

Fair Funding for Texas School Children

Americans agree that a child's future should not depend on his or her heritage, parents' income, or neighborhood. Our sense of justice insists that America be the land of opportunity where all of its citizens are considered equal.

A fundamental part of this belief is the idea that all children must have access to quality education. But how we carry this out has led to an ongoing debate. We have struggled with deciding whether that access should be relatively equal or whether some children – poor children – should have limited opportunities.

What is the issue?

For many years in Texas, there were tremendous differences in the amount of money available to educate children in public schools. Prior to 1995, some of the wealthiest school systems spent \$10,000 per student and had low local school tax rates. Poorer school systems could only spend \$3,000 per pupil and had much higher school taxes. The quality of each child's education was entirely dependent on the wealth of the local community and varied by thousands of dollars from school to school.

These differences enabled some districts to tax low and spend high. They could hire the best teachers, administrators, coaches and support staff. And they could build spacious, state-of-the-art school facilities.

On the other hand, poorer

schools had to tax high and spend low. They employed more non-certified teachers, had over-crowded schools, and lost their better teachers and administrators to nearby wealthy schools. They also had buildings in need of major repairs just to make them safe.

These injustices began to change in 1991 when the Texas Supreme Court ruled that public education is a state (not a local) responsibility. More importantly because it was a *state* obligation, the court required that education be more equally funded in schools around the state.

To bring about this greater equalization, the state provided more money to low wealth school districts. It also set limits on how much tax revenue the wealthiest school systems could raise and required them to give their extra money to the state to help fund the overall cost of public education.

These changes provided access to quality schools to almost all children in the state of Texas.

To ensure that they were able to gauge the impact of their changes Texas lawmakers also adopted increased accountability for all public schools. Since these major reforms took effect, Texas has emerged as a national leader in public education, particularly in helping to close the gap in achievement between poor, minority and other students.

Despite the notable improvements brought about in the overall

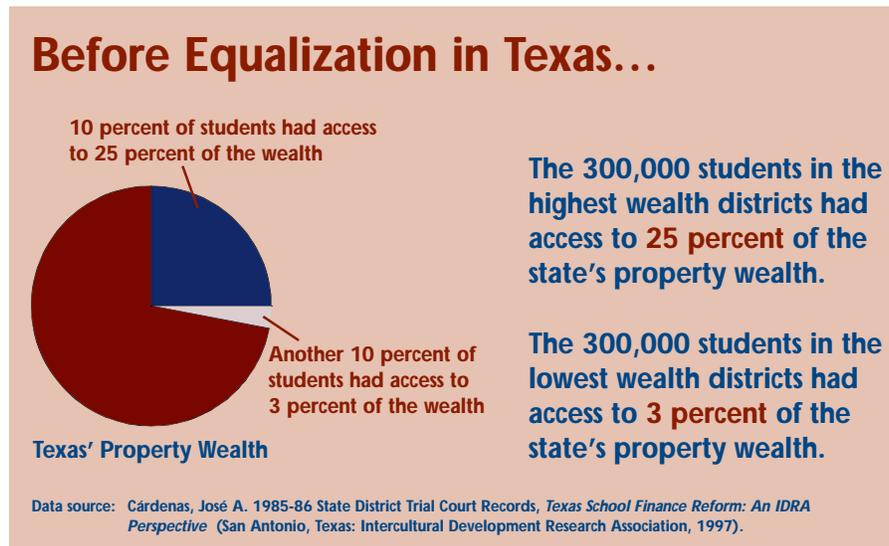
system in Texas, a small but powerful group of school systems and individuals have fought to return Texas to the period when a select few were able to tax low and spend high. For this small group, access to equal education for all should be set aside to re-create a two-tiered, unjust public school system, that would provide poor or mediocre education for most children and excellent education for a select few.

Unequal funding is bad for everyone

Unequal educational opportunity is bad public policy. It is bad for public schools, bad for businesses, bad for taxpayers, and, most importantly, bad for children.

It is bad for public schools because it creates an education system of haves and have nots. And the haves would refuse to share their wealth. Furthermore since wealthy schools would not need state funding, they would oppose increasing funding for the overall school funding plan. Without universal support for high quality schools for all, a few would tend to outspend the rest, a condition deemed unconstitutional by the Texas courts.

Unequal educational opportu-



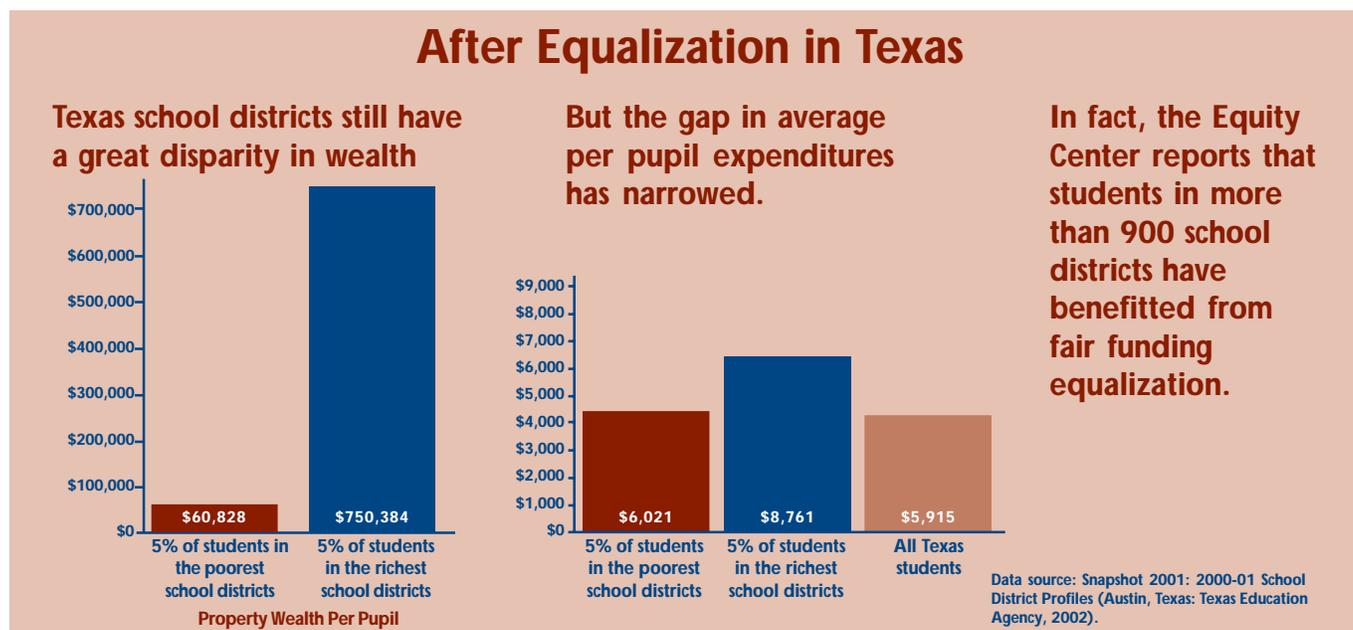
nity is bad for business because, from a workforce viewpoint, it creates very uneven levels of education for different students. This leads to big differences in work readiness in the Texas workforce.

Research on the impact of poor schooling indicates that businesses are forced to spend billions of dollars on employee training when schools do not have enough resources to provide high quality education to local graduates.

Unequal educational opportunity is bad for taxpayers because an un-equalized funding system causes some people with homes and businesses of equal value to pay

higher local property taxes than others. In fact, it was this inequality in tax burdens that was one of the major factors that caused the Texas school funding system to be considered unconstitutional.

Unequal educational opportunity is bad for children because the quality of a child's education and his or her subsequent chances to attend college and have a better life is compromised from the day he or she first steps through the schoolroom door. This makes the wealth of your family and the neighborhood in which you happen to live the major factor dictating the quality of your neighborhood children's schooling.



Before Equalization in Texas...

\$14,000,000	Amount of property wealth per pupil in the richest school district	\$216,990	Average expenditures per classroom in the 100 wealthiest school districts
\$20,000	Amount of property wealth per pupil in the poorest school district	\$89,340	Average expenditures per classroom in the 100 poorest school districts
700 to 1	Ratio of this difference		
47¢	Average tax rate in the 100 wealthiest school districts	\$7,233	Average expenditures per student in the 100 wealthiest school districts
74¢	Average tax rate in the 100 poorest school districts	\$2,978	Average expenditures per student in the 100 poorest school districts

Source: Cárdenas, José A. 1985-86 State District Trial Court Records, *Texas School Finance Reform: An IDRA Perspective* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 1997).

What needs to be done?

Texas is beginning to reap many benefits from its recent commitment to equalizing education for all of its children. Student achievement has improved, taxpayers are more equally sharing the cost of paying for public schools, and businesses are seeing the results of better-prepared graduates. In contrast to many communities across the country, Texas has witnessed a rise in average family incomes, and greater numbers of pupils are beginning to enroll in Texas colleges.

Unfortunately, a few people who had unfair advantages in the old, unequal public school funding system are determined to go back to the way things were. They yearn to return to the days when they had lower taxes than anyone else but still could outspend their neighbors by thousands of dollars per pupil. They want to go back to the days when they could oppose increases in state funding for all schools without

suffering any impact for those stances since they already outspent everyone else. They strive to return to the days when they could lure the best teachers and administrators from neighboring schools offering them higher salaries and greater benefits than others could afford.

Having failed in their early efforts to get the courts to overturn the improved funding plans, these anti-equalization groups have resorted to trying to convince the state legislature to water down key parts of the new state school funding plan. They claim that they do not oppose equalization, but they do not want equalization to get in the way of providing superior schooling for “their” children.

In rendering the decision in the historic *Edgewood* school finance case, one of the judges noted that all children in Texas public schools are everyone’s responsibility, because our collective well-being is highly interconnected.

For too long, children in some public schools were looked upon as someone else’s children and therefore someone else’s responsibility. The court noted, however, that all Texas children are “our children,” and therefore all of us have a shared responsibility for their educational well-being. IDRA contends that no single child is expendable, that all are equally valuable.

Texans need to say no to those who want to weaken the system by excusing a few from tax limitations or by allowing a few schools to spend more than anyone else, privileging a few to the detriment of the many. To go back to the old funding system is to go back to an unjust funding system. Texas and its school children deserve better. The future of our state demands better.

Where to Get More Information

Organizations

Intercultural Development Research Association
www.idra.org, 210-444-1710.

Equity Center
www.equitycenter.org, 512-478-7313

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund
www.maldef.org, 210-224-5476.

Publications and Articles

Basics of Public School Finance, by W. Kirby and B. Walker (Austin, Texas: Texas Association of School Boards, 1986).

“The Edgewood Drama: An Epic Quest for Equity,” by S.J. Farr and M. Trachtenberg, *Yale Law and Policy Review* (Volume 17, Number 2, 1999; pp. 607-727).

“Holding the Line: School Finance Reform in Texas,” by A. Cortez, *IDRA Newsletter* (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, June-July 2002).

Savage Inequalities: Children In America's Schools, by J. Kozol (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

School Equity: Producing Productive Schools in a Just Society, by M.J. Gittell (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

Texas School Finance: A Legislative Primer (Austin, Texas: Texas Legislative Budget Board, 2002).

Texas School Finance Reform: An IDRA Perspective, by J.A. Cárdenas (San Antonio, Texas: Intercultural Development Research Association, 1997).

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization, directed by María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D., dedicated to creating schools that work for all children. As a vanguard leadership development and research team for three decades, IDRA has worked with people to create self-renewing schools that value and empower all children, families and communities. IDRA conducts research and development activities, creates, implements and administers innovative education programs and provides teacher, administrator, and parent training and technical assistance.



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