

Chicanos in Cowtown: Rufino Mendoza and the Mexican American Educational Advisory Council

As a student at North Side High School in Fort Worth in the early 1970s, Rebecca Mendoza occasionally spent time reviewing personnel and application files at the central administration building of Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD). Rufino, Rebecca's father directed her to look for any records of administrators, teachers, or applicants with Spanish surnames.¹ In May of 1971, Rufino Mendoza co-founded and served as the first chairman of the newly formed Mexican American Educational Advisory Council (MAEAC), which aimed to shed light on and correct the inequitable treatment of Mexican students in FWISD.² Mendoza's son, Rufino, Jr., invited him to attend the first meeting of MAEAC. Meeting Eddy Herrera, a sociology professor at the University of Texas at Arlington and a program specialist with the Community Action Agency, the local antipoverty initiative, motivated Rufino, Jr. to get involved in local issues. Armed with the information Rebecca retrieved, MAEAC monitored FWISD's hiring practices and their efforts—or lack of efforts—to increase the number of Mexican employees. MAEAC worked diligently to change the discriminatory practices of FWISD and achieved some significant victories. Even though they did not have the tools to erase the long history of racial and ethnic inequity, their efforts demonstrates the importance of Mexicano activism in the city.³

Mexican Americans have endured unequal educational opportunities in the Southwestern United States since the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.⁴ School district officials worked actively throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to not only segregate children of Mexican origin from their White peers, but also to provide inferior buildings, ill-prepared teachers, and a Eurocentric curriculum. These intentional disparities ensured the

continued availability of uneducated and ostensibly submissive laborers.⁵ At an ad hoc Mexican American Leadership Conference held in Fort Worth in November of 1969, the conference participants, including Chicano activist, Eddy Herrera, critiqued the local education system and indicated a desire for a reinterpretation of history that would highlight the positive contributions of Mexicans and their continued oppression as a conquered people. Young activists in Fort Worth drew inspiration from Chicana/o college students who, across the Southwest in the 1960s, demanded curriculum that would encourage a new sense of identity that uplifted the “indigenous roots of the mestizo.”⁶ Chicana/o activists argued that without such culturally-responsive education, ordinary Mexican American students would be less likely to take pride in their cultural backgrounds and would only find ongoing poverty and oppression after being rejected by the dominant group in society.

The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, reported on the conditions of Mexican Americans in Fort Worth in a special edition in July 1970. Nancy Vick, FWISD Director of Secondary Education, stated in the piece that new “Ethnic studies recently added by the school system tend to stress Negro contribution but neglect Mexican-Americans.” In addition to this lack of ethnic studies, the article also highlights a few other factors that discourage Mexican Americans from engaging with and completing their education. The journalist claimed that Mexican families prefer to send their children to vocational schools and do not encourage them to attend college. However, Ray Valdez, a Chicano activist, pointed out that counselors do not tell Mexican American students about all their options for higher education. Valdez also stated that Mexican students rarely have people who look like them on campus. During the 1968-1969 school year, out of the three thousand Fort Worth ISD elementary teachers, only ten were Mexican and the district recently appointed the first Mexican principal. Additionally, “school officials” cited in the article stated

that eighty-six to eight-nine percent of Mexican American students who begin school in Fort Worth ISD do not graduate. Overall the journalist blamed Mexican American families' "pride" and their desire for their children to work rather than attend school as the reason for their "lag" in education.⁷

This new curriculum, developed prior MAEAC interventions, mentioned in the article, aimed to combat the perception from "Texas history courses [that] often make Mexican-American children think their ancestors were merely villains at the Alamo who contributed nothing to the state's development."⁸ The district recognized the lack of people of color represented in school textbooks and hoped that their new curriculum would provide an opportunity for Mexican students to make better connections with their learning. In a 1974 report of the US Commission on Civil Rights titled, "Toward Quality Education For Mexican Americas," historian Carlos Cortés, stated that a study of US history textbooks "revealed little in these texts which would specifically contribute pride of the young Chicano, but much that could assault his ego and reinforce a concept of Anglo superiority."⁹ Other than a mention of Aztecs, which often times emphasized their human sacrifice practice, no other indigenous people or Spanish colonization were covered in these textbooks, suggesting that "real" American history began when the British settlement of Jamestown in 1607. When textbooks did mention Mexicans, they often did so in the context of immigration, poverty, or housing issues. Textbooks only portrayed Mexicans in a positive light when they sprinkled in contributions of token individuals during important historical events, but these sprinkles did not alter the Eurocentric perspective of US history. FWISD's forward-thinking initiative in developing their own curriculum is commendable; however, these new historical interpretations the district

acknowledged only considered the *contributions* of “minority ethnic groups,” but did not aim to break away from the narrative that reinforced White supremacy.

This surface level intervention by the district did not prevent the newly-formed MAEAC from taking steps to remedy the lack of equity in education for their children. Rufino Mendoza Sr. and six other members of the committee, including Rufino Jr. and Eddy Herrera, identified several areas of concern: the need for improved curriculum and instruction that reflected the insights of Chicana/o activists, the lack of bilingual education, the presence of few Mexican faculty members, insufficient professional development for both staff and faculty, and discriminatory school policies.¹⁰ After meeting with the superintendent and other high-level district administrators, MAEAC did not see any significant changes taking place. This lack of effort by FWISD led to the first lawsuit against the district filed on behalf of Mexican Americans in Fort Worth. With the help of attorney Geoffrey Gay, MAEAC became interveners, or joined an ongoing lawsuit, in the long-standing *Flax v. Potts*, a NAACP lawsuit that sought an end to segregation in FWISD.

Mendoza Jr. later recalled that, MAEAC sought the following remedies from the lawsuit:

1. Mexican Americans to be defined as a separate ethnic group within the district and therefore deserving of distinctive programs.
2. The employment of a Mexican American assistant superintendent
3. The employment of a Mexican American in the personal [sic] department who has the authority to hire faculty and staff for school campuses.
4. An intensive recruitment campaign to increase the employment of Mexican Americans with an ultimate goal of twelve percent to reflect the percentage of Hispanic students in the district.
5. The designation of a member of the administrative staff of the Board of Education to oversee the implementation of the demanded reforms.
6. The creation of a tri-ethnic citizen’s council to monitor the progress of the five goals in addition to the continued desegregation of the school district.¹¹

Additionally, MAEAC wanted to serve as a screening committee to the personnel department to ensure all administrative appointments to campuses received cultural sensitivity training prior to

taking their post. MAEAC leaders also sought quarterly access to the superintendent to discuss the needs or complaints of the Mexican community. Any school with a fifty percent or more population of Mexican students, they argued, should employ a Mexican principal, as well as Mexican administrators. MAEAC further asked the school board to open an investigation into the high drop-out rate of Mexican students and to establish a magnet school in the heavily Mexican North Side neighborhood.¹² Last, MAEAC demanded that all school correspondence be available in Spanish and for the school board to include the Mexican community in improving bilingual education opportunities.¹³ These aggressive demands demonstrate how the efforts in Fort Worth resembled those taken in other major cities throughout the Southwest.¹⁴

MAEAC's legal battle spanned an entire decade. FWISD's superintendent voiced his frustrations with MAEAC when he stated that the district was "making definite progress" in the hiring of Mexican-Americans but that "the trouble is *they* want it done tomorrow" (emphasis added).¹⁵ Lyndon Rogers, spokesman for MAEAC, believed that the promises made by FWISD were vague and that the committee "did not feel the administration has acted in good faith in accomplishing the goals of equal and quality education for Mexican-Americans."¹⁶ He also stated that FWISD knew exactly what needed to be done to remedy the issues. The members of MAEAC had reiterated their demands when they first intervened in the lawsuit in 1972, and they did so again in 1974, 1976, and 1978. Regarding the continued underrepresentation of Mexican faculty and staff, the superintendent cited the lack of Mexicans completing college as the reason for the slow rise in the employment of Mexican Americans.¹⁷ In November of 1979, MAEAC rejected a settlement proposed by the district. The FWISD panel proposed increasing the number of Mexican teachers to ten percent. Mendoza stated, "We're already 16.5 percent [up four and a half percent in less than a decade] of the population. Even if they increase employment to 10

percent, within three years our population will be at 20 percent and we'll still be way behind.”¹⁸

In March of 1980, the *Dallas Morning News* reported that the lawsuit had become a “waiting game,” with both MAEAC and FWISD waiting for an answer from the other.¹⁹ Mendoza offered his “bottom line proposal” that included “hiring Hispanics to make up 12 percent of the staff, being considered a separate ethnic group, naming an assistant superintendent to monitor the program and to report to the judge, hiring a Mexican-American personnel officer and offering magnet programs in North Side schools.”²⁰

An initial victory came just a few months later when U.S. District Judge Eldon Mahon ruled that Hispanics should be treated as a separate ethnic group. After this victory, Mendoza turned toward pressuring district administrators and school board members to reduce dropout rates and increase the test scores of Hispanic students. “If Anglos had 60,000 students and lost 30,000 of them, they’d say they have a problem. If we have 400 students at North Side High School and lose 200 of them, we have a problem.” Mendoza also stated that the Hispanic students who graduated were not educated or trained well enough to compete for jobs or continue into higher education. He attributed these problems to teachers and administrators placing Hispanic students in basic or vocational courses rather than challenging them with higher level academic classes because they did not expect the students to “excel or even succeed.”²¹ Mendoza wanted the district to help remedy these issues by reaching into the community and educating parents on how to motivate their children.

The final victory of MAEAC’s lawsuit against the school district occurred in 1981 when the Fort Worth Division of the United States District Court ordered FWISD to make a series of significant changes in an attempt to “remediate the effects of years of discrimination which was found to be part of a dual school system.” Indeed, “the Court found that Hispanic students had

been victimized by this segregationist approach to education.”²² The ruling represented a watershed for local Mexican activists, but it did not completely solve the educational inequality that had existed for generations and continued into the following decades. The district did not follow through on their earlier efforts in addressing demeaning curriculum nor did they ever hire enough Mexican employees to accurately represent the student body. However, Rufino Mendoza Sr. and MAEAC forced FWISD to make concerted efforts to recognize the unique needs of Mexican students, an important feat on the path toward more equitable educational opportunities.

¹ Rebecca Mendoza, Personal Interview with author, March 5, 2015. Mendoza completed her last year of teaching in 2016 after more than forty years as a middle school teacher at Riverside Middle School in FWISD, where there is currently a petition to rename the school in her honor.

² Rufino Mendoza, Jr., email message to author, March 24, 2015.

³ The term *Mexican American* will be used interchangeably with *Latin*, and *Chicano* to describe American citizens of Mexican ancestry. *Hispanic* and *Latino* are used when including people with origins in other Central and South American nations. The terms will vary for both stylistic purposes as well as to accurately reflect the evolution in identity throughout the twentieth-century and the terms used by the subjects of this research. Mexican immigrants or Mexican nationals will be used to describe non-U.S. citizens from Mexico living and working in the United States. I will also use *ethnic Mexicans*, *Mexicans*, or *Mexicanos* when discussing both non-citizens and American citizens of Mexican ancestry as a group. I will also use *Brown* at times for aesthetics especially when combining the experiences of Black people, other times these two terms are grouped as *people of color*. The term *White* is used to identify the dominant group in American society who have historically benefited from racial and social privileges. I have also chosen to capitalize all of these terms signifying their status as a distinct racial group.

⁴ For a longer discussion on the history of Mexican Americans and Education see, Gilbert C. Gonzalez, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1990); Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Chicana/o Struggles for Education: Activism in the Community*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013); Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981*; or Richard Valencia, *Students and the Courts: The Mexican American Legal Struggle for Educational Equality*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

Richard Valencia, *Students and the Courts: The Mexican American Legal Struggle for Educational Equality*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 7.

⁵ Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, 178, 191-196. For a longer discussion on the history of Mexican Americans and Education see, Gilbert C. Gonzalez, *Chicano Education in the Era of Segregation*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1990), Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Chicana/o Struggles for Education: Activism in the Community*. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2013), Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., *Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981*, or Richard Valencia, *Students and the Courts: The Mexican American Legal Struggle for Educational Equality*, (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

⁶ Garcia, *Mexican Americans Leadership*, 300-301.

⁷ Katie Fegan, “Education Lag Continues: Language Role High in Dropout Problems,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, July 26, 1970, 5-G.

⁸ Katie Fegan, “Education Lag Continues: Language Role High in Dropout Problems,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, July 26, 1970, 5-G.

⁹ “Toward Quality Education for Mexican Americans, Part VI: Mexican American Education Study,” A Report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, February 1974, <https://www2.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/usccr/documents/cr12m573rp6.pdf>

¹⁰ For more on the efforts to establish a bilingual education program in FWISD see Briana Salas’s essay.

¹¹ Rufino Mendoza, Jr., email message to author, March 24, 2015.

¹² For more information about magnet schools in Fort Worth, see Kate Kacier’s essay.

¹³ Rufino Mendoza, Jr., email message to author, March 24, 2015.

¹⁴ MAEAC's decision to sue the school district is indicative of the methods used by Mexican American generation activists and demonstrates the value placed on education by this community. These judicial efforts that began as early as 1925 in Texas were sometimes successful in changing the discriminatory practices of both individual school districts and statutory legislative decisions. One of the most influential cases in Texas, *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District*, in 1970 led to the recognition of Mexican Americans as an "identifiable ethnic group" and therefore entitled to equal protection under the law. This decision was instrumental in the success of future litigation including the decisions made in Fort Worth. See, Valencia, *Chicano Students and the Courts*, 307.

¹⁵ Barbara Clark, "FW minority plan cited," *Dallas Morning News*, October 14, 1978, 13.

¹⁶ Barbara Clark, "FW minority plan cited," *Dallas Morning News*, October 14, 1978, 13.

¹⁷ Barbara Clark, "FW minority plan cited," *Dallas Morning News*, October 14, 1978, 13.

¹⁸ Barbara Clark, "Mexican-American committee rejects FW Panel's proposal," *Dallas Morning News*, November 4, 1979.

¹⁹ Barbara Clark, "Desegregation case sparks waiting game," *Dallas Morning News*, March 1, 1980.

²⁰ Barbara Clark, "Desegregation case sparks waiting game," *Dallas Morning News*, March 1, 1980.

²¹ Barbara Clark. "Hispanic fights for better schools." *Dallas Morning News*, September 27, 1981.

²² Rufino Mendoza, Jr., email message to author, March 24, 2015.