

THE REPORT@ROBERTLEOS.COM

August 2007
Volume II Issue 6

©2007 by Robert H. Leos, P.O. Box 92006, Austin, TX 78709-2006
Phone: 512-914-5998 Fax: 512-892-1781; <mailto:report@robertleos.com>

Dr. James R. Vasquez ***Education Service Center Region 19*** ***El Paso, Texas*** *By Robert H. Leos*



When James R. Vasquez retired as superintendent of the Edgewood School District in San Antonio, Texas, he was already well-known for his leadership in the famous Edgewood vs. Kirby school finance case. Edgewood vs. Kirby took on several different names as the commissioners of education changed throughout the years following the initial suit. The court victory, however, brought significant changes to the methods of funding public education in Texas and was hailed in Great Britain as a major civil rights victory in Texas.

[Continued on the next page](#)

Since leaving his post in San Antonio, Dr. Vasquez has served as monitor/master of several school districts at the request of the Texas Education Agency, and served as Senior Director of the agency's Division of Governance, Operations, and Civil Rights. In 1997, Dr. Vasquez was named Executive Director of the Education Service Center, Region 19, in El Paso, Texas. The El Paso center is one of twenty regional education centers in Texas, established through legislation, and designed to assist school districts in improving their operations and increasing student performance. In addition to his duties as Executive Director, Dr. Vasquez continues his state and national activities and is actively involved in numerous capacities with the University of Texas at El Paso.

Throughout his career, Dr. Vasquez has been the recipient of numerous awards for his many contributions to education. In 1979, he was invited to the White House to witness the signing of the Youth Employment Act. He was named Communicator of the Year by the Texas School Public Relations Association, joining fellow recipients President George H.W. Bush, Dr. Mike Moses, and former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros. In recognition of his many contributions to schools and society, Our Lady of The Lake University in San Antonio, Texas awarded James Vasquez a doctorate in education.

Dr. Vasquez agreed to an interview for *The Report* in his El Paso, Texas office to discuss his role in Edgewood vs. Kirby, and other facets of his forty-plus years in education. [rhl](#).

ROBERT LEOS: *What were the events and circumstances in 1980 that led to your involvement in Edgewood vs. Kirby?*

DR. VASQUEZ: We already had a history with the Rodriguez case. That was the first case on school finance and it was lost by Edgewood in the federal court. Nothing happened for several years until I became superintendent in 1978. In 1980, I started trying to get people interested in the case again, this time to take it through the state court system. We tried hard but no one wanted to join us. As a matter of fact, one large district in San Antonio actually donated money to the state to fight us in the lawsuit because they felt that we were going to take their money, not understanding that they were poor also. However, in comparison to us, they were better off. They had more resources but they were still below the state average. They would say, "But we're not poor." And I would answer, "But you are poor. If you compare yourselves to Highland Park or to a plush suburb of Houston, or to some of the rural, rich school districts in Texas—once you start looking at that chart and figuring where your school district sits in comparison to others, you'll realize you're not as well off as you thought you were." People just didn't understand that and they didn't understand why I got so excited about the issue. But what I was doing was just trying to get people, including the legislature, to understand the fundamental issue. Starting in 1979, I testified in every regular session, in the special sessions, before House and Senate committees, and the issue went right by them. They didn't understand. Ultimately, the discussions opened up a complete new look at the state having to put more money into financing schools.

ROBERT LEOS: *Are schools better off financially now than they were before the school finance system changed?*

DR. VASQUEZ: We're somewhat better off than we were then, but Texas still ranks 38th among all states, so we're not there yet. When you look at Dr. Steve Murdock's (state demographer) scattergrams and you look at where the largest number of college graduates and professionals come from, they are concentrated in states that have the highest investment in public education. The return is obvious. You see almost perfect corollaries with states' investment in public education and the number of college graduates and professionals.

ROBERT LEOS: *The school finance system that resulted is sometimes referred to as “Robin Hood” because of the redistribution of funds from wealthy school districts to poorer school districts. How did you feel about the Robin Hood analogy after all the effort that went into winning this case?*

DR. VASQUEZ: What the Edgewood case said was that the burden of educating children is a Texas *state* issue, not just a local issue. Although the state gives school districts the authority to tax, the assumption is that it is still state money. It doesn’t belong to a specific school district. It belongs to the children of Texas.

I take umbrage to people calling the school finance system “Robin Hood” because I hate that such a fantastic victory is turned into a felony. They can use “Robin Hood” if they tell the whole story of Robin Hood. The rich took the money from the poor through unfair taxation and the people in the monarchy got the benefit of the taxes that the king collected. Robin Hood then took back from the rich what had been taken from the poor. People forget that part of the Robin Hood story. So, I don’t mind if people call it “Robin Hood” in the context of the whole Robin Hood story because it is not a felony to win the right to equal opportunity.

When the Edgewood vs. Kirby decision was announced, the BBC (British Broadcasting System) reported that another civil rights victory had occurred in the state of Texas. A *civil rights* victory. We never heard it described like that in Texas.

ROBERT LEOS: *Over your very successful career, you no doubt have a great deal of pride in your work with Edgewood vs. Kirby. What other accomplishments in your career are you most proud of?*

DR. VASQUEZ: I’m certainly proud of the work with the Edgewood vs. Kirby case,

but I’m also proud of the work of this Education Service Center. Everyone that looks at our work is very positive. I didn’t do it all. It started before me. Michael Hinojosa was here before me. He began the change and I’ve been able to move it forward. From all the evaluations that we get, I think we have a very good service center. I sometimes tell people that I’m the most evaluated person in the world. I’m evaluated by the superintendents in my region, by all the participants in our workshops here at the center, by my board, and by the commissioner of education. I’ve had the good fortune of being evaluated by commissioners from Dr. Meno to the most recent commissioner.

“When the Edgewood vs. Kirby decision was announced, the BBC (British Broadcasting System) reported that another civil rights victory had occurred in the state of Texas. A civil rights victory. We never heard it described like that in Texas.”



“What the Edgewood case said was that the burden of educating children is a Texas state issue, not just a local issue.”

ROBERT LEOS: *You're a great believer in the need for more role models for today's students. How can schools provide this?*

DR. VASQUEZ: When I was at Edgewood, I used to have what I called the "Vasquez Modeling Agency." I would take former students to the schools; an architect, a judge, a medical doctor. They would worry about what they would say to the students. I would say, "Just tell them what you do. I want them to see that they can be a Rodriguez and be an architect, or a Juárez and be a medical doctor, or a Prado and be a judge. They went to the same school you go to, they have names like yours, and they look like you, so guess what? You can do it too. Just get up and go do something."

It's a subtle, almost unconscious message that you're giving them. They just need to have that imagination working. Because if you don't give them those types of messages, they have other role models in the street. Edgewood was surrounded by housing projects and some of these kids came from housing projects. Think of the kinds of role models they had. It can be done.

DR. JAMES R. VASQUEZ
Executive Director

Ph.D. Our Lady of The Lake University, San Antonio, Texas, in recognition of his work in education and accomplishments in Edgewood vs. Kirby.

Masters Degree. Counseling. St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas.

B.B.A. Economics. St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas.

1960-1991. Teacher, assistant principal, curriculum director, superintendent. Edgewood Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas.

Dr. Vasquez has been Executive Director of the Education Service Center, Region 19, since 1997.

For more information about the Education Service Center, Region 19, visit their website:
<http://www.esc19.net>

Education Service Center, Region 19
6611 Boeing Drive
El Paso, Texas 79997
Telephone: 915-780-1919
Fax: 915-780-6537

