

EDGEWOOD UNDER SIEGE

Vouchers Come to a Texas School District

BY JEFF MANDELL

THIS IS A terrible slap in the face for our teachers and our community," Karen Rodriguez, for sixteen years a teacher in the Edgewood Independent School District (E.I.S.D.), San Antonio, Texas, and currently president of the Edgewood Classroom Teachers' Association, was describing the Horizon Scholarship program. The privately funded Horizon program provides tuition vouchers to selected low-income students in San Antonio's Edgewood district.

Horizon is the largest voucher effort to date of the Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation of America (C.E.O.), which boasts smaller voucher programs in forty American cities. As C.E.O. sees it, providing "parental choice" vouchers to students from low-income families, like most of those in Edgewood, is a first step in U.S. education reform. But Rodriguez, like many of her Edgewood colleagues and parents of Edgewood students, has a very different perspective.

Edgewood is one of the poorest school districts in the state. In principle, C.E.O.'s tuition voucher is available to any E.I.S.D. student eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches; more than 13,000 of E.I.S.D.'s 14,000 students qualify. There is, however, a catch. Scholarships are awarded only to students who (1) meet the financial criteria, (2) live within district boundaries, and (3) are already admitted to a private school. Often, the effect of the third stipulation is to exclude potential students from scholarship eligibility.

In practice, private schools do not have the legal obligation, the willingness, or often even the capacity to accept certain students public schools must educate as a matter of both law and tradition. Students with special learning needs—due to dyslexia, emotional problems, attention-deficit disorder, physical disabilities, bilingual requirements—are not generally welcomed at many San Antonio private schools. Some

schools lack the staff and equipment to care for special needs students; others simply do not accept students who require extra attention or who are not already performing at or above grade level. In other words, many students who would most benefit from specialized attention are automatically excluded from the Horizon program—and will remain the responsibility of the public schools.

Ana Pinedo, for example, had scoured San Antonio for a private school that would accept her daughter, who is confined to a wheelchair and suffers additional medical problems. Pinedo's daughter must attend a school staffed by a registered nurse. "I called all over San Antonio," Pinedo explained, "and no one would take my daughter because they don't have the special needs programs." Pinedo herself had gone to private schools as a girl and had negative perceptions of E.I.S.D. But finding no alternative, she enrolled her daughter at Coronado-Escobar Elementary and says she has been pleasantly surprised: "I support this district 100 percent. I see a lot of good, positive things going on here. I went to private school, but I really wish my parents had sent me here. I'm concerned about Edgewood losing money, but somehow Edgewood will find a way. We know they will not back down from helping our kids, no matter what."

C.E.O. San Antonio Program Director Teresa Treat dismisses concerns over special needs programs, noting that fourteen special needs students were accepted into private schools and are receiving vouchers this year. (A total of 837 students are using vouchers.) According to Treat, no parents have notified C.E.O. that they were unable to find a school for their special needs child. But in fact, of the special needs students Treat cited, several receive therapy each afternoon for speech problems—at E.I.S.D. schools. The district receives no tax money for the therapy it provides to students who attend private schools. By continuing to help those students, E.I.S.D. is in effect forced to subsidize C.E.O.'s private program—and divert funds from

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its own remaining students.

More dramatically, the district stands to lose more than \$4.5 million in dedicated state funding for next year because of students lost to the Horizon program. (Another \$2 million will be lost because two major housing projects in the district recently closed, forcing many tenants to relocate.) Voucher proponents respond that therefore Edgewood has that many fewer students to educate, but the district insists the situation is not that simple: Edgewood must operate the same number of schools, run the same number of buses, maintain a central office staff, perpetuate the special needs programs students require, and also provide services for some students who spend most of each day at private school.

Moreover, because the allocation of school funds is based upon the previous year's attendance, even if every student currently accepting a voucher were to return to Edgewood next year, the district still would be funded for 1999-2000 based on the number of students enrolled right now. The expected shortfall is already evidenced as the district has tried to prepare for the loss. Rodriguez admitted to feeling pinched in her supply budget this year. But Hoelscher Elementary principal Virginia Kinney insists that the funding crunch will not lead to fewer educational options for students: "I can't ever see us consolidating programs because those have a direct impact on our students." She added that Edgewood would go without new roofs or reduce staff before cutting back on student-centered expenditures.

The funding loss will come at a crucial moment: immediately after the district finally acquired sufficient money to enhance and expand its educational programs. Edgewood recently opened magnet programs in math and science and fine arts and established advanced placement programs in its high schools. In addition, the district's scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (T.A.A.S.), the statewide standardized test by which the Texas Education Agency (T.E.A.) rates schools as "low-performing," "acceptable," "recognized," or "exemplary," have risen dramatically. In the past five years, Edgewood has gone from having nine of its twenty-six schools declared "low performing" by T.E.A. to having no low-performing schools and three campuses recognized for high student performance. Faced with dramatic state funding cuts, the district will be hard-pressed to sustain that progress.

Whether or not the schools can continue to improve with significantly less state funding is only one of the district's structural problems. Edgewood, west of downtown San Antonio, is a relatively small district; Kelly Air Force Base occupies more than a third of its area. Edgewood's population is more than 95 percent minority, and the annual per capita income is just over \$5,000. Local property tax revenues are so low that more than 89 percent of the district's per-student funding comes from state and federal funds. (In contrast, San Antonio's wealthiest district, Alamo Heights I.S.D., receives less than 3 percent of its funding from state and federal sources, and can still afford to send more than \$1,300 per student to the state for mandated redistribution to poorer districts.) The imminent closure of the air base is not likely to improve the situation.

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Even with the base operating, the district is the largest area employer. So the expected cutbacks will inevitably mean lost jobs—mostly in secretarial, custodial, food service, and other non-teacher positions—for students' families. This is what Rodriguez means when she insists, "There are a lot of implications. This isn't just about students going to private schools; it's affecting a wide spectrum of the community." Given that the second largest employer in the district is the H.E.B. grocery chain, the loss of those jobs can only exacerbate the cycle of poverty in Edgewood.

Edgewood's poverty is very much an issue in the "scholarship" program—C.E.O. America's president Fritz Steiger acknowledges that the district's economic conditions were the primary reason for placing the Horizon program here. Yet according to many Edgewood parents, their economic circumstances often



render Horizon scholarships virtually useless. For example, to receive a scholarship, students must be eligible for federal free or reduced-price lunch programs—but many private schools do not participate in the federal programs. Working parents also note other hardships: the additional cost of books and/or uniforms; requirements to sell raffle tickets and/or participate in mandatory fundraisers; required parent “volunteer” hours; the necessity of private transport for students to and from schools often far from home. E.I.S.D. also provides supervised places for students before and after school. Asked about these issues, C.E.O.’s Treat responded, “Transportation has not been as big of an issue as we anticipated.”

Dolores Salinas’ greatest concern is more general and reflects her awareness of Edgewood families like that of Ana Pinedo. “If we all get vouchers and send our kids to private schools, then what will happen to the kids who are left?” Treat hardly paused to consider the question: “We hope that all schools, public or private, will improve if they need to. But our concern is not with Edgewood Independent School District. What happens to Edgewood is secondary for us.”

Presumably primary for C.E.O. is what happens to John Rhodes. Rhodes is a tall man with neat gray hair, penetrating blue eyes, and a raspy voice; you could easily mistake him for a golf pro. But Rhodes is a local suburban pastor, and founder of Family Faith Academy, one of two new private schools to open in Edgewood this year. Rhodes is a newcomer to the educational scene, and does not claim to be an expert educator. Rather, he finds himself at the Academy because of the coincidence of a parental request and the Horizon scholarships. When a parent in Rhodes’ congregation complained of not having a Christian school available to her, Rhodes began praying about the possibility of opening such a school, and “vouchers were a sign from the Lord to locate in Edgewood.”

The Family Faith Academy is located in a building

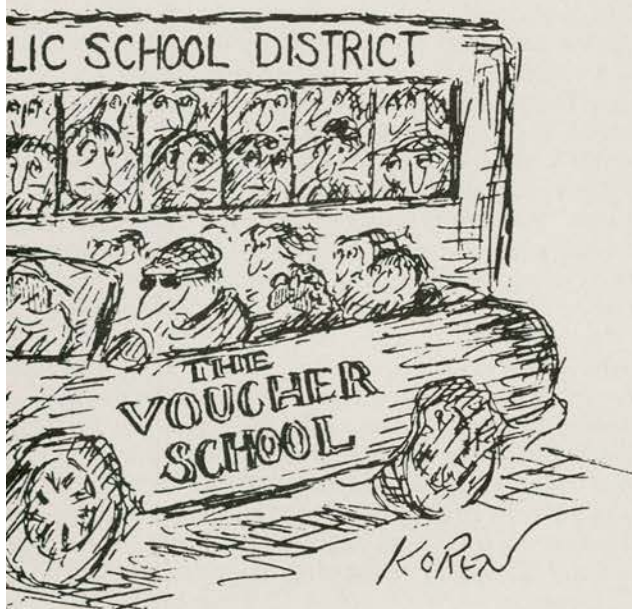
that used to be home to Chino’s Dugout—the last in a series of bars that formerly occupied the premises. Rhodes jokes about how glad the landlord was to see him. Inside, the school is light and airy, the freshly painted walls covered with drawings and Bible verses. The main room features study carrels along the perimeter, providing each student with a place to work, and a large table in the center for group interaction. Off to one side is a smaller room, brightly decorated with phonics wall charts, that serves as the classroom for the youngest students. Those youngest kids—currently there are five—learn to read through phonics and passages from the New Testament. The older kids (second grade and up) work on individualized curricula, setting goals for themselves each day in math, reading, social studies, science, and Bible. Their performance is judged by whether or not they meet those goals.

Rhodes and his two teenage sons (who are “home-schooled”—that is, they receive their education by helping at the Academy) work with the older students, less as teachers than as coaches. “It’s their education and their work,” Rhodes explained. “We’re here to coach them, to tailor the work for them, and to help them remove obstacles, but they have to take responsibility.”

It is exactly this talk of responsibility couched in explicitly Christian ideology that drew Ilene and Albert Gonzalez to enroll their daughter Desiree at Family Faith. Albert spoke repeatedly of “one-on-one education,” but Ilene insisted, “My main concern is that Desiree loves the Lord and loves speaking of the Lord. It’s an added plus that she gets more attention here.” Asked about other private schools in San Antonio, the couple cited familiar concerns: book fees, uniform expenses, transportation problems.

Only a mile or so from Family Faith Academy, in the dilapidated Edgewood Square shopping center, sits another private Christian school that opened this year: the Edgewood School of Leadership. The School of Leadership (which had been “El Shadai New Hope Christian Academy” until it changed ownership in early February) is sandwiched between a beeper shop and a florist.

Jim Billman, the school’s principal, looks much more the businessman than John Rhodes and has much more of an educational background. Billman already operates three schools in Galveston, has strong curricular ideas, and believes firmly in standardized testing. Whereas Rhodes declared Family Faith to be a losing proposition financially, Billman left no doubt that his school is an investment, and one from which he expects to garner a return. At the moment, the school has only five students, but the storefront can hold forty, and Billman anticipates being booked before semester’s end. Like Rhodes, Billman spoke of an individualized approach, pointing to the study carrels that he installed in the storefront. He echoed Rhodes’ savage attack on the whole-language system of reading instruction, affirmed the importance of phonics, and went on at length about the importance of teaching morals. Billman’s schools use the widespread “School of Tomorrow” Christian curriculum, and he shares copies of those materials with Rhodes’ Academy.



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Billman believes his curriculum will "meet the need for more individual attention" and "fill in all the learning gaps kids come in here with." The school gives all new students diagnostic exams to identify their "gaps," and the teaching stresses fundamentals. "We spend a lot more time on the basics—we demand mastery." Billman has high expectations of what he can accomplish: "We transform kids."

As with students, so with schools. Billman dismisses the argument that private vouchers might harm E.I.S.D. and scoffs at the amount of money Edgewood spends "outside the classroom." For him, that's simply wasted money: "Our society decided bigger is better, but that's just wrong." Billman says his school will provide leadership not just for students and families, but for the district as well. "Our hope and our prayer is that this voucher program causes a working coalition, where our success will help show Edgewood how to do better. They will hopefully emulate us." Rhodes had a similarly dismissive, if more ethereal, take on the voucher controversy. Opponents, he said, "can be real mad at Leininger [Dr. James Leininger, major funder of the Horizon program] or whoever the bogeyman here is, but I'm telling you that God knows these kids are here, and He's not for vouchers or for public schools—He's for kids. And He'll keep the parents accountable."

Accountability is also important to Edgewood parent Frank Baledéz. He sees no reason to flee public schools that he thinks are doing well: "The voucher is new, not proven, has no track record. There's no documentation that it's better than public schools yet. Until there's evidence that vouchers are better than what Edgewood's offering, I'll wait." Baledéz spoke while cutting out laminated illustrations for bulletin boards at Hoelscher Elementary. Across the district, Edgewood parents volunteer so regularly and in such large numbers that every school has a large and well-utilized parent workroom.

Many of the volunteers are even fiercer in their defense of Edgewood schools. Mary Ann Arocha, who graduated from E.I.S.D., recently returned to the area just so her children could attend district schools. Anna Badillo is tired of people underestimating Edgewood: "We've got great teachers here. People think the kids won't learn just because it's a poor district, but the teachers and schools here are as good as anywhere else."

C.E.O.'s statistics suggest that most Horizon parents agree, at least about competing public schools: Of the 837 students who initially accepted vouchers, only six used those vouchers to attend non-religious schools. Early on, C.E.O. claimed its program would promote choice within the public schools, but thus far only two students have used vouchers to attend other area public schools. In San Antonio, the largest group of Horizon students is now attending Catholic schools (443), while the rest moved to schools sponsored by other denominations. In other words, most of the families seeking vouchers did so to support religious education for their children. And while the Horizon program means up to \$4,000 per student, the same student represents a \$5,800 loss to the Edgewood district—and to the students who choose to remain in public schools.

Many of the parents who volunteer in Edgewood schools traveled to Austin in early February to share their perspectives on vouchers with the Texas State Legislature. More than a hundred parents from E.I.S.D. participated in the lobbying effort, telling their stories to lawmakers, who are considering a "pilot" voucher program (which would include the state's major urban districts). Ana Pinedo described her visit as emotional. She explained to legislators that private schools did not have the facilities for her disabled daughter. Dolores Salinas told her representatives, "C.E.O. discriminates. They picked only certain students to invite. They are insulting our community." That charge refers to C.E.O.'s apparent practice of targeting only favored students to move out of Edgewood, in effect leaving the public schools to deal with more difficult cases.

C.E.O.'s Treat denied that the Foundation solicited any particular group of students, although she allowed that certain schools might have sent targeted mailings containing Horizon applications and that those schools might have received selected-student lists from C.E.O. For its part C.E.O. almost went out of its way not to alert the community at large about its program. Although the Foundation held a kickoff press conference and published an application in the *San Antonio Express-News* (which is among the program's official sponsors), there were no town meetings, no block walks, no phone banks, and no informational tables outside supermarkets. According to Treat, no further publicity was necessary. Yet C.E.O. has not accepted enough applicants even to fill the 1,000 private school seats the Foundation determined were available in San Antonio.

Neither the underwhelming parental response nor the withdrawal of 5 percent of the participants in the first semester has dampened C.E.O.'s enthusiasm. C.E.O.'s own report on the program's first few months strains to explain some of the unimpressive numbers: "The most compelling aspects of the Horizon program are not covered in this report of figures, statistics, and events." Instead, C.E.O. cites "the true facts of the childrens' [*sic*] success" as Horizon's standard for evaluation. Those facts will presumably become clear over time. In the meantime, C.E.O. continues to tout the program. The Foundation has asked researchers from the University of Virginia to conduct an "independent evaluation"—but the resulting proposal outlines a project to measure not student achievement, but parental satisfaction. Measuring student achievement would be problematic—Horizon does not require private schools to adhere to any curriculum, to administer any standardized tests, or to meet any other common educational standards.

For the present, the challenge presented by the Horizon program has brought the Edgewood community closer together. While some worry about how E.I.S.D. will cope with a slashed budget next year, many remain confident that the district will continue to improve. Kinney, the principal who led Hoelscher Elementary to become a school recognized for its performance by the Texas Education Agency, speaks with a soft certainty: "I suspect we'll see those [Horizon] kids back. For a lot of parents it's a 'grass is greener' thing. Once they actually get their feet wet, they'll come back." □