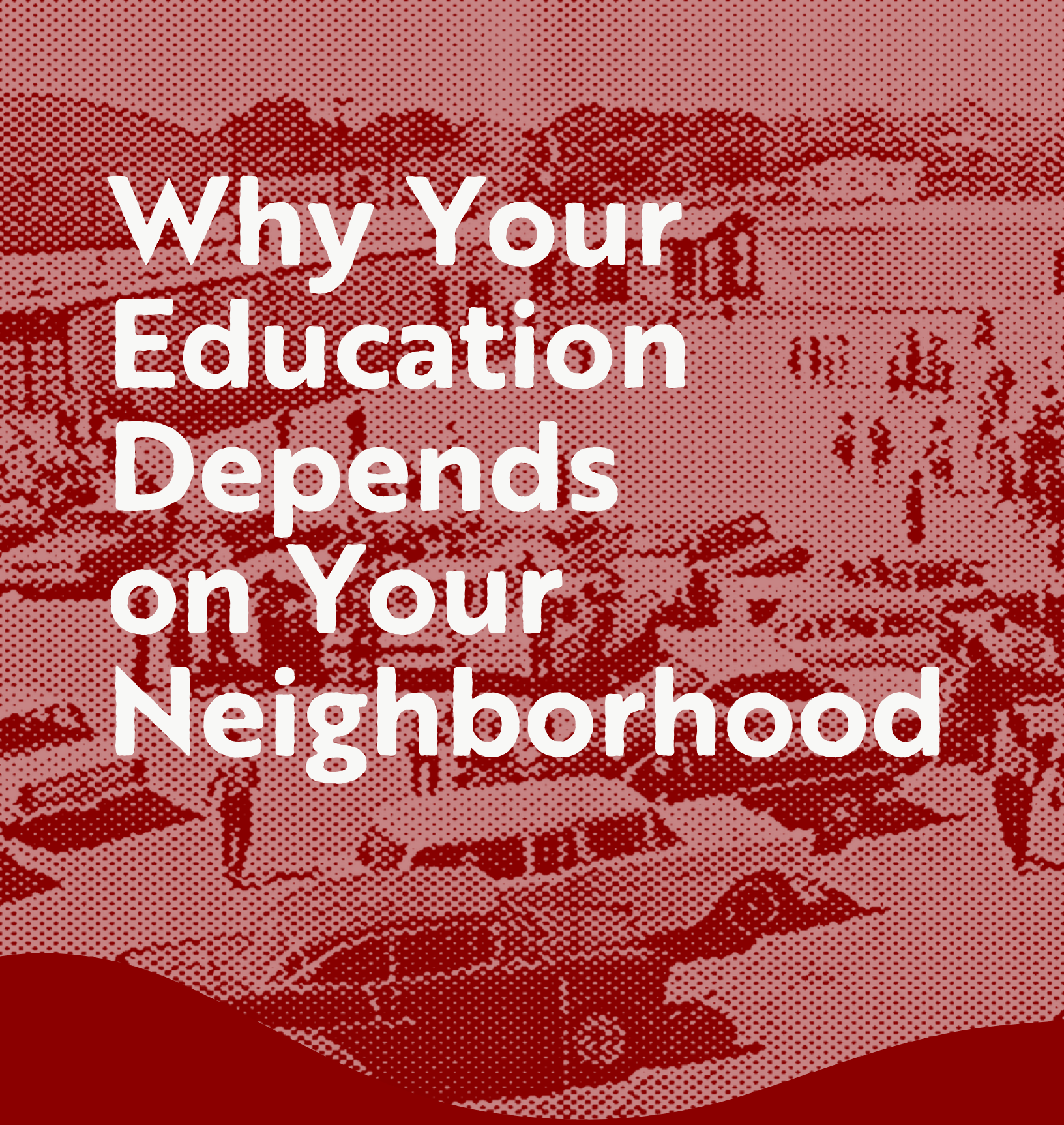

Why Your Education Depends on Your Neighborhood

A Reflection Guide

KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOR

Introduction

What if the quality of your education—and all the opportunities it created for your life—depended on the ZIP code where you were born? In Texas, especially in cities like San Antonio, it often does.

Behind every classroom, school building, and textbook is a complicated history of funding systems, neighborhood lines, and legal battles that have shaped what students experience. Communities have been fighting for decades to make education fairer, especially for students of color from lower-income neighborhoods.

This reflection guide—along with the short documentary *The Walkout*—is intended to help us think through the story of how we got here, why things still feel unfair, and how people are working today to change the system.

Why San Antonio Schools Are So Different

San Antonio has 17 different school districts—yes, that's a lot for one city—and they didn't just appear overnight. Most were created back when San Antonio was first growing and spreading out. Places like Alamo Heights and Edgewood started off as separate towns or rural communities. They built their own schools and formed their own districts long before officially becoming part of the city.

Further, those school districts were shaped in ways that kept communities separated by race and wealth. In wealthier areas, housing deeds often included race restrictions that prevented nonwhite families from living there. During the 1930s, a discriminatory practice known as "redlining" allowed banks or insurers to refuse or limit services to people in low-wealth areas. If you were not white, you could not own or lease a home in certain neighborhoods.

Practices like these created some neighborhoods with high property values and others with very low property values. Since school funding was dependent on property taxes, this led to real differences in what schools could offer in terms of facilities, programs, and teacher salaries.

Those patterns of segregation and investment are still visible in our city today. That's why a student's experience of San Antonio's school system—and the opportunities it creates for their lives—can vary dramatically based on where they live.

Reflection:

What was your school experience like? What did your school buildings look like? What kind of classes and activities were offered?

Exercise: Watch *Making San Antonio* to get an understanding of how our neighborhoods were designed to be divided.

How San Antonio Began to Change

Until the last few decades, families in low-resourced San Antonio neighborhoods grew up without basic services—no running water, no electricity, no flood control.

These weren't just inconveniences; they were daily hardships that shaped every aspect of life. And the people living in these neighborhoods had very little power to change their circumstances. City government was dominated by a business elite that prevented residents of the Westside and Eastside from having a voice in local politics. It was nearly impossible to make meaningful improvements in low-income areas.

But that didn't stop people from trying, especially young Mexican Americans who began to organize for collective action. To be seen and heard, they had to demand a system that recognized their rights and dignity.

One of the first Mexican American groups to act across the country was farm workers. Within the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, leaders like César Chávez and Dolores Huerta helped form the United Farm Workers (UFW), a union that fought for better pay and safer working conditions from California to Texas.

Their efforts helped spark a broader movement in the 1960s: the Chicano Movement, or El Movimiento. New organizations began to push for reforms in labor, housing, and political representation.

Public schools also became a central focus of the movement. Many Mexican American students and other students of color attended underfunded, segregated schools where their success wasn't expected. Speaking Spanish resulted in punishment, and higher education often felt out of reach.

In 1967, five students at St. Mary's University in San Antonio decided to change that. Mario Compeán, Juan Patlán, Willie Velásquez, Ignacio Pérez, and José Ángel Gutiérrez founded the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO).

They believed that through organizing and activism, real change in education, politics, and culture was possible—not just in San Antonio, but across Texas. And they were ready to prove it.

Reflection:

Think about a time when you felt like your voice was insignificant. What was the situation? What did you do about it—or what do you wish you could have done?

Exercise: Check out "Mapping the Movimiento." Use this interactive map to learn more about this movement in San Antonio.

Walking Out and Speaking Up

Just as MAYO was organizing, a wave of student protests swept across the globe in 1968. From Mexico City to France, young people were raising their voices, demanding change, and imagining a better future. One of the defining issues was the Vietnam War—a conflict that deeply affected communities everywhere, including San Antonio's Westside.

In the Edgewood School District, the war hit especially close to home. More young men from this area were sent to Vietnam than from any other part of the city. As classmates lost friends and family in the war, the injustice became impossible to ignore. They were being asked to sacrifice everything for a country that failed to see their worth.

By 1968, students at Edgewood High School had reached a breaking point. Their school was severely underfunded. Classrooms were overcrowded, textbooks were outdated, the building was crumbling, and pathways to college felt out of reach. While these teenagers were expected to serve their country, their own futures were neglected.

Determined to make their voices heard, the student council drafted a list of basic demands: certified teachers, updated textbooks, and access to college prep classes. When the school administration failed to respond, students took matters into their own hands. They began organizing meetings, and leaders from MAYO joined them, bringing experience, strategy, and inspiration from the student walkouts—also known as "blowouts"—that had recently erupted in East Los Angeles. With this momentum, the students made a bold decision: they would walk out, too.

On May 16, 1968, more than 400 students walked out of class. They weren't trying to cause trouble—they were making a stand for a better future. They marched from the high school down the road to the district superintendent's office, but the superintendent wouldn't come out to meet with them.

However, they were not discouraged. Along with MAYO, neighborhood priests and parents joined in and promised to keep the fight going. Two parents in particular, Alberta Zepeda Snid and Demetrio Rodríguez, formed the Edgewood Concerned Parents Association.

In 1969, Demetrio Rodríguez became the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) challenging how Texas funded public schools. The lawsuit, *San Antonio ISD v. Rodríguez*, argued that relying on local property taxes punished students in poorer areas and violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

The case made it to the U.S. Supreme Court. But in 1973, the Court ruled in a 5-4 decision that education is not a fundamental right under the U.S. Constitution, and wealth-based disparities did not constitute a protected class. Put simply, unequal access to education was deemed constitutional.

It was a heartbreaking outcome for the families, but it brought national attention to school funding inequities and sparked further activism. It also shifted the battle from the federal level to the state level, where future cases would begin to push for fairer funding.

The Edgewood Walkout and the Rodríguez case together marked a turning point. They showed what can happen when students, parents, and communities stand together, even when the system doesn't recognize their rights—and they helped lay the groundwork for the ongoing battle to make quality education available to everyone.

Reflection:

Have you ever spoken up for yourself or someone else? What gave you the courage to do it?

Exercise: Watch *The Walkout* to get a more in depth look at the Edgewood Walkout and the impact it had on the public schools in Texas.

Setting the Stage for Change

Despite the loss in *Rodríguez*, a wave of legal cases helped expand protections for Mexican American students and other students of color in the following years.

- ***Keyes v. Denver* (1973):** Recognized Latino students as a protected group under desegregation laws.
- ***Lau v. Nichols* (1974):** Required schools to provide language support to non-English-speaking students.
- ***Castaneda v. Pickard* (1981):** Created a three-part test for effective bilingual education.
- ***Plyler v. Doe* (1982):** Guaranteed the right to public education for undocumented children.

These rulings helped build a foundation for Edgewood families to try their case again at the state level.

Additionally, led by MAYO, there were as many as 50 other school walkouts around Texas, including the Crystal City Walkout, which continued the push for changes to the school funding system.

In 1984, Edgewood parents, empowered by the other walkouts and lawsuits, filed a new lawsuit, *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby*, arguing that the funding system violated the Texas Constitution's promise of an "efficient" education system.

In 1989, the Texas Supreme Court agreed. The ruling led to a funding reform plan called "recapture" where wealthier districts shared some tax revenue with poorer ones.

Not everyone supported the plan. The media dubbed it "the Robin Hood Act," and critics framed it as taking money from wealthy districts to give to poorer ones. This narrative fueled opposition and made lawmakers even less inclined to invest additional funds in public education in the years that followed.

Despite ongoing controversy, the plan remains in place today.

Reflection:

What have you heard about recapture/the Robin Hood Act? What feelings or thoughts does it bring up for you?

Exercise: Research your own school district. Do they redistribute funds or receive redistributed funds from the state?

Where We Are Today

Texas still funds public schools mostly through local property taxes, and while the state has made changes over the years, the system is still full of challenges.
One of the key parts of the funding system is something called the basic allotment.

This is the amount of money the state gives schools for each student. As of 2025, the basic allotment is around $6,161 per student. That number can go up a little depending on the student's needs—for example, if they're learning English or need special education services. But critics argue that the basic allotment hasn't kept up with inflation or the real cost of educating kids today.

On top of that, there's the recapture system. If a school district raises more money through local property taxes than the state says it needs (based on that basic allotment formula), it has to send the extra money back to the state. Then the state redistributes that money to help fund schools in poorer districts.

However, if the amount the state recaptures is more than they need to fulfil the basic allotment of each school district, that money stays with the state. Instead of redistributing all the money the state collects for education through property taxes, they keep a portion of it to create a surplus for the state's budget.

Most districts in Texas are feeling the strain, including property-wealthy districts. Many say they simply don't have enough to cover rising costs like supplies, staffing, and building maintenance. The basic allotment from the state hasn't kept up with inflation, so schools are being asked to do more with less.

But the impact isn't felt in the same way everywhere. Wealthier districts are still better off because they can supplement what they get from the state by passing local bonds or receiving money from school organizations run by parents. So, while nearly every district is struggling to some extent, those in high-income areas have more tools to fill the gap—and that creates big differences in what schools can offer their students.

Closing

Fixing how schools are funded in Texas is a big challenge, but everyday people can still make a big difference.

Start by learning how the system works and who makes decisions. You can speak up by writing to local leaders, voting, attending school board meetings, or simply starting conversations.

Organizations like Raise Your Hand Texas, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), and the Equity Center are working to make education fairer. They offer tools, resources, and ways to get involved.

Change won't happen overnight, but when students, families, and communities come together, we can create more opportunities for everyone.

Key Terms

Basic Allotment

The base amount of money the state of Texas provides for each student in public schools. Currently, at about $6,161 per student, it may increase depending on student needs but has not kept pace with inflation.

Recapture (Robin Hood)

A system where wealthier school districts that raise more local tax revenue than the state says they need must send some of that money back to the state, which then redistributes it to less wealthy districts.

Property Taxes

The primary source of funding for public schools in Texas, collected based on the assessed value of real estate. Wealthier areas with higher property values can generate more funding per student, while lower-value areas often impose higher tax rates but still struggle to match the revenue of wealthier areas. For example, Alamo Heights Independent School District charges 1.2% while Edgewood charges 1.39%.

Redlining

A discriminatory practice where banks and government agencies denied loans or services to people in certain neighborhoods—often communities of color—based on racial or economic factors. This practice contributed to long-term economic and educational disparities.

At-Large Elections

A voting system where all voters in a city elect all members of the council, rather than choosing representatives by district. This system often gave more political power to wealthier, majority-white neighborhoods.

Segregation

The separation of people or groups based on race, often resulting in unequal access to public services like education, housing, and transportation.

Key People

Demetrio Rodríguez

A parent and activist from the Edgewood community who became the lead plaintiff in San Antonio ISD v. Rodríguez, the 1973 Supreme Court case challenging unequal school funding in Texas.

Alberta Zepeda Snid

A leader of the Edgewood Concerned Parents Association, who helped organize and support student activism in underfunded school districts. She also was part of the Pecan Shellers Strike and dedicated her life to working for justice in her community.

César Chávez & Dolores Huerta

Founders of the United Farm Workers (UFW), who organized farmworkers to fight for better pay and working conditions and inspired broader activism in the Chicano Movement.

Mario Compeán, Juan Patlán, Willie Velásquez, Ignacio Pérez, José Ángel Gutiérrez

Founders of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), which worked to improve education, political representation, and civil rights for Mexican Americans

Manuel Diaz Garza, Tony Molina, Eva Carreon, Rebecca Felen, Rosendo Gutiérrez, Herlinda Sifuentes, Diana Herrera, Richard Herrera, Barbara Bustos, Robert Bustos, Beck Pena Ortiz, and many others

Students involved in the Edgewood Walkout.

Edgar Lozano, Homer Garcia, Elida Aguilar, Miguel Acosta

Students involved in the Lanier Walkout.

Key Organizations

Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO)

A student-led activist group formed in 1967 to push for educational, cultural, and political reform for Mexican Americans in Texas.

United Farm Workers (UFW)

A labor union founded by Chávez and Huerta to advocate for the rights of farmworkers, which inspired similar movements for civil and educational rights.

Edgewood Concerned Parents Association

A grassroots group formed by Edgewood families to support students in their fight for better school conditions and fair funding.

Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF)

A national civil rights organization founded in 1968 to protect and promote the rights of Latinos in the United States.

Raise Your Hand Texas

A nonprofit organization focused on strengthening public education in Texas through policy, advocacy, and research.

Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA)

An education-focused nonprofit that promotes equity and excellence in education, particularly for underserved communities.

Equity Center

A nonprofit that represents Texas school districts—especially low- and mid-wealth ones—and advocates for fair, equitable school funding statewide.

Court Cases

San Antonio ISD v. Rodríguez (1973)

A U.S. Supreme Court case that ruled education is not a fundamental right under the Constitution, allowing funding disparities based on wealth to continue.

Edgewood ISD v. Kirby (1989)

A Texas Supreme Court case that ruled the state's school finance system unconstitutional, leading to the creation of the recapture system.

Keyes v. Denver (1973)

Ruled that intentional segregation could occur without laws and included Latino students in desegregation orders.

Lau v. Nichols (1974)

Established the right of non-English-speaking students to receive language support services, leading to bilingual and ESL programs.

Castaneda v. Pickard (1981)

Set a three-part test for schools to ensure bilingual education programs were based on sound research, properly implemented, and effective.

Plyler v. Doe (1982)

Declared that undocumented children have a right to public education in the U.S., blocking Texas from denying them access.

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