *Equality of Opportunity*, 108.



Systemic prejudice and discrimination from Anglos were found to be the principal reasons why Mexican Americans were disenfranchised from the desire to obtain formal schooling.<sup>26</sup> This prejudice would be the driving force behind Mexican-American activism during the 1940s and 1950s. Although activism began decades before, it wasn't until veterans from WWII and Korea returned from foreign battle grounds when major progress began. Whites systemically kept Mexican Americans from attending white schools, especially at the secondary grades. San Miguel points out that although public education was legally allowable for Mexican Americans in Houston, it was almost impossible for them to attend any schooling beyond elementary during the first forty years of the twentieth century. Whites created obstacles that made it difficult for Mexican-American students to attend. For example, they constructed high schools far from the Mexican *barrios*. Districts also placed Mexican-American students in non-academic courses while in elementary schools so when they attended high school, they quickly found themselves academically behind whites and dropping out became an attractive remedy.<sup>27</sup>

Not only did schools and districts legitimize segregation, the judicial system did so as well. The Texas state courts legitimated segregation of Mexican Americans, most notably in the 1930 case of *Del Rio ISD v. Jesus Salvatierra*. In Del Rio, Texas, the Salvatierra family brought the case before the local courts because the school district segregated Tejano children from whites based on them being Mexican. District administrators claimed that segregation of Mexican students was entirely based on academic or attendance criteria, not based on race. Additionally, they argued that the

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<sup>26</sup> Foley, *From Peones to Politicos*, 34-35.

<sup>27</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 12.

language barrier easily qualified as a disability and therefore administrators and teachers placed them in less academically focused classes away from Anglos, a practice that Houston Independent School District continued until at least the mid 1970s, if not later. Mexican girls in Houston, for example, were placed in cooking, sewing, and homemaking classes while boys attended classes geared to manual labor, agriculture, and farm trades.<sup>28</sup>

But the “system” of exclusion was not the only deterrent for children. Other factors also kept Tejano children from obtaining education. Many families who had either previously sold their lands or who immigrated from Mexico became migrant agricultural workers and could not afford to have their children attend school regularly. Most migrant children attended only a couple of months per year. They traveled around the state contingent on when different crops needed picking, and the seasons would determine their constant relocation to find work. This was especially true after children attained the age of about ten, an age many adults considered appropriate to send children off to work.<sup>29</sup> Work however, was not the only reason why children did not go to school.

Personal factors contributed to low school attendance as well. For example, Lily Verver, a resident of Edna, Texas, remembers growing up in Ganado, TX. Verver says that her siblings, except for two, hardly went to school. Verver’s mother was ill most of her life and her father died at an early age. Verver completed second grade, but because her domestic labors kept her occupied, she had to drop out before third grade. Lily’s brother, Paulino, remembers his experiences in segregated Mexican schools in Palacios and

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<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Nájera. “Practices of Faith and Racial Integration in South Texas: A Case Study of Mexican Segregation.” *Cultural Dynamics*. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 8-15; San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 128-130.

<sup>29</sup> Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 31.

Ganado. He was luckier than Lily, he attended about six years. But he too had to drop out and start working because of his father's death and mother's illness. Their sister, Isabel Verver, who fortunately finished high school, was one of few Tejanas who would complete such a feat. She later played an important role in fighting the trend of early drop outs of Mexican Americans. Isabel Verver contributed to the initial success of the pre-school program, The Little School of the 400, in the late 1950s, which LULAC helped organize.<sup>30</sup>

### **Fighting Back**

Activism during and after the World Wars changed Mexican-American activism for the better. For the most part, Mexican-American veterans returned from the Wars, especially after World War II, with a new mindset and set of values. They came back with a more defined sense of belonging to America, more focused desire to equal access to the pursuit of happiness, and most importantly, a clear vision of holistic egalitarianism. Ideological shifts came about during the war for many reasons. Some of these reasons included the constant contact with Anglos, serving in a desegregated government institution, the defeat of Hitler's racial superiority theory, and for many, like Sergeant Macario García (recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor) of Sugarland, Texas, being honored for their valiance and courage. Once back home, Mexican-American veterans created a mass following of working-class citizens that closely identified with and understood the middle-class mentality that many were now achieving. Now with veteran

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<sup>30</sup> Paulino Verver, interview by author, 16 October 2012, Edna, TX, digital recording, Lincoln, NE; Lily Verver, interview by author, 16 October 2012, Edna, TX, digital recording, Lincoln, NE.

status, broader knowledge, and adequate self-esteem, many Mexican Americans demanded to be treated as equals and wanted their share of the American dream.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, Mexican Americans and their children had had enough of segregation and discrimination by the middle of the twentieth century. Concerned and frustrated parents became more vocal against the status quo. Grass-roots organizations sprouted across the Brown Belt in response and many of them focused on education. One such organization in Texas was *La Orden Caballeros de America* (Order Knights of America). Pedro Hernández and his wife Maria L. founded the Order in 1929 with the purpose of, “improving the educational and social condition of Tejanos.”<sup>32</sup> Although Hernández’s purposes at times differed from those of other groups, her organization many times teamed up with others. For example, *La Orden* collaborated with LULAC on several occasions. One of those times was when they helped each other improve the access to quality education of San Antonio’s West Side barrio, one of the poorest in the city.<sup>33</sup>

Another such organization of the era was *La Liga Pro Defensa Escolar* (School Improvement League), founded in 1934. Eleutrio Escobar founded *La Liga* in San Antonio also in protest to educational conditions. *La Liga* appreciated the American ideal that education was a central value for self-improvement. It advocated for the improvement of existing Mexican schools in the barrios, however, at the expense of integration. Education, *La Liga* claimed, had to be improved for its posterity. After some internal problems, it changed its name to an English variation—School Improvement League—in 1947 and

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<sup>31</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, 44 & 55-56.

<sup>32</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, 42-43.

continued to work for educational improvements.<sup>34</sup> Historian Richard A. Buitron, Jr. described the league as reflecting, “a belief that education was the only avenue of betterment for the children of the city’s most impoverished areas, a value central to the American ideology of self-improvement and progress.”<sup>35</sup> But these organizations became troubled by limited local reach, limited resources, and internal conflicts that ultimately resulted in a short lived existence.

In 1948 military veterans came together to form the American G. I. Forum (AGIF), an organization exclusively of Mexican-American veterans that would demand their rightfully earned benefits from the federal, state, and local governments. It was founded by Héctor Pérez García who was a medical doctor and served in WWII. The Forum quickly established chapters in cities throughout Texas and, teaming up with LULAC, it began challenging segregation in schools and other public places. An early victory for the Forum was that of obtaining due burial for veteran Felix Longoria. Longoria died during WWII and was sent back home to Three Rivers, Texas from the Philippines. When his family tried to bury him at the local cemetery, the cemetery’s administrators denied him access to the hall for his wake because he was of Mexican descent. Longoria’s family was discontent and challenged the cemetery in the courts. Due to the Forum’s intervention, the courts ruled favorably on behalf of the Longorias. The U.S. military took matters into their own hands however, and with the family’s approval, buried Longoria’s body at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington D.C. with full military honors.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Buitron, Jr., *Tejano Identity*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Guerrero, *Memorias*, 108-109.

Arguably the most important of the Mexican American organizations was the League of United Latin American Citizens. LULAC was founded in 1929 to combat discrimination of all sorts towards Mexican Americans. It was founded on principles that hoped to ameliorate the pervasive and systemic racism that was rampant throughout the Brown Belt. Promoting access to quality education for their children was one of the key initiatives taken up by LULAC activists. Political scientist Benjamin Márquez describes the League's intentions, "For LULAC, the key to Mexican American advancement was to reform the American educational system and make it accessible to Mexican Americans."<sup>37</sup> Education is considered by many to be an equalizing force not only within American society, but throughout the world.<sup>38</sup> But only if education is consistently given to all members of its society *and* of a similar quality, could education be considered such a force. As Gutierrez states, on the contrary, if these two elements are not given equally and to all citizens of the state, then they will ultimately serve as a dividing force within society. The dividing force could easily turn revolutionary.<sup>39</sup> These two factors, in Texas, were the important elements when it came to Mexican Americans' education.

LULAC quickly began concentrating its efforts on education. For example, LULAC participated in back-to-school campaigns, demanded the improvement and renovation of "Mexican" schools, trained adults for American citizenship, and provided homemaking instruction for house wives.<sup>40</sup> But these community initiatives are not what

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<sup>37</sup> Márquez, *LULAC*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 8-9.

<sup>39</sup> Gutiérrez, *La Raza and Revolution*, 25-31, 65-69.

<sup>40</sup> Márquez, *LULAC*, 28.

LULAC is renowned for. Litigation that LULAC delivered shortly after the organization's inception became its hallmark. Surprisingly, just one year after it was founded, LULAC's litigation initiative began to bear fruit when it challenged school segregation in the previously-mentioned border town of Del Rio, Texas. In *Del Rio ISD v. Jesus Salvatierra* (1930), LULAC was successful in having the state courts agree that segregation was unconstitutional if it was based on racial or ethnic discrimination. The school district appealed the case to the appellate court however, and won. It won on the basis that the school segregated on academic achievement and not because of race. As mentioned before, although this case was not completely successful, it did set a precedent of anti-racism litigation.<sup>41</sup>

Not until after World War II did LULAC's activism pay off in grand fashion. In 1948, several years before *Linda Brown v. Board of Education*, LULAC finally achieved a significant gain in equal opportunity in education access with the favorable court decision in *Minerva Delgado v. Bastrop ISD*. The plaintiffs argued that several school districts of Bastrop County segregated Mexican American children based on their ability to speak Spanish and Mexican heritage and that the segregation was arbitrary and systemic. Judge Ben H. Rice declared that Bastrop Independent School District was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution and demanded that Mexican Americans not be segregated after September of 1949.<sup>42</sup>

LULAC not only fought racist practices with litigation, it also participated in grassroots activism. In 1945, under the auspice of John J. Herrera, it protested against

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<sup>41</sup> Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 124.

racial school segregation that had been practiced in Pearland, TX for many years. In this situation, the Pearland schools were segregating Mexican-American children in a one-teacher school. Meanwhile, Anglos had a modern facility with adequate utilities, supplies, staff, and auxiliary personnel. LULAC challenged this practice and Pearland integrated the schools in the 1946-47 school year.<sup>43</sup>

Many reasons existed to keep Mexicans segregated from whites in schools. For example, Anglos labeled Mexican-American children as unfit and unable to learn, in other words, retarded. Anglo teachers would constantly report that Mexicans were dumb and ignorant because they could not understand simple instructions. Anglo teachers labeled Mexican-American children as such without taking into consideration that a language barrier existed since Mexicans spoke Spanish and instruction was given in English.<sup>44</sup> After all, this was an era when people thought that one was born with an IQ just as one was, “born with blue eyes.”<sup>45</sup> As a result, teachers often sent them to other classrooms to be entertained instead of taught and received less academic education compared to Anglo children which further hindered their learning. Such a situation existed in San Antonio where the district focused Tejano student efforts on vocational trades. Additionally, some of the teachers’ concerns focused on making Americans out of Mexicans, for example cutting their hair in American styles and teaching them how to properly address staff as sir and ma’am, while leaving them to fail by neglecting their scholarly needs and thus

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<sup>43</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 44-45.

<sup>44</sup> Gonzáles, *Mexicanos*, 208-209.

<sup>45</sup> Zigler, *History of Head Start*, 7.



achieved the self-fulfilling prophecy of being unable to learn.<sup>46</sup> In the 1950s, LULAC stepped in and attempted to ameliorate the situation by making English learning a priority for Mexican-American children.

At this point, LULAC began concentrating its efforts towards individuals within the barrios. Under the direction of Felix Tijerina, LULAC put together a program that would help Spanish-speaking children throughout Texas learn English before they entered kindergarten. This program was called The Little School of the 400 (LS400) and it prepared Spanish speakers to become bilingual. Tijerina imagined Mexican-American students entering elementary school without being ignorant of English and therefore be less likely to fail academically, be placed in non-academic courses, and eventually drop out. This effort by Tijerina and his supporting team was a very audacious move, for never had a program of this type on such a grand scale been attempted.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> García, *Mexican American Middle Class*, 176; Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 15, 176.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas H. Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur & Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 198-200.

### CH 3: LULAC AND THE LITTLE SCHOOL

Felix Tijerina's family moved to Texas from a small community called General Escobedo, Nuevo León in northern México. They migrated to Sugarland, a suburb of Houston, in 1906, the same year Felix was born. Felix and his siblings were mostly home schooled, as were many during his time. Tijerina however, did attend school for only a couple of years but quit early because his father died in 1918 and working for a wage was expected of him. The Tijerina family moved into Houston shortly after to look for better employment opportunities and it was here that Tijerina had his first experience with prejudice for not knowing English. Lacking English skills, Tijerina became a street vendor for approximately two years before finding meaningful employment at a restaurant as a busboy for 9\$ per week. He worked ardently for several years and taught himself English in the evenings or by reading labels from food stuffs at the restaurant. But his hard work and determination to learn English paid off.<sup>1</sup>

As a young adult, Tijerina opened his own restaurant in 1929. His success did not endure the wrath of the Great Depression however, and he lost the restaurant during the mid 1930s. Tijerina, now married, managed life without it for a few years and in 1937 they opened another restaurant, and this time, they succeeded. Within a couple of decades, the Tijerinas built a modest chain of eight restaurants and consequently became much respected business owners in the eyes of both Mexicans *and* Anglos.<sup>2</sup> Tijerina did very well with his business venture becoming the first Mexican-American millionaire of the Houston metro-

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<sup>1</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 17-19, 128-129, 33-35.

<sup>2</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 31; Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 64.



Figure 1. Felix Tijerina Houston Press,  
August 1961. Tijerina Papers, HMRC

area, and remembering his tough time as a youngster, he was determined to open the doors of opportunity for others.<sup>3</sup>

Tijerina soon joined several local civic business organizations, and became well known in many prominent professional circles, mostly of white entrepreneurs and businessmen. Tijerina was often the sole Mexican-American member in most, if not all, of those boards or committees.<sup>4</sup> In addition to private circles, Tijerina was also admired by state and federal politicians and administrators whom recognized his qualities as a business and community leader. The federal government at one time even considered him for the ambassadorship to Mexico.<sup>5</sup> But Tijerina's work in the Mexican-American community is where his legacy stands out most.

Tijerina gave generously to his community; he often gave money to charities and to individuals in need. It was not uncommon to find out about Tijerina giving students money to continue attending college. But it was also common to not find out about Tijerina's financial contributions to good causes. He was not the arrogant type that would talk about his altruistic donations. He valued education highly and understood that cultural pride was important to how children valued education. Tijerina advocated that cultural pride brought security to one's self identity and esteem. Educator Guadalupe Campos Quintanilla describes Tijerina's philosophy on cultural pride, "If the language barrier could be broken and pride in the heritage could be reinforced, he believed the Mexican American would

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Kreneck, "Sleuthing Immigrant Origins: Felix Tijerina and His Mexican Revolution Roots." *War Along the Border: The Mexican Revolution and Tejano Communities*. ed. Arnoldo de León. (Houston, TX: University of Houston—Center for Mexican American Studies, 2012), 227.

<sup>4</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 282-283.

have a better chance of competing on equal terms with other members of society.”<sup>6</sup> It was this desire for equal access to education and advancement for Mexican Americans that fed Tijerina’s drive to work for his community. Tijerina became national president of LULAC in 1956 and served until 1960, a role that allowed the development of his educational ambitions for others. This was his opportunity to develop his initiative, The Little School of the 400, a program that would affect thousands of Tejanos and many more when it affected the federal pre-school program that would eventually service millions nationwide under the Head Start label.<sup>7</sup> But Tijerina could have not done this alone; LULAC would be his supporting agency.

LULAC, under the leadership of Tijerina, committed itself to protect and advance progressive causes for all Mexican Americans. LULAC accomplished this by advocating civic morality and assimilation to American life, and thus negotiating culture. The organization’s official language was English, it opened membership only to American citizens, it favored middle-class and conservative ideals, and it disliked the notion of having more migrant workers come in from México. LULAC was an American organization. This assimilationist agenda culminated in the formation of The Little School of the 400—LULAC’s most ambitious project yet to help Mexicans learn English and eventually acculturate into American mainstream.<sup>8</sup> Tijerina truly believed that education would be the

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<sup>6</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 31-33.

<sup>7</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 140.

<sup>8</sup> Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 180.

most effective gateway for Mexican Americans to enter a world that was exclusively Anglo.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Context of LULAC**

Although it has recently been contested,<sup>10</sup> it has been documented that the League of United Latin American Citizens was founded on intentions that were formulated by the Mexican-American middle class in order to create a populace that was bicultural, mainstream, and bilingual if not English-speaking. Assimilation was a necessity if one were to succeed in earning higher wages, obtaining promotions at work, but above all, earning Anglo respect. And to reach this assimilation and acculturation, the public school system would have to play a major role. Since public schools did not welcome Mexican Americans, LULAC looked to motivate the communities into action to demand improved education for their children.<sup>11</sup>

As previously stated, education in Texas for Mexican Americans was extremely difficult. Segregated was rampant and at times, some community schools were not yet begun to be built when administrators reassigned students by racial priority. While Anglo children received the newer, more comfortable schools with adequate supplies and amenities, the Mexican American students usually ended up with the older edifices which were in such bad shape that they sometimes lacked running water, in house washrooms, electricity or furniture. Although Mexican-American children attended these schools, the educational service coupled with the environment, was so deplorable, that most children

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<sup>9</sup> Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 64-65.

<sup>10</sup> Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women, or Dogs Allowed*, 3, 6-8.

<sup>11</sup> Gonzales, *Mexicanos*, 179-181; Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 31.

dropped out by the time they reached the fifth grade. We have to remember that schooling is not the same as education; but that is a separate issue that requires research and elaboration of its own elsewhere. Senior, and later, junior high schools usually integrated their student bodies. Seldom, however, did any Mexican Americans reach high school, let alone graduate. Most children left school due to poverty, low self-esteem, disappointment, but most of all, because the educational system was underwritten with racism and did not allow them an equal opportunity to succeed.<sup>12</sup>

Many public independent districts established “Mexican Schools” to separate Mexican American students from Anglos. Houston for example, began its segregation practices in 1900 when it allowed Rusk Elementary in the *Segundo Barrio* neighborhood (Second Ward) to become completely Mexican while allowing and encouraging its white students to transfer to other schools. During the 1920s, the Houston Independent School District built a small school, Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary, in response to the increasing presence of Mexican children in the primary schools of the Denver Harbor neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> At the turn of the century, Houston, as were many other towns and communities, was well on its way to discriminating Mexicans.

This should come as no surprise however, as several historians, including Arnolfo de León, have extensively documented racism towards Mexicans during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anglo immigrants pouring into Texas after annexation to the United States brought with them racist sentiments that were previously focused on Natives and African Americans. De León points out, “Anglos were not going to regard as equals

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<sup>12</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 12; Rubel, *Across the Tracks*, 43-44; Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 20-21.

people whom they thought to be colored, whom they therefore considered uncivilized, and whom they connected with filth and its foul implications.”<sup>14</sup>

The practices used to keep Mexican-American students separate did much more than just deter them from attending class. The system provided a cyclical pattern of underachievement. This underachievement kept Mexican Americans from obtaining meaningful and well-paying employment. Not only did the lack of education keep them from work, but also from politics and other agencies. By keeping them in low-paying jobs, the system did not allow for them to be able to purchase nicer or newer houses. This in turn kept their children from growing up in nicer neighborhoods and attending newer schools. This again kept their children in low-quality schools which fed the same cyclical pattern and eventually became a self-fulfilling prophecy of incompetence and stagnant economic, social, and political mobility. Finally, it kept Mexican-American self esteem low and their inferior complex high.

At mid-century Mexicans looked forward to becoming American. At the beginning of the 1950s, as much as 83% of the Spanish surnamed population in Houston was born in Texas,<sup>15</sup> albeit most were culturally Mexican. However, acculturation, education, and transition into American mainstream interested many Mexican Americans. This was especially true for the youth, for they had fewer ties to Mexico and American consumerism was gaining ground. During and after WWII Americanization was more palatable, tolerated, and eventually desired. Mass media, including movies, magazines, and cartoons,

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<sup>14</sup> Arnolando de León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Towards Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 14-23.

<sup>15</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 99.



made America all that more accessible to Mexican children and teenagers; they increasingly desired a bicultural life if not an American one.<sup>16</sup>

Within this context emerged the need for Mexican Americans to unite for improvement. Gains were made into white collar jobs and careers. But these advances were minimal and selective.<sup>17</sup> LULAC and other organizations, along with the Mexican Consulate, recognized that without adequate education, advancement would not prevail. However, at this crucial time when one would think that action would be taken by the masses, the Mexican-American community was described by Mr. Luis Duplán, the Mexican consul, as having, “no interest in the solutions of its own problems.”<sup>18</sup> This is when Felix Tijerina, his supporters, and LULAC stepped up to help in grand manner.

### **Why the Program?**

Tijerina had the idea of improving children’s education by teaching them English before they entered school. A basic understanding of English for children would create higher achievement and attendance since the high Mexican-American drop-out rate was due primarily to language difficulty. San Miguel stated about the high drop-out rate of Mexican Americans, “At the heart of the problem, according to LULAC, was the language difficulty.” For example, many children endured harsh punishment and public humiliation for not being able to speak English.<sup>19</sup> Also, Mexican-American children repeated the first

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<sup>16</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 66, 80.

<sup>17</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 52-53.

<sup>18</sup> De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 140.

few grades and overcoming this obstacle was of major concern.<sup>20</sup> It is estimated that by 1930 approximately 90% of all Mexican American children lacked English language skills, and they did not fare much better by 1950.<sup>21</sup> But it was much more than that. Education was a much needed avenue for access to equality, hope, and forward advancement in politics, economics, and society. It would be the beginning to an end of second-class American citizenship for Americans of Mexican descent.

Children of Mexican-American descent were incredibly behind in education compared to other races. In Texas, more than 200,000 Mexican children aged five did not know how to speak English although the Texas State Department of Education had issued several guides as far back as 1924 to teachers on how to teach them English. Dropping out of school before the fifth grade was the norm. In Fort Bend County, near Houston, for example, thirty-three percent of the students were Mexican American but only two (not two percent) Mexican American students graduated high school in 1954. Adults were surveyed and research indicated that Mexicans had 3.5 years of formal education, blacks had 7.5, while Anglos averaged 11.5 years.<sup>22</sup> Anthropologist Arthur J. Rubel chronicled that in 1959, in one South Texas town, no Mexican-American migrant working adult knew how to read or write.<sup>23</sup> This norm of low education may have been common place not only throughout the migrant farm workers of all of the Brown Belt, but also of those regions using temporary Mexican-American farm labor such as in the Great Plains.

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<sup>20</sup> Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 156.

<sup>21</sup> Clinchy, *Equality of Opportunity*, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 23; San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Rubel, *Across the Tracks*, xxi, xxv.

Along with Felix Tijerina, Tony Campos, a teacher, David Adame, a LULAC administrator, and Jacob Rodriguez, a newspaper editor and also a LULAC administrator, who were all community activists, considered different ways to help the advancement of Mexican Americans.<sup>24</sup> They settled on helping children learn English before they entered grade school. They thought this would be the most beneficial among the other ideas they were considering since children still had their whole lives ahead of them and had the most potential to benefit from the new knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

Mexican American children entered the public school environment with incredible amounts of discomfort, uncertainty, and fear. Anglo teachers controlled the classrooms since hiring practices preferred them over others; this was also true even for schools located in *barrios*. Schools had different norms that children were unaccustomed to; greatly different from those of their homes. The language barrier, of not knowing how to speak English, was probably the most difficult obstacle to cope with and the most detrimental to their psychological well-being. As previously mentioned, most children of Mexican descent dropped out during or at the end of third grade, often after being held back for two or three years after not completing lower school grades satisfactorily.<sup>26</sup>

Studies have shown that social contexts, such as schools, shape personality development for students. This is especially true during late childhood and early adolescence, which is when a person's identity is formed.<sup>27</sup> These developments shape a

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<sup>24</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 36-37.

<sup>25</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Carroll, *Longoria's Wake*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, Thirteenth Ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010), 143.

person's self identity whether in a positive or negative manner. It could be extremely detrimental to a person's self-esteem if that person is subject to negative stimulants, such as punishment for speaking Spanish, as in the case with Mexican American students during this era. Many Mexican American students inevitably developed inferiority complexes and suffered from it for much of their lives. This is due to the fact that many Mexican Americans felt inferior to their Anglo counterparts in a critical moment in their lives—their school years. And if a person is subjected to racial discrimination at an early age at the hands of Anglos, then one may carry that inferiority feeling for many years after their traumatic experience. This inferiority complex could eventually keep them from staying in school or graduating, and for many, it did.<sup>28</sup>

According to one study, a person's identity first develops in a psychological stage identified as self-understanding, "the individual's cognitive representation of the self... self conception." This development continues with role experimentation. Further, all of these steps take place when one is at the age of high school years.<sup>29</sup> But if one is excluded from participating in high school because they were not smart enough to keep up with Anglos, then inferiority is entrenched in the person's psych. This undoubtedly carries on into a person's social and personal life, especially when working vis-à-vis with Anglos during adulthood.

This milieu created by Anglo racism prompted Mexican Americans to research the cause of Mexican-American failure. LULAC, under the initiative of Felix Tijerina, began a state-wide study to see what major factors contributed to the setbacks of Mexican-

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<sup>28</sup> Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 65; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 213.

<sup>29</sup> Santrock, *Adolescence*, 133.

Americans in public schooling. The study produced several results, but the principle deficiency was the lack of knowledge of the English language. This lack of language contributed to teacher's discontent of the Spanish-speaking student. Frustrated teachers then chastised the students or placed them in an environment that no longer allowed the student to learn; a domino-effect that ensued more times than not.<sup>30</sup>

As a result of LULAC's study, Tijerina took on the project to create a pre-school program dedicated to help children learn English and therefore decrease the probability of becoming victims of injustices within Anglo-controlled schools.<sup>31</sup> For this project, Tijerina knew he needed funding. He requested assistance from the state on several occasions but was unsuccessful. Although the State Board of Education administrators and the governor agreed with Tijerina about the need for help, they were unwilling to commit with much other than emotional support. Determined to help others, Tijerina then went to other public officials, such as Henry Holle, Commissioner of Health, Homer Garrison, Jr., Director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, and J.W. Edgar, Commissioner of Education, for help. But found the same result again, they offered support but no financial assistance.<sup>32</sup>

### **La Escuelita de Aire**

Tijerina and his supporters began working without state assistance. In early 1957 they began planning a radio program called *La escuelita del aire* (The Little School on the Air). It would be a radio program that would be aired via Spanish radio stations across Texas. The program would repeat essential vocabulary words twice a day in fifteen minute

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<sup>30</sup> Márquez, *LULAC*, 51-52.

<sup>31</sup> Márquez, *LULAC*, 51-52.

<sup>32</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 24-26.

installments Monday through Friday. The broadcaster would be an on-the-air “mother” who instructed children and parents at home to follow the program with activity booklets provided and distributed by Tijerina’s group. Mrs. Carlos Calderon and Mrs. Jo Ann Roth created the booklets and materials for the listeners. The goal was to air 390 lessons throughout thirteen stations for thirteen weeks over several cities.<sup>33</sup>

Convinced that his *Escuelita* would be successful, Tijerina went out to seek financial support from two of the few Hispanic elected officials in Texas. His ambitious goal of broadcasting in several cities, including Houston, San Antonio, San Angelo, Fort Stockton, and Del Rio among others, was an expensive one.<sup>34</sup> State Senator Henry B. Gonzalez and State Representative Oscar Laurel applauded Tijerina’s efforts; however, they did not commit any financial support. Tijerina also sought other financial backers, but found none. LULAC too responded similarly. At the 1957 national conference, the general membership supported the concept, but no funds were appropriated. Funding was not found mainly due to the fact that the program had not been tried yet and politicians and others did not want to pledge financial support to a program that was untested. By late May of 1957 financial support had not materialized and the *Escuelita* fell through after doubts surfaced about its effectiveness and unfinished materials for the program.<sup>35</sup> Although Tijerina did not want to give up, he was unclear about how to proceed.

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<sup>33</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 141-142; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 198-199.

<sup>34</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 200.

<sup>35</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 26; San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 142.

### **Little School of the 400**

Isabel Verver, a teenage Mexican-American 11<sup>th</sup> grade high-school student from Ganado, TX, had read a magazine article in *Texas Outlook*, the official publication of the Texas State Teachers Association. The article explained Tijerina's intentions. Aspiring to become a teacher, she quickly called him to offer suggestions and support. The idea of teaching English to Spanish-speaking children appealed to Verver, for she was directly affected by the lack of English as a child. She remembers being in first grade and not knowing any English to answer her name when called on. Even worse, Verver was unable to ask permission for the simplest necessities. Once, Verver had to go to the washroom but, unable to ask for permission, she instead cried as she peed in her seat. This experience was one of the most traumatic for her; she never forgot it.<sup>36</sup>

The inability to speak or understand English also affected Verver indirectly. She had family and friends whom did not know the language and dropped out of school at young ages. Having seen her community quit on school, Verver used her experience as motivation and vowed to make a difference in her community. She advised Tijerina that she would be willing to pilot the program in Ganado if the instruction method would be modified to a classroom setting; Tijerina and his supporters agreed. Tijerina also agreed to pay Verver \$25 a week out of his own pocket for her services. In May of 1957, Verver became the first Little School of 400 teacher in Ganado, TX.<sup>37</sup> In the words of Dr. Guadalupe Campos Quintanilla, "The purpose of the 'Little School of the 400' was to teach

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<sup>36</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 142-143; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 200-201.

<sup>37</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 26-27; San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 142-143; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 201.

Table 1  
Little School of the 400 Vocabulary Word Groups

1. Environmental Vocabulary
  - a. School and Playground
  - b. Home, Family, Clothes
  - c. Outdoors
2. Health Vocabulary
  - a. Cleanliness and Body
  - b. Foods
3. Verbs
  - a. Action and non-Action
4. General Vocabulary
  - a. General words and Take-in
  - b. Holidays
  - c. Community
  - d. Animals and Circus Animals
  - e. Colors and Numbers

*Source: Elizabeth Parris Burrus, Beginner's Vocabulary  
(Houston, TX: Frank Fraga Printing Co., 1957).*



four hundred basic English words to Spanish dominant children in order to help them effectively cope with instruction in English.”<sup>38</sup>

The group devised materials for the classrooms including a list of approximately 400 words. This time Elizabeth Burrus compiled the vocabulary (see appendix 2).<sup>39</sup> A teacher at De Zavala Elementary School in Baytown, TX, Burrus had approximately twenty years of experience teaching Spanish speakers. Burrus was asked by LULAC member Tony Campos to help with the creation of the curriculum for the program. She agreed. Not much later she came up with the list of words which she felt were essential for children to know for them to succeed in first grade. As time went on, the list expanded to almost five hundred words.<sup>40</sup>

Burrus’s philosophy of teaching English was quite simple. She believed that children learned best when they participated in the acquisition of language, that is, by practicing it and speaking it with others. Speaking English in class was the key to success, and they used Spanish only when teaching new words or concepts. Burrus believed that incorrect pronunciation of words should be corrected early and often for learning it correctly at first was more effective and efficient. She also stressed the importance of vocabulary and the ability to speak before being able to read it. Additionally, Burrus believed that an important factor for the children to become successful in English acquisition was for them to think in English. But most importantly, if communities wanted

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<sup>38</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 143-144; Elizabeth Parris Burrus, *Beginner’s Vocabulary* (Houston: Frank Fraga Printing Co., 1957), 1-2.

successful Mexican-American children, then they needed teachers devoted to the cause and that had an innate desire, “to teach these children.”<sup>41</sup>

The LS400’s pedagogy, the method for teaching, was also simple. It consisted of five basic strategies: first it used Spanish instruction to teach English vocabulary, second it used a form of show and tell for new vocabulary, third it used a system of repetition, fourth its teachers promoted the use of English at home and elsewhere, and finally, scaffolding, a strategy that ensures that previous information is understood before learning additional material. Verver taught approximately five new words per day and began each day by reviewing the previous day’s vocabulary. And although the program eventually had more than 400 words, the name of “Little School of the 400,” stuck by the summer of 1958, and continued to be used.<sup>42</sup>

### **LS400 Implementation & Expansion**

Verver asked the principal of Ganado High School, Pat Ozment, for permission to use the local high school for the pilot program. Verver was given permission. She then invited local residents to send their five and six-year-old children to the new program. Verver however, ran into trouble. As mentioned before, children were needed to help with work and chores, or lacked clothes worthy enough to be worn in a school environment. But Verver fervently insisted for families to send their children, and although eighteen families had pledged their support, only three or four children showed for class on the first day. Although somewhat disillusioned, she took those three children and taught them English

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<sup>41</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 143; Burrus, *Vocabulary*, 1-2; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 202.

<sup>42</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 145; Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 65; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 202-203.

for approximately a week. She then organized a public presentation with her students to prove to the community that the program was effective and to garner community support. It worked. By the end of the second week of class, forty-five kids attended her new pre-school program. The Mexican-American children learned the English vocabulary very quickly and community support for their English acquisition grew.<sup>43</sup> Her personal dream of helping the community was materializing with the support of Tijerina, LULAC, and the community itself.

Sixty students eventually attended the schools in 1957 and went off to first grade. The impact was immediate and positive. During that fall, four teachers at Ganado Elementary School claimed that the students who attended the LS400 quickly caught on to the lessons. Administrators and faculty at Ganado Elementary School asserted that children who had attended Verver's program were academically advanced compared to those Mexican children who had not. Additionally, they noticed that attendance for these children was higher than those who had not attended the LS400. But most notable was the passing rate for first graders. Ninety-eight percent of those who Verver taught in her first summer passed first grade that following school year as opposed to twenty percent which was the norm. Only one of the students who attended the LS400 did not pass the first grade after his first year, a huge improvement over the 80% of Mexican-American children who

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<sup>43</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 145; Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 65; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 201-202; Tijerina, Felix "The LULAC Educational Program Has Already Started..." n.d., Felix Tijerina, Sr., Family Papers Collection (hereafter known as Tijerina Papers), Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. Houston (hereafter known as HMRC).

repeated the first grade. This small program continued to garner community support and more families sent their children to the LS400.<sup>44</sup>

Verver's success was evident and Tijerina soon established another LS400 in neighboring Edna, TX which was just a couple of miles southwest of Ganado. The new school was held at Edna's Mexican Baptist Church. LULAC began thinking big, and by the summer of 1958, their goal was to open 50 new LS400 schools throughout the state. Their goal was not achieved but they did accomplish opening eight more schools. By June of 1958 Tijerina and Verver, although she no longer taught, organized expansion programs in Aldine, Brookshire, Edna, Stockton, Sugarland, and Rosenberg among other cities. Governor Price Daniel inaugurated the opening of the Sugarland LS400 on June 23, 1958 and stated that the program itself was, "the most important event in the recent history of Texas."<sup>45</sup> In addition to Tijerina and Verver, other LS400 teachers also attended, for example, Geneva Santellana of Edna and Tonie Zarate of Ganado.<sup>46</sup> For Tijerina, it was one of his proudest days.

When Laredo first implemented its LS400, it began with services in 13 elementary schools and the organizers expected a student body of approximately 700. Many community members anxiously awaited the program's start, for they knew that those who would benefit the most were children in the, "early grades." Local radio station, KVOZ, wrote an editorial in anticipation of the program. It stated, "Our entire school system will

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<sup>44</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 146; Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 156.

<sup>45</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 145-146.

<sup>46</sup> "3 Lulac Teachers See Dedication of New 'Little School'" *The Edna Herald* 26 June 1958.

benefit... But most importantly... they will face school confidently, without the sometimes heartbreaking handicap of not being able to understand,” what is being told to them.<sup>47</sup>

Expansion did create some problems however. One problem was that more schools meant more teachers. Finding teachers that authentically cared to teach Mexican-American children was a difficult task; therefore, it was no surprise that they sought Mexican-American teachers. Another problem was that some LULACers disagreed with the pre-school program. For example, John J. Herrera, a LULAC member and attorney, argued that LULAC had no need to teach these children English. Finally, adequate funding was a chronic problem for the program. Tijerina on many occasions paid teachers out of his own pocket to ensure that the program survived.<sup>48</sup>

On a positive note, Price Daniel, the then governor of Texas, and other state politicians supported the Little School of the 400.<sup>49</sup> This was important because LULAC now had, if not financial, then at least public, support from the most important political figure in Texas. This could potentially lead to financial support from the private or even the public sector which was much needed in order to keep the program alive and expanding. Tijerina and others at LULAC saw that the program was effective in breaking the language barrier and it was deemed fruitful and accomplished most if not all of its goals.

During the summer of 1958, the LS400 instructed 402 children. Six of the schools stayed open that fall until December 15 serving another 222 students. Tijerina advised

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<sup>47</sup> Radio KVOZ Editorial, n.d. Tijerina Papers, HMRC.

<sup>48</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 145-146.

<sup>49</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 146.

LULAC that state-wide expansion was the next step. He explained that by expanding the program, it would potentially more than double the average years of education Mexican Americans could attain. Tijerina's ideal reach for the program was 75,000 students while employing 1,000 teachers at a cost of roughly \$1.35 million.<sup>50</sup>

### **LS400 Funding and its Criticism**

In September 1957 Tijerina urged that LULAC modify their constitution to include a fund specifically for education. He asked them to allow for the addition of a separate entity, the LULAC Education Fund Inc., to administer and disburse funds specifically for the LS400 program. The Fund was approved for two purposes: to allow for scholarships for high education and to provide English instruction to pre-school children. The separate entity was approved and in June of 1958 LULAC began asking for funding to any who would listen. Tijerina planned ambitiously and he proposed to organize an *escuelita* where ever there were fifteen pupils willing to attend. He would subsequently hire a teacher for them.<sup>51</sup> But fund raising would first have to be successful.

Tijerina again tried to lure in corporate funding to no avail. The Ford Foundation turned Tijerina away but a consultant there advised him to try obtaining funds from the state, not individual politicians. After all, he had already received positive results from the pilot program in Ganado and Edna, student enrollment was growing, Governor Daniels recognized the program's potential, and it was becoming a legitimate institution within the *barrios*. LS400 soon garnered one thousand students and was no longer a minor project

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<sup>50</sup> Tijerina, Felix to Board of Directors, 23 Sept 1958, Little School of the 400 Collection (hereafter known as the LS400 Papers), HMRC.

<sup>51</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 146-147; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 213.

that politicians, agencies, or school administrators could ignore. It had blossomed into an educational movement. LULAC and Tijerina were soon overwhelmed by the success, but more so by the expenses required to keep the program afloat. Tijerina and his supporters returned to the Texas Congress for help.<sup>52</sup> This time, however, they were prepared with results that no congressman could have ignored.

Tijerina laid out a two-fold argument for the Texas Congress. He advised that the program would teach non-English speakers, regardless of heritage, how to command English before attending first grade and therefore prepare them for their journey towards progress and good citizenship. Secondly, by installing the program, children would not have to repeat the first grade therefore, saving tax payers hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not millions, by not having to pay for children to attend first grade multiple times. According to Tijerina, the information in table 2 illustrated the savings that the State of Texas would incur. Although most children only repeated the first grade once, it was not uncommon for them to repeat it twice, or more.<sup>53</sup> This time the state came through. Texas' Fifty-sixth Legislature formally pledged to adopt the LS400 as a state program and to fully finance it beginning with the 1959-1960 school year.<sup>54</sup> This was a major victory not only for Mexican-American children, but for all whom did not speak English.

Tijerina also asked LULAC members to financially contribute to the cause. Tijerina urged regional leaders to ask members and community residents for financial contributions.

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<sup>52</sup> Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 156.

<sup>53</sup> Tijerina, Felix to Board of Directors, 23 September 1958, LS400 Papers, HMRC; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 235-236.

<sup>54</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 147-148.

Additionally, Tijerina and his staff sent a mass mailing of approximately three thousand letters to Mexican-American businessmen for financial support in the sum of \$18.45 each, the average cost of one child's pre-school education.<sup>55</sup> How many responded favorably is unknown, but it must of not been too favorable for in June of 1958, they sent out three thousand more letters requesting financial contributions; but this time requested Anglo support. Tijerina was trying to cover as much territory as possible to garner support for his audacious experiment and it was common for him to cross racial lines to obtain assistance. His relentless pursuit for funding was necessary as the program sometimes ran on fumes. For example, in April of 1959, the LULAC Education Fund only reflected a balance of \$8.12.<sup>56</sup>

As previously mentioned, with more students entering the LS400, more teachers were needed. Tijerina paid the new teachers \$25 per week, as he had Isabel Verver. Tijerina personally paid for approximately half of all expenses for that summer. The teachers for the summer of 1958 Little School of 400 were all bilingual, bicultural, and Mexican American.<sup>57</sup>

No good deed ever goes unchallenged or without criticism and for the LS400, this was true as well. Albert Armendariz, a LULAC member, criticized LULAC and Tijerina

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<sup>55</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 215-216, 218; Tijerina, Felix "The LULAC Education Program Has Already Started..." n.d., Tijerina Papers, HMRC.

<sup>56</sup> Tijerina, Felix to Alfred J. Hernandez, 2 April 1959, LS400 Papers, HMRC.

<sup>57</sup> LULAC Educational Fund, Inc. Statistical and Financial Report June 1, 1958 to Sept. 15, 1958, LS400 Papers, HMRC.



Table 2  
Expenses to the State for Children With and Without Preschool

\$1,350	LULAC Pre-school Program (75 students per year)
<u>+ \$3,600</u>	First Grade Public School
\$4,950	Cost to Prepare a Mexican American for Second Grade
\$3,600	First Grade Public School
<u>+ \$3,600</u>	Repeating First Grade due to Lack of English
\$7,200	Cost to Prepare a Mexican-American for Second Grade.
\$7,200	Cost of Mexican American Failing First Grade Once
<u>- \$4,950</u>	Cost of Mexican American Attending Pre-School and First Grade Once
\$2,250	Savings to Texas
\$10,800	Cost of Mexican American Failing First Grade Twice
<u>- \$4,950</u>	Cost of Mexican American Attending Pre-School and First Grade Once
\$5,850	Savings to Texas

*Source: Tijerina, Felix to Board of Directors, 23 September 1958, LS400 Papers, HMRC.*

Table 3  
Little School of the 400 Teachers for the Summer of 1958

1. Miss Margie Garcia	Sugarland
2. Mrs. Nat Espitia	Aldine
3. Mrs. Toney Zarate	Ganado
4. Miss Geneva Santellana	Edna
5. Mrs. Terry Barrera	Fort Stockton
6. Miss Josephine Salazar	Brookshire
7. Mrs. Blas Rodriguez	Rosenberg
8. Mrs. Rachel Garza	Vanderbilt
9. Miss Teresa Hernandez	Wharton

*Source: LULAC Educational Fund, Inc. Statistical and Financial Report  
June 1, 1958 to Sept. 15, 1958, LS400 Papers, HMRC.*

for creating the LULAC Fund stating that it violated the by-laws of the organization. He claimed that it divided the organization into two and that only an amendment to the LULAC constitution had the power to establish such an entity. Armendariz expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that the board of the Fund was mostly comprised of non-LULAC members. For example, E. J. Golaz of Gulf Oil Corporation and not a LULAC member was “elected” to the Fund’s board according to a statement made by Tijerina. Armendariz also stressed that the board should be comprised exclusively of LULAC members from more states than just Texas. Additionally, Armendariz claimed that funds should be held by individual local councils or sent to the national treasurer since the Fund was illegitimate. These concerns seemed reasonable to most since in June of 1958, most were resolved. First, Tijerina was re-elected for a third presidential term demonstrating that his approach to his pre-school dream was of paramount approval. Secondly, an amendment was added to the constitution that allowed the Fund to continue its functions. Lastly, the LULAC treasurer, “was officially relieved from all responsibility for the monies collected,” for the purpose of the Little School of the 400.<sup>58</sup>

Jake Rodríguez, a 26-year member of LULAC from San Antonio also criticized the LS400 program. Rodriguez stated that what Tijerina wanted to accomplish would only worsen Hispanic-Anglo relations. According to Rodríguez, if Anglos saw more Mexican children integrated with American children, Anglos would push for stricter segregation in schools. Rodríguez also mentioned that other San Antonio colleagues thought lowly of the program and even stated that the program “would ‘never get to first base!’” Another of

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<sup>58</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 216-218; Gulf Executive Elected to LULAC Board, April 20, 1960, LS400 Papers, HMRC.

Tijerina's critics was John J. Herrera. Herrera became entangled with Tijerina over personal matters and due to Tijerina's sympathies for Eisenhower's and Nixon's 1956 election. And thus, Herrera, although supported Tijerina for reelections to the LULAC national presidency, did not endorse or support his pre-school program. Herrera also claimed that Tijerina's school was a step in the wrong direction for it promoted segregation instead of integration even though integration was always Tijerina's ultimate goal for his program.<sup>59</sup>

With much hard work from many, and the leadership of Tijerina, the pre-school program materialized. Although not in its original on-the-air form, the pre-school program netted wide success with the children and communities encouraging others to support it. Although the LS400 became a successful program for LULAC and Tijerina, some criticized the program while others criticized Tijerina. Yet the program also had numerous consequences. More light shined on LULAC as it expanded its reach across the country. Tijerina too expanded his reach as Governor Price nominated him for other state-wide positions of prestige. And the Mexican-American community was changing the way others looked at it.

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<sup>59</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 203-204, 214, 267.

#### **CH 4: EFFECTS**

While Felix Tijerina merely intended to create a school program where Spanish-speaking children could learn basic English words that would help them succeed in an English-speaking school system, he inadvertently challenged the state educational system while strengthening ties of the Mexican-American community. But those are only two of the many consequences the Little School of the 400 created. The LS400 allowed Spanish-speaking children, on a massive scale, the opportunity to learn English before being thrust into the Anglo environment of public schooling. Most notably, the program allowed individual Mexican-American children to aspire to receive equal access to quality education. Because of the LS400, many Mexican Americans from South Texas continued school past the third grade which was the quitting point for most. Finally, albeit more research is needed, the LS400 may have also become the precursor for the educational component of the nation-wide Project Head Start program under President Lyndon B. Johnson.

However, perhaps the most important consequence was the program's position in Mexican-American history. While the program was noted for having many Mexican-American teachers, it was basically an assimilationist project. Similar in many ways to Mexico's educational programs aimed at indigenous children, the LS400 sought to integrate children of Mexican-descent into Texas and American society. The Cold War era undoubtedly played a role in this project since it subjected Mexican Americans to accommodationist pressures. While some Mexican-American activists refused to assimilate politically and continued the pre-World War II traditions of radical protest, others such as LULAC did not and chose instead to conform to mainstream American

values. Radical activists were hounded as a result of the 1950s Red Scare and McCarthyism; middle-class Mexican-American leaders however thrived.

The initial success that the LS400 earned allowed Texas to recognize it as a successful educational program. Politicians viewed the program favorably and in 1959 they adopted it as one of their own when the Texas Congress passed House Bill No. 51 (see appendix 3). This bill allowed for state funding of a pre-kindergarten instruction program directly modeled after the LS400. This was exactly what Tijerina and his contemporaries hoped for. Texas funded 90% of the program and the respective school districts would have to pick up the remaining 10%. However, H.B. 51 did not make attendance compulsory and after a few years, a vast majority of the target children still had not taken advantage of this new opportunity.<sup>1</sup>

Before the LS400 made way into the chambers of the Texas Congress, research had begun on how to improve children's education within the state. The legislature created the Hale-Aikin Committee of Twenty Four (HAC). The committee of twenty four members was instructed to give recommendations to the fifty-sixth legislature in 1959 on how to improve their school's effectiveness. The recommendations had to be comprehensive and inclusive, covering details for all 254 of Texas' counties. Of the twenty-four committee members, the governor appointed six. Tijerina's dedication to children's education allowed him the governor's consideration and as a result, Tijerina's was appointed as the only Mexican-American member in 1957.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Campos Quintanilla, *Little School*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Hale, L. Dewitt to Felix Tijerina, 7 Oct 1957, Tijerina Papers, HMRC; Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey* 235.

The HAC was organized into four sub-committees. Tijerina was assigned to the School Program Subcommittee which was responsible for analyzing the appropriateness of districts' school curriculum for their respective schools. Tijerina quickly began explaining the benefits of the LS400 to other committee members. After many meetings and due research, in the summer of 1958 the sub-committee welcomed Tijerina's LS400 concept, research, and data. The totality of the HAC subsequently endorsed Tijerina's proposal and by August they finalized all recommendations for the state legislature and prepared a presentation that showed the savings to the state and benefits to the children.<sup>3</sup>

The Fifty-sixth Texas Legislature soon began working on a bill that would make the LS400 a state program. A short bill, spanning approximately 450 words, described in its first section that the Central Education Agency (CEA) would develop a program for all of those children who did not speak English prior to first grade. The purpose of the program was to, "prepare such children... with a command of essential English words... to complete successfully the work assigned to them." The second section of the bill limited children's participation in the program to four months and required them to be at least five years old. Section three authorized the CEA to issue certificates to teachers who qualified to teach pre-school. Section four advised that the State would pay for the program, no teacher salary would exceed two hundred dollars per month, and a fifty dollar stipend would be provided for maintenance expenses. Section five warned that if a section of the bill would be declared unconstitutional, the rest of it would still be valid. Section six declared the situation of non-English speaking children an emergency that needed prompt action.

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<sup>3</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 235-237.

Finally, the last section instructed the CEA to enact this program for the 1959-1960 school year.<sup>4</sup>

El Paso Representative Malcolm McGregor introduced the bill. McGregor and co-sponsor, Corpus Christi Representative DeWitt Hale, became full supporters of the bill and of Tijerina. The representatives had large populations of Spanish-speakers in their districts and would benefit from the programs. On January 23, 1959, H.B. 51 was recorded in the House and delegated to the Committee on Education days thereafter. Tijerina and other supporters soon registered as official lobbyists in Austin to begin convincing legislators to pass the bill. One important element of their lobbying strategy was to stress that others also benefited from the pre-school, in particular the Czech, German, Polish, and French.<sup>5</sup> Tijerina and his crew intended to contact every legislator and explain to them not only the successes that the LS400 had had in their respective communities, but also of the successes of similar non-LULAC sponsored pre-school programs. In addition to the most obvious benefits, the new lobbyists also advised legislators of more idealistic benefits such as children “happiness.”<sup>6</sup>

While the House Education Committee analyzed the bill, L. P. Sturgeon, representative of the Texas Teachers Association, testified in favor of the program. Additionally, Governor Daniel Price’s support for the bill surely resulted in no small show of faith for the program. On March 16, 1959 the committee approved the bill and passed it to the House floor. The House passed it by a margin of 118 to 27 on April 20. On May 1<sup>st</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> Legislature of the State of Texas, H.B. 51, Tijerina Papers, HMRC.

<sup>5</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 244-245.

<sup>6</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 148.



after some adjustments, the Senate also passed it by a margin of 26 to 1.<sup>7</sup> Once the governor received the bill, he signed it and Texas officially adopted the Little School of the 400 as the Preschool Instructional Classes for Non-English Speaking Children Program (PIC).<sup>8</sup>

When the bill passed, Tijerina became filled with humbling emotions of gratitude. He spoke briefly to the Senate thanking them for their consideration. Shortly thereafter Tijerina also addressed the bill's sponsors via written correspondence also to thank them and bless them for their commitment to the program. The HAC produced only two successful bills, the H.B. 51 and another which other allowed retired teachers to become substitutes.<sup>9</sup>

This was truly a dream come true for Felix Tijerina, LULAC, and Isabel Verver. Once the State of Texas took over the program, Tijerina and LULAC had no reason to keep the LS400 alive. The Fund had no money to pay for any part of the program and the LS400 soon dissolved. In its totality, the LS400 served approximately one thousand children. The new program replaced the LS400 classes across the state and Texas had assumed the burden of their educational mission; that was what mattered. The replacement program was welcomed but few people knew about it. H.B. 51 did not mention advertizing or promotion of the program, and worse, allocated no funds for doing so. Tijerina felt compelled to inform the *barrios*.<sup>10</sup> Tijerina's efforts for the pre-school program would continue.

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<sup>7</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 245-246.

<sup>8</sup> Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 156.

<sup>9</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 246.

<sup>10</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 219, 254.

Historian Guadalupe San Miguel explains that there are several reasons for Texas' quick adoption of this program. The first being the dire need of assistance for non-English speakers to become successful in school, especially Mexican Americans who were severely affected by systemic racism in schools. By the end of 1959, with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, many more Anglo politicians recognized the importance of racial toleration. The second reason is that the legislature was caught off guard and, "the provisions were voluntary which resulted in a lack of organized opposition to it." Texas did not impose the program on the school districts and instead left it up to the districts to voluntarily create the program in their own schools. Finally, the bill focused the failure on the Mexican-American children and ultimately their communities. In other words, it took the heat off of the racist practices of the teachers, administrators, and schools.<sup>11</sup>

There are other factors that contributed to the bill's passage as well. First, the sheer number of non-English speakers is important. As urbanization of Mexican Americans in Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas grew; these large *barrios* could no longer be easily ignored. Although the increase of Mexican-American children during these years was not explosive, it was steady. Second, Tijerina's appointment to the Hale-Aikin Committee allowed his input about the poor conditions of Mexican-American children to obtain legitimacy. Tijerina earned the respect of the other members of the committee and he was generally liked by them, which helped his cause. Third, Tijerina and his LULAC supporters kept this struggle alive to no end and against many odds. They poured a great amount of time, effort, and money into the project. Lastly, Tijerina's political connections with sympathetic Anglos allowed the LS400 much needed support with the media, HAC,

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<sup>11</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 148-149.

and eventually, the Texas State Legislature. These four factors, in addition to those stated by San Miguel, contributed to the success of H.B. 51.

Later that year, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) issued a statement to all Texas school districts outlining important information of the H.B. 51. Of particular peculiarity, in the first paragraph the TEA explains that, “the purpose of the special program is to prepare non-English speaking children for entry into the first grade.” The fact that it references the target population as “non-English speaking children” goes to show that they accepted the blanket idea that the program not only benefited Mexican Americans. The TEA did not want it to appear as if they targeted Mexican-American children in particular, for it may have had negative political repercussions within the dominant Anglo majority.<sup>12</sup>

The TEA required that pre-school teachers have certifications and permits subject to the same standards as elementary teachers. This requirement surely disqualified many Mexican-American teachers-to-be that dearly needed to fill some of those newly created positions of authority and pride within their respective communities. In 1958 the LS400 employed only Mexican-American teachers. The names of Miss Garcia, Mrs. Espitia, Mrs. Zarate, and Miss Santellana, from Sugarland, Aldine, Ganado, and Edna respectively, rang out within the classrooms as students called on them for help, guidance, and leadership.<sup>13</sup> Anglo teachers, being the majority of the certified teachers in the state, surely became the beneficiaries of the newly available teaching positions. Anglo teachers may have been employed for these positions with much higher percentages, for they had the necessary

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<sup>12</sup> Texas Education Agency, “A Pre-School Instructional Program for Non-English Speaking Children.” n.d. LS400 Papers, HMRC.

<sup>13</sup> LULAC Educational Fund, Statistical and Financial Report June 1, 1958 to Sept. 15, 1958. n.d. LS400 Papers, HMRC.

credentials for certification. Until more research is completed however, we will not know how this specifically affected the hiring of Mexican-American teachers.

By April of 1960 the TEA sent letters to school district superintendents across the state. In the letters V. J. Kennedy, Director of the Division of Curriculum Development, advised that handbooks about the new pre-school program had been sent out to the teachers and to the superintendents themselves. It also stated that the TEA sponsored three one-day workshops, in San Antonio, McAllen, and Del Rio, so that the teachers that signed up for pre-school teaching could be trained on program implementation.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously, Tijerina engaged in massive promotion and advertising drives for the PIC. He called and wrote to district superintendents asking them if they needed help getting the pre-school program started in their district. Tijerina also wrote LULAC members asking them to request from their local schools the implementation of such a program in their community if there existed enough Spanish-speaking students within the community. Tijerina urged community parents to register their children at their local elementary schools so that programs could be installed. He also asked them to spread the word about the PIC. To finance the advertising efforts, Tijerina orchestrated fund raisers such as raffles and contests where LULAC sold tickets for prizes. He used these funds for the mass mail outs and radio time used to advertise the PIC across Texas.<sup>15</sup> After all, the state did not require the individual districts to start a program so if the community did not request the service, the districts had no obligation to set the program up.

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<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, V.J. to Superintendents Addressed, 4 April 1960, LS400 Papers, HMRC.

<sup>15</sup> Tijerina, Felix to LULAC's, 13 Jan 1960, LS400 Papers, HMRC; Tijerina, Felix to Padres de Familia, July 1960, LS400 Papers, HMRC.

Tijerina believed since Texas had picked up the tab on the pre-school program, then LULAC efforts could be best invested in promoting this new service to various communities. In July 1959 Tijerina asked LULAC for a budget to send representatives into, “rural areas and urge parent groups to seek the language teaching that is so vital to non-English speaking pre-school children.”<sup>16</sup> After all, it would do no good to have a program available with state support if only a few people knew of it and took advantage of it. The *barrios* needed to be informed.

Tijerina’s San Antonio colleague, Jacob (Jake) Rodriguez, assisted Tijerina in this advertizing campaign. Rodriguez urged other LULACers to join in the effort of getting the word out to the community. He requested that each council devote a committee to carry this laborious task to fruition.<sup>17</sup> LULAC made plans to divide the state into fifteen geographic districts to promote the program efficiently. The plan, in usual Tijerina style, was ambitious. It would carry out promotion, cooperation with schools and districts, cooperation with interested groups, and public relations. The plan also called to hire a supervisor for each of the fifteen districts, a public relations staff member in each of the 254 counties, and an executive director to oversee the effort. However, due to the lack of funds only Rodríguez and a small handful of supervisors were hired to implement the promotional campaign.<sup>18</sup>

Tony Adame of Laredo and Homer Sifuentes of Corpus Christi became district supervisors. Each faced mixed results with their promotional goals. Adame had a

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<sup>16</sup> Tijerina, Felix to LULAC, 15 July 1959, LS400 Papers, HMRC.

<sup>17</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 256-257.

<sup>18</sup> De Leon, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 152.

considerable amount of success. Reports show that he contacted forty-nine local districts that showed a wide variant amount of eligible students for the program; the largest, approximately 4,000 children in Bexar County. Adame was able to set up many programs within his area. Sifuentes on the other hand, was dealt a more frustrating hand. For example, he had much trouble getting in touch with the person responsible for Jim Wells County. He was sent to various towns looking for various people. After three days of hunting, “and probably several tankfuls of gas later,” Sifuentes finally came in contact with Jack R. Ryan, the superintendent. Surprisingly, Ryan advised Sifuentes that they had, for two years, a program already in place that catered to the local needs of the Mexican-American population. Ryan however, advised that he would participate in the new state-sponsored program and request support from the TEA, but not before Sifuentes was led on a long and frustrating goose chase.<sup>19</sup>

Several Fund-raising efforts for this project arose. In late 1959 Tijerina requested the enrollment of one thousand members to contribute ten cents weekly for a whole year. However, this effort proved fruitless, as less than 140 members responded favorably.<sup>20</sup> As usual, Tijerina did not quit. Having networked with business people around Houston, one corporation came to the aid of the LULAC Educational Fund. Hearing of Tijerina’s hard time of raising funds, Gulf Oil Incorporated pledged their support. In a statement released on March 28, 1960 by the Educational Fund, Robert L. Boggs, Vice President, and Madison Farnsworth, Houston Marketing General Manager, applauded LULAC’s initiative to teach Mexican-American children English and advised of a donation to the Fund. They

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<sup>19</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 153-154.

<sup>20</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 257.

committed to contributing funds to LULAC efforts for promoting the then state sponsored pre-school program. LULAC explained in the statement that in 1957, when the LS400 began, approximately 70% of Mexican-American students entering first grade failed. By 1960, only 3% of the students who participated in LS400 failed; an astounding improvement in just three years. Unfortunately neither the Fund's statement nor a letter of receipt addressed to Vice President Boggs dated April 8, 1960 declared how much Gulf Oil committed or donated.<sup>21</sup>

But Gulf Oil's support did not end there. In an act of good deed, Gulf Oil allowed LULAC the opportunity to promote its program throughout South and West Texas using its private jet—*Gulf Star*. The plan was to distribute 200,000 circulars and 2,500 posters in a one-day multi-stop media-covered trip. The trip was code named "Operation Little Schools" and included the participation of prominent government and organization officials from across the state. On Saturday April 16, 1960 the plane departed Houston's Hobby Airport. Gulf Oil Vice President, Madison Farnsworth; Gulf Oil Publicity Director, Andy Lucas; El Paso Mayor Raymond Tellez, and a couple of LULAC members accompanied Tijerina in this journey. Tijerina and his entourage departed Hobby at 7:00 a.m. for Corpus Christi, and then continued on to McAllen, Laredo, El Paso, San Antonio, and finally back to Houston.<sup>22</sup>

Local politicians, LULAC members, community members, school staff, and the media welcomed them at each stop. Moreover, thirty-eight radio stations ran promotional

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<sup>21</sup> LULAC Educational Fund, Inc. Gulf Oil Corporation Provides Financial Support For Educational Project, 28 March 1960, LS400 Papers, HMRC; Hernandez, Alfred J. to Robert L. Boggs, 8 April 1960, LS400 Papers, HMRC.

<sup>22</sup> De Leon, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 154-155.

items for LULAC. Some television stations even ran a documentary explaining how the program worked. Newspapers across the state covered the voyage in overwhelmingly positive light. Boy Scouts at these locations carried the circulars and posters to their destinations and helped distribute them into the *barrios*.<sup>23</sup> Tijerina's promotional efforts that day appeared successful in many ways. But yet, rural Texas had remained untouched by this series of flights. More help was needed.

Tijerina continued seeking financial support from the *barrios*. A couple of years later, in March 1962, Tijerina again served a letter to LULAC members reminding them that promotional efforts should be of great importance to get the word out about the pre-school program. Tijerina advised that \$12,000 was needed and explained that the TEA's preschool program had to that day served approximately 45,000 children and estimated that 35,000 would take advantage of it during the summer of 1962. Tijerina's ultimate goal to have 75,000 students participate per year was firm, and he was committed to reaching it.<sup>24</sup>

The new PIC under the state began in the summer of 1960.<sup>25</sup> Six hundred fourteen classrooms within one hundred thirty five school districts opened that summer. More than 15,000 non-English speaking students received instruction.<sup>26</sup> By June of 1961, the student body surpassed the 18,000 mark. This was far from Tijerina's ideal goal of 75,000; but it was a considerable expansion compared to LULAC's ability. Teachers numbered nearly 800 across the state and the curriculum also expanded its vocabulary to approximately 500

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<sup>23</sup> De León, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 154-155.

<sup>24</sup> Tijerina, Felix to LULAC Members, 23 March 1962. Tijerina Papers, HMRC.

<sup>25</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 246.

<sup>26</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 263.



words. More districts also participated in 1961—158. The programs concentrated in South Texas communities; however, it also served northern communities such as Abilene, Dallas, and Waco.<sup>27</sup>

School districts for the most part did not participate in the new state sanctioned program. Approximately 150 districts out of 1,427 participated in the pre-school at any given time.<sup>28</sup> Many factors may have contributed to this low participation rate. Advertizing efforts on behalf of LULAC may not have reached communities, especially those with sparse populations of west and Panhandle Texas. Interestingly, traditional Mexican *machismo* may have kept girls from attending. Further research on gender participation is needed however. Economics continued playing a role as many parents needed their children to work for wages. Migrant field labor still kept many children from staying in a community for an extended period of time and thus from attending school. Finally, bigotry from Anglos who controlled the districts and schools may have also kept programs from achieving the minimum quantity of children needed to establish the state sponsored classes.

Three years into the program, the TEA conducted an evaluation of the PIC. The report titled, *Report on the Preschool Instructional Program*, noted financial expenditures. In 1960 it spent \$300,763; in 1961 \$348,199; and in 1962 \$371,748. The state covered close to 91% of the cost while the individual districts covered the rest. It also advised that 33% of those children participating in the program scored low in reading comprehension

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<sup>27</sup> Palomo Acosta, *Las Tejanas*, 156-157; LULAC Education Fund, Inc. to Dear Sir or Madam, May 1962, LS400 Papers, HMRC; San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 151.

<sup>28</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 152.

exams as opposed to 65% for those who did not attend the PIC. The report concluded that 95% of students who attended, successfully completed the reading program as opposed to only 51% of those who did not attend. The participation in preschool perpetuated reading itself. Most importantly, 93% of students having preschool advanced to the second grade after attending first grade only once as opposed to only 52% of those without preschool.<sup>29</sup>

Student attendance in the PIC increased from 1960 to 1964, stabilized for approximately three years hitting its peak in 1966 when attendance reached 21,166, and then drastically declined in 1967 when attendance dropped more than 4,200 participants. Project Head Start and Title I, federally funded programs established by President Lyndon B. Johnson, began implementation in Texas during the 1960s and took some of the Preschool's attendees away. Anglos argued that the federal initiatives that created kindergartens across the country diminished the need for preschool and sought to eliminate the pre-school program. Jake Rodríguez, a one-time critic of Tijerina's program, dissented.<sup>30</sup>

Rodríguez claimed that the Head Start Program targeted English-speaking children, not Spanish speakers. Head Start focused on health, nutrition, and other concerns, not Mexican-American children's language barrier which was the purpose of the PIC. Nevertheless, federal funds became scarce for Texas to continue all of the pre-first-grade programs and funds became almost non-existent for the PIC. When the PIC began

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<sup>29</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 156-157.

<sup>30</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 157-158.

suffering from a decrease in attendance, the state became indifferent. Additionally, many Mexican-American parents preferred Head Start for its health and nutritional components.<sup>31</sup>

Disillusionment and declining enrollment notwithstanding, in 1968 LULAC attempted to strengthen the PIC. To increase participation, LULAC members proposed that the program be compulsory in all school districts, the age be lowered, and classes extended to one year. They argued that these adjustments would increase attendance from the communities, participation from school districts, and placate those critics that argued that a few months of vocabulary would never mend the academic years they lagged behind Anglos. San Miguel states, “These recommendations were ignored, and were all but forgotten as LULAC administrators began devoting more time to other educational programs and to filing discrimination cases against local and state school officials.”<sup>32</sup>

### **National Recognition**

Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough saw a *Houston Press* article on the LS400 back in March of 1958 that moved him so much, that he had the article reprinted in the *Congressional Record*. Yarborough praised LULAC and Tijerina for their efforts to educate their own. According to Tijerina’s biographer, Thomas H. Kreneck, this may have been, “the first national mainstream publicity for Tijerina’s preschool program.” It may have also been the first time it came to light within the federal government. Especially important was the fact that Texan Lyndon B. Johnson would later become president and

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<sup>31</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 157-158,

<sup>32</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, 159-160.

being that Yarborough, LULAC, and the LS400 were from Texas; no doubt Johnson was well aware of the development of the program.<sup>33</sup>

Lyndon B. Johnson taught at a Mexican school in Cotulla, was a principal in a small school in Winter Garden, and then entered the South Texas political arena. Johnson left the education field to work for then congressman Richard Kleberg, an important South Texas rancher. Johnson, like many South Texas Anglos, was in continuous contact with Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Johnson, having worked in education, understood the need for Mexican-American children to obtain educational equality. Johnson showed that he cared about the children that he taught, especially as a school teacher. He often drove them to sports games, bought them equipment for school, and even made home visits. Although he treated them with firm discipline, he was warm, caring, and inspiring to these students when others would treat them, “worse than you’d treat a dog.”<sup>34</sup>

No doubt these benevolent sentiments towards Mexican-American children followed Johnson to the Oval Office when he became Vice President, in 1961, and later President, in 1963. Johnson delivered on many of Kennedy’s initiatives, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which created Project Head Start was one of them.<sup>35</sup> Texas, with the help of the American G.I. Forum, established these programs throughout the *barrios*. By 1965 Texas led the country in Head Start enrollees, no doubt greatly benefiting

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<sup>33</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 216-217.

<sup>34</sup> Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 14; Pycior, *LBJ & Mexican Americans*, 18-20, 23; Philip Reed Rulon, *The Compassionate Samaritan: The Life of Lyndon Baines Johnson* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 41.

<sup>35</sup> Valora Washington and Ura Jean Oyemade Bailey, *Project Head Start: Models and Strategies for the Twenty-First Century* (New York City: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 26.

Mexican-American children since the program was, “based on the ‘culture-of-poverty’ notion,” and a great majority of Mexican-American kids were poor.<sup>36</sup>

Little credit has been given to the LS400 as the genesis of the educational component for Johnson’s Head Start program. Political scientist Benjamin Márquez makes a direct connection in his book, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization*, by stating that the LS400 was the, “precursor of the Headstart Program.”<sup>37</sup> But Márquez does not elaborate. More research is needed to verify if and how the LS400 shaped Johnson’s Project Head Start. Being a Texas resident, teacher, politician, and friend to many Mexican Americans in Texas during this time surely allowed Johnson to have ample knowledge about the success of Tijerina’s preschool program. Similarly Tijerina and other LULACs had connections in Washington D.C.

Despite LULAC and Tijerina’s efforts, most credit for Head Start is given to East Coast academics. For example, credit is given to the New Haven, CT public schools for creating the, “guidelines for the educational component of the Head Start.” New Haven opened a ten-week educational course for fifteen four-year olds on April 2, 1963, years after LS400’s successes. It was funded by the Ford Foundation,<sup>38</sup> which had known about the LS400 for several years.

Roots of Head Start are also traced to East Coast nurseries. For example, the 1929 National Association for Nursery Education gets credit as a, “predecessor.” Additionally,

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<sup>36</sup> Pycior, *LBJ & Mexican Americans*, 155; Washington, *Project Head Start*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Márquez, *LULAC*, 51.

<sup>38</sup> Jeannette Galambos Stone, “General Philosophy: Preschool Education Within Head Start” ed. by Edward Zigler and Jeanette Valentine, *Project Head Start: A Legacy of the War on Poverty Second ed.* (Alexandria: The National Head Start Association, 1997), 163.

some key researchers also get credit. Susan Gray and Rupert Klaus who studied poor black inner-city children, are mentioned frequently in the historiography of Head Start. They created the Early Training Project in Nashville, TN researching, “progressive retardation,” which states that those who do not have language and social skills early in life tend to progressively fall behind further as they continue schooling.<sup>39</sup>

National publicity no doubt put the LS400 Mexican-American efforts on the national stage. Notably, *Time* Magazine made splashes in educational circles. In August of 1959 *Time* ran a two-column article on the LS400 titled, “A Four-Hundred Word Start.” And the Spanish version of the *Time* article, “Circulated throughout Latin America,” within *Impacto* Magazine, a magazine produced in Mexico City.<sup>40</sup> Taking advantage of the national and international momentum, Mexican American activists in the Brown Belt lobbied for bilingual education, as many took pride in their Spanish language heritage. Lupe Anguiano, for example, spent much time lobbying for bilingual education for she disliked the way in which white Californians labeled Spanish speakers as retards. She had visited wealthy private schools in Washington D.C. where children easily spoke a variety of languages and she argued that speaking more than one tongue benefited all persons, not just Mexican Americans.<sup>41</sup>

These demands put forth, in monumental fashion, the need for funding of bilingual education. Funds for education of non-English speaking children increased. Congress allocated \$15 million, “for aid to school districts to help educate children of limited

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<sup>39</sup> Zigler and Styfco, *History of Head Start*, 4-6.

<sup>40</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 254-256.

<sup>41</sup> Pycior, *LBJ & Mexican Americans*, 184.

English-speaking ability,” in 1968. Thirty million dollars were reserved in 1969 and the figure was increased again to \$40 million in 1970. In 1971 the federal government allocated \$80 million for bilingual education, \$100 million in 1972, and \$135 million in 1973. Although bilingual education was not the purpose of the LS400 and neither Johnson nor Nixon actually applied those full amounts into the education system, their efforts go to show that the federal government was willing to accept that language barriers existed and created academic problems and needed to be addressed in a significant manner, such as with pre-kindergarten programs.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Kaplowitz, *LULAC*, 145-147.

## CONCLUSION

The Little School of the 400 accomplished many goals and also set forth unexpected events. The State of Texas adopted the program as its own under the title, “Preschool Instructional Classes for Non-English Speaking Children Program.” Due to his hard work, Tijerina was appointed for state-wide positions. The pre-school program allowed more than twice as many students to become qualified to pass the first grade on their first attempt. Both the LS400 and the PIC provided Mexican-American students with the tools needed to attend school for more years. The program’s success also contributed to LULAC’s expansion across the United States, for other Hispanics saw a sign of promise within the pre-school’s results. It may have also influenced President Johnson’s Project Head Start. The LS400 became the first major *barrio* initiative for acculturation during the Cold War years. Finally, it brought to the national stage the Mexican-American demands for first-class citizenship as Americans.

The Little School of the 400 also made a substantial impact on the lives of the students it served and mobilized Mexican Americans nationwide, but in a non-confrontational manner. First, the LS400 was created by Mexican Americans for the adoption of Americanization. It ran counter to the goals of previous community, Catholic, and private schools which traditionally taught in their cultural forms, including the Spanish language. Second, within the *barrio* it proved that Mexicans accepted the fact that Americanization was needed for progress. To teach English to their posterity, parents chose to deny their children formal Spanish. Third, LS400 also began to chip away at the system that allowed for Anglos to “segregate, punish, or humiliate” children due to their inability to speak English. Fourth, the LS400 also gave Mexican-American children a



sense of academic fulfillment, which arguably allowed them to dream of accomplishing more academically than their parents. Fifth, it provided a monumental blow to the popular myth that neither Tejanos nor Mexican Americans cared about their children's education.<sup>1</sup> Sixth, in the face of Jim Crow, it forced the State of Texas to recognize that Spanish-speaking children suffered from inferior educational services in their segregated Mexican schools and began to ameliorate their situation. And finally, the federal government may have implemented an educational component to its Head Start Program that was directly influenced by the LS400.

With the new in-roads that Mexican Americans achieved in Anglo controlled schools, an increasing number of Mexican-American children entered and stayed in school. Unfortunately, this led to increased hatred of them in many communities especially where only one or two high schools existed in communities and therefore had to be shared. This was also the era of the Civil Rights Movement; a time when African-American students also entered Anglo schools in large numbers. Many minority groups faced formidable experiences in the face of old-South Anglo administrators, teachers, and parents. To many, the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954 opened the floodgates to a resurgence of xenophobia, especially when minorities demanded equality with stern and strength. As a result, for many years to come the public education system, and the public forum in general, continued to be unequal, discriminatory, and demeaning. Over time, it became clear that the State of Texas attempted to implement legislation that curtailed the *Brown* decision.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed*, xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Brian D. Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 1.

Tijerina's work came after McCarthyism, an era of active scrutiny of suspected political dissenters and communists. But the Cold War was in full swing, and those who did not speak English, bore some extreme disapproval. In general, Anglos believed them to be disloyal and not able to appreciate America whole-heartedly. Additionally, President Kennedy and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, not to mention many of their file and rank staff, genuinely believed that the Civil Rights Movement "was inspired by communism."<sup>3</sup> This environment no doubt had an effect on Mexican-American activists that wanted to prove to America that they too, were in fact, Americans; and Americans loyal to America without communist values. Teaching their children English would ameliorate this doubt of loyalty as speaking Spanish created doubt within Americans.

Tijerina's work presented itself in a time of much international upheaval. The Korean Conflict was waged in the early 50s. Participation in Viet Nam began shortly thereafter. Investigations into communist-minded groups became a job of the Federal Bureau of Investigations, and they took their job seriously. The American G.I. Forum used a tactic where they used the word "American" in their organization's name to stay clear from FBI suspicion. They used a pro-American, non-minority name for their organization. LULAC too suggested changing their name. In May of 1959 the McAllen, TX council suggested using, "League of United Loyal American Citizens." This would eliminate the "Latin" distinction and keep the League safe from FBI harassment. LULAC and Tijerina did not support changing the name, but in a LULAC newsletter, Tijerina stated that all LULACers should keep communism out of their homes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Foner, *Give Me Liberty!*, 853.

<sup>4</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 248-249.



Figure 2. Ganado Elementary and LS400 Historical Marker.  
Photograph by the author, October 2012.

For these reasons and more, Tijerina chose wisely to keep LULAC out of controversial contests and instead decided to take LULAC through a voyage of conservative non-confrontational activities. At a time when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People asked LULAC for support, Tijerina advised that African American problems were not of relevance to those of Mexican Americans. He also advised them to be patient instead of participating in sit-ins and other forms of active protest.<sup>5</sup> Tijerina conformed to Anglo expectations and pacifist ideals; contrary to LULAC's beginnings when LULAC fiercely challenged racism in the courts and other measures. By concentrating on two issues, education and LULAC expansion, Tijerina was able to keep the organization healthy, away from law enforcement scrutiny, and in a positive light with Anglos and more importantly, the media.<sup>6</sup> But his pacifist policies may have pushed others to militancy, for not much more than a decade later, militant activism took root throughout the Brown Belt, ironically, for education purposes.

LS400 recognition did not stop at mid century. With the efforts of the Historical Commission of Jackson County, Director Frank Condron and researcher Judy Rodríguez, also a LULAC member, the LS400 earned a dedication to Felix Tijerina's and Isabel Verver's Little School of the 400. On November 16, 2010, Governor Rick Perry signed the dedication to the official state historical marker (see appendix 4). The dedication was honored on the next day at the Ganado Elementary School entrance, "the location of the original 'Little School.'" Isabel Verver de la Vega (now remarried) was present, as was the

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<sup>5</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 262.

<sup>6</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 268-269.

local and regional media. She gave a brief speech about the genesis of the program and retold her story about when she was unable to ask permission to go to the washroom. She then explained what the marker meant to her and how important it was to the Mexican-American community. Verver de la Vega was very proud of her efforts back then and of the dedication at hand. According to Rodríguez, only deceased persons are allowed on official state historical markers. In Verver's case, a rare exception was made.<sup>7</sup> And yet, more research is needed to find those who attended the LS400 and to seek how the program impacted their lives and those of their respective families.

Tijerina had set several goals for the LS400, including: to increase the, "average education level of Latin Americans from 3.5 to 7.6," eradicate the inferiority complex Mexican Americans suffered, fully integrate Mexican-American children into public schools, and strengthen American citizenship. Additionally, Tijerina envisioned a community where Mexican Americans and Anglos came together for common causes, including sharing mainstream society.<sup>8</sup> Although Tijerina did not achieve them all during his lifetime, all of these elements, and more, eventually materialized. In sum, Tijerina's "dream" of uniting the community for common educational, social, and economic improvement succeeded in the face of obstacles, criticism, and intra-LULAC fracturing. Tijerina was always motivated by his own personal adolescent experiences. In time he would rise above racism to change and improve the system. In doing so, he improved

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<sup>7</sup> Chris Lundstrom, "The Little School that did What Others Could Not," *Jackson County Herald-Tribune*, 17 Nov 2010; Rick Perry "Historical Marker Dedication," *The State of Texas*, 16 Nov 2010; Judy Rodríguez, interview by author, 17 Oct 2012, Ganado, TX, digital recording, Lincoln, NE; Frank Condron, interview by author, 16 Oct 2012, Edna, TX, digital recording, Lincoln, NE.

<sup>8</sup> Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey*, 213-214, 220, 232, 272.

conditions for millions of Texans of Mexican descent and became a living demonstration for the power of one man to change the zeitgeist.

## APPENDIX 1

### **Glossary:**

Ayuntamiento: Town council.

Barrio: A neighborhood of Hispanics, especially that of Mexican descendants.

Chicano: A person born in the U.S. of Mexican descendents and is acculturated to Americanisms and is more politically aggressive or militant than is a Mexican American.

Colegio: Private learning institution, not necessarily a college or university.

Escuela or Escuelita: School or Little school.

Español: Spanish.

Mestizo: A person of mixed Spanish and Indigenous blood.

Mexican American: A person born in the U.S. but that retains Mexican culture proudly and chooses conformist forms of acculturating to Americanization.

Tejano: A Mexican in Tejas pre 1848.

## APPENDIX 2

Elizabeth Burrus

### BEGINNER'S SPEAKING VOCABULARY

#### I. Environmental Vocabulary

##### a. School and Playground

Afternoon, Ball, Basket, Blackboard, Bat, Bell, Book, Blocks, Clay, Clock, Circle, Chalk, Crayon, Color, Doll, Desk, Door, Drum, Eraser, Flag, Floor, Games, Jack and ball, Kite, Locker, Lavatory, Line, Morning, Marbles, Noon, Nurse, Paint, Paste, Paper, Pencil, Playmate, Picture, Room, Rope, Recess, Record player, Scissors, School bus, Slide, Story, Swing, See-saw, Top, Teacher, Toys, Table, Window, Water

##### b. Home, Family, Clothes

Baby, Bed, Blue-Jeans, Boat, Boy, Breakfast, Birthday, Broom, Brother, Cap, Coat, Chair, Children, Cup, Church, Dinner, Dresser, Dress, Dish, Doctor, Father, Family, Fire, Fork, Fountain, Glass, Girl, Gloves, Grandmother, Grandfather, Home, Hot, House, Hammer, Ice box, Radio, Knife, Lunch, Money, Mother, Mirror, Mr., Mrs., Miss, Name, Nail, Napkins, Piano, Plate, Radio, Raincoat, Saucer, Sister, Spoon, Supper, Stove, Shirt, Shoe, Socks, Slip, Sweater, Telephone, T.V., Underclothes

##### c. Out-doors

Flowers, Garden, Grass, Ground, Leaf, Leaves, Next, Rain, Rocks, Sky, Sun-shine, Stick, Sidewalk, Tree, Wind, Warm

#### II. Cleanliness and Body

##### a. Arms, Bath, Clean, Comb, Dirty, Dry, Eye, Ear, Elbow, Face, Feet, Fingernail, Foot, Hand, Handkerchief, Hair, Head, Knees, Legs, Mouth, Neck, Nose, Shoulder, Shower, Sick, Soap, Stomach, Teeth, Toes, Tongue, Towel, Wash, Well

##### b. Foods, Apple, Banana, Beans, Bread, Bacon, Candy, Cake, Crackers, Carrots, Cheese, Chicken, Cookies, Coffee, Chile, Corn, Fritos, Fish, Ice cream, Meat, Milk, Onions, Oranges, Oleo, Hot-dog, Hamburger, Potatoes, Pepper, Grapes, Rice, Radishes, Sugar

#### III. Verbs (Action Words)

##### a. Am, Are, Brought, Brush, Bounce, Blow, Be, Bow, Bring, Buy, Burn, Came, Can, Catch, Caught, Clasp, Close, Color, Come, Count, Cry, Cross, Cook, Cut, Do, Draw, Drink, Drive, Dye, Eat, Find, Fly, Get, Give, Go, Has, Have, Help, Hear, Hit, Hide, Is, Iron, Jump, Know, Laugh, Like, Light, Left, Listen, Look, Love, Made, Make, May, March, Night, Open, Play, Put, Push, Pull, Pray, Ran, Roll, Run, Right, Ride, Ring, Said, Sang, Set, Saw, Scrub, See, Shake, Shut, Show, Skip, Sing, Sit, Sew, Sleep, Slide, Stand, Step, Stop, Skate, Sweep, Take, Tell, Talk, Throw, Threw, Told, Touch, Turn, Use, Walk, Will, Want, Went, Wait, Wake, Wipe, Work

#### IV. General Vocabulary

A, Above, About, After, Again, All, And, At, Away, Bad, Because, By, Below, Beside, Bye, Cold, Closet, Down, Day, Each, Excuse me, Fast, For,



First, From, Front, Good, Lost, He, Hello, Her, Him, His, How, I, In, It, Little, Many, Me, My, New, Nickel, No, Not, Old, Our, Over, On, Of, Outside, Please, Pretty, She, Tomorrow, Thank you, This, The, Them, Those, That, They, To, Under, Up, Us, We, Wall, What, When, Which, Who, With, Yes, You, Yours, Yesterday

- a. Take in  
Grocery store, Hospital, Post office, Picture show
- b. Holidays  
Halloween, Witch, Owl, Meow, Fly, Thanksgiving, Turkey, Indians, Kill, Hunt, Christmas, Christ, Santa Clause, Carol, Reindeer, Bells, Angels, Manger, Valentine, Heart, Postman, Letter, Easter, Mother Day, Father Day
- c. Community  
Airplane, Air condition, Automobile, Bicycle, Doll, Man, Men, People, Store, Street, Scooter, Train, Tricycle, Truck, Woman, Women, Wagon
- d. Animal and Circus Animals  
Bird, Butterfly, Burro, Cat, Cow, Dog, Her, Horse, Frog, Lizard, Lamb, Pig, Parrot, Pigeon, Rabbit, Rooster, Sheep, Snake, Turtle, Elephant, Monkey, Tiger, Zebra, Lion, Camel, Giraffe, Bear
- e. Colors and Numbers  
Red, Blue, Yellow, Green, Black, Purple, Brown, White, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

**APPENDIX 3****H.B. 51**  
**S.B. 62****BY MCGREGOR & HALF**  
**BY AIKIN & KAZEN****A BILL**  
**To be entitled**

An Act authorizing a pre-school instructional program for non-English speaking children providing for instructional units, providing for financing, requiring Central Education Agency to develop a program and establish certification standards for teachers in such program, providing a severability or savings clause and declaring an emergency.

**BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS;**

Section 1. A special program for non-English speaking children shall be developed by the Central Education Agency. The purpose of said program shall be to prepare such children for entry into the first grade of the Texas Public Schools with a command of essential English words which will afford them a better opportunity to complete successfully the work assigned them.

Section 2. The program for non-English speaking children shall cover a period of not more than (4) months. Any non-English speaking child who is at least five (5) years of age and who will be eligible to enter the first grade the ensuing school year may be enrolled.

Section 3. The Central Education Agency shall establish the academic requirements for teachers who teach in this program and issue certificates to those who meet said standards.

Section 4. The cost of operating the special program for non-English speaking children shall be borne by the State and each participating district on the same percentage basis that applies to financing the Minimum Foundation Program within that respective district. The cost of the program shall include a salary not to exceed Two Hundred (\$200) Dollars per month and a maintenance and operational allotment of Fifty (\$50) Dollars per month for each teacher. The State's share of the cost shall be paid from the Minimum Foundation Program Fund, and this cost shall be considered by the Foundation Program Committee in estimating the funds needed for Foundation Program purposes.

Section 5. If any section, subsection, sentence, clause, or phrase of this Act is for any reason held to be unconstitutional, such decision shall not affect the validity of the remaining portions of this Act.

Section 6. The fact that non-English speaking students cannot successfully complete the work of the first grade in the normal period of one (1) year, and the fact that no provision has been made to prepare such children to meet the requirements of the first grade so as to effect economy through completion of that work in the usual period of one year's time creates an emergency and imperative public necessity that the Constitutional Rule requiring bills to be read on three (3) several days in each House be suspended, and said Rule is hereby suspended.

Section 7. The provisions of this Act shall take effect for the 1959-60 school year, and it is so enacted.

(A list of State Senators and House Representatives follows.)

## APPENDIX 4

### Historical Marker Information & Inscription:

Texas Historical Commission staff (AD), 3/20/2009, rev. 5/7/2009  
 27" x 42" Official Texas Historical Marker with post  
 Jackson County (Job #08JK01) Subject (Atlas) UTM: 14 741992E 3214778N  
 Location: Ganado, 310 S. Fifth St.

### LITTLE SCHOOL OF THE 400

The Little School of the 400 was an educational project developed to integrate Spanish-speaking school children into the mainstream public school population. The program sought to teach these children a vocabulary of 400 essential words to enable them to successfully complete the first grade.

Isabel Verver, a 17-year-old Ganado High School student, read an article in a spring 1957 issue of *Texas Outlook* Magazine that expressed Felix Tijerina's desire for such a program. Tijerina was a successful Houston businessman as well as the national president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Verver contacted Tijerina and expressed her desire to implement such a program. Both Tijerina and Verver knew what it was like to be a first-grader unable to communicate with their teachers or fellow students, and hoped to remove that language barrier.

Baytown educator Elizabeth Burrus supplied a list of 400 vocabulary words to Tijerina that she had formulated from years of teaching bilingual students. Verver taught the pilot class in Ganado during the summer of 1957 and produced 60 "graduates" in time for the fall school term. Seeing Verver's success, LULAC established similar classes in towns such as Vanderbilt, Edna, Sugar Land, Aldine, Brookshire and Wharton for summer 1958. Tijerina and members of LULAC worked for passage of House Bill 51 during the 56<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature. The bill established a state-sponsored program called Preschool Instructional Classes for Non-English Speaking Children and eliminated the need for the privately funded "Little Schools." Head Start and other federally-funded programs of the 1960s eventually took the place of the state-sponsored program.

(2009)

Marker is property of the State of Texas

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