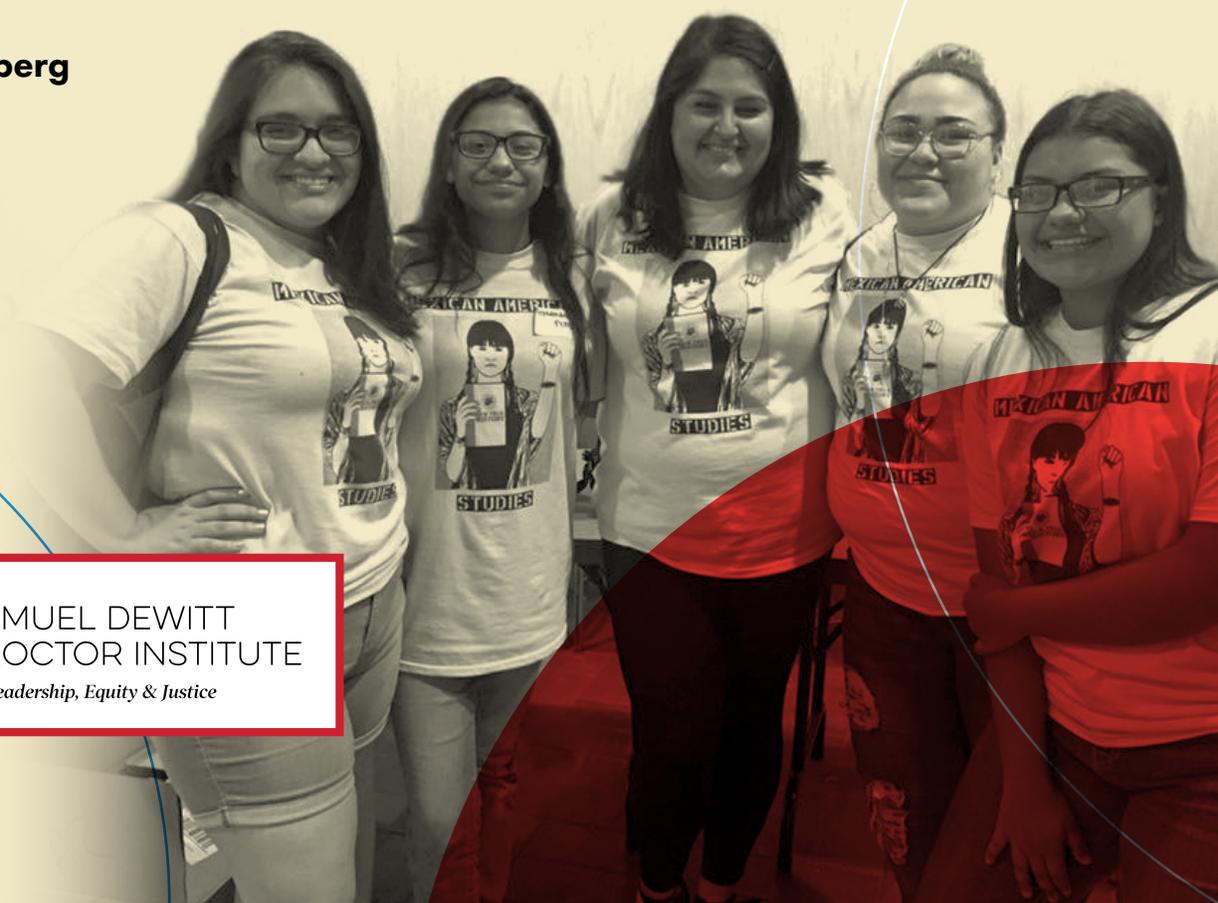

Leading from the Hyphen:

**A CONOCIMIENTOS MOVEMENT
TO INTEGRATE MEXICAN
AMERICAN STUDIES INTO TEXAS
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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**SAMUEL DEWITT
PROCTOR INSTITUTE**
for Leadership, Equity & Justice



Introduction:

“United States People”

In 2018, during a hearing on whether to create a dedicated class on Mexican American Studies (MAS) in Texas public schools, Texas State Board of Education member David Bradley testified: “I don’t subscribe to hyphenated Americanism. I find hyphenated Americanism to be divisive.” His fellow board member, Patricia Hardy further testified: “We’re not about Hispanic history; we’re about American history. We’re not about taking each little group out and saying, ‘You’re the majority, so we’re going to teach your history.’ We’re Americans, United States people.” *United States people*. Given that Mexican American and other Latinx children comprise 52% of Texas public school student population (projected to increase to 70% by 2050) and given that Texas annexed parts of Mexico in the 19th century, it seems logical to question why “their” history isn’t yet part of “our” history.

The question of whether the United States of America is a “melting pot” or remains a land of “hyphens” continues to be a contentious one. While still largely symbolized across the world by the Statue of Liberty and its iconic poem “Send me your tired and your poor....I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” this country’s long history of colonialism, slavery, racism, segregation, forced assimilation, and deportation has never lurked far from the surface. And how we teach that history in our public schools has been particularly controversial, never more so than in recent years when the question of “who belongs” in the United States has been at the forefront of public policy, discussion, and debate.

The **SAMUEL DEWITT PROCTOR INSTITUTE FOR LEADERSHIP, EQUITY, & JUSTICE** sought submissions for The Year of Leadership—a three-report, research series examining leadership. We invited submissions that grapple with the idea of leadership within the context of education, both at the K-12 and higher education levels. We asked authors to consider: What makes for great leaders? What skills do leaders need to make change and be effective? What type of leadership is needed now? What if leaders fail? What kinds of people do leaders need on their team? What contemporary challenges should future leaders aim to address? How can one’s various identities shape their leadership? What are some best practices and strategies to advocate for equitable and just institutional leadership in education? Within the educational context, where is leadership needed most?

The resulting data-driven reports are peer-reviewed and contain original research. All authors were financially compensated.

This report examines a new generation of social justice educators in Texas who are leading from the hyphen. For the better part of the last eight years Texas activists and educators of all grade levels and subject areas have been fighting for a dedicated history course on Mexican American Studies (MAS) in the K-12 curriculum, including pre-vetted textbooks and curriculum materials that are aligned with their state standards (otherwise known as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills or (TEKS). They have also been on the front lines of trying to integrate MAS across the K-12 curriculum, including units on Mexican American culture, art, literature, language, and identity. Yet at the same time, the educators profiled in this report are doing a delicate balancing act as they confront strong resistance to anything that is critical of American history, White supremacy, and/or suggestive of the “hyphenated Americanism.”

In fact, the current push for integrating MAS into public education in Texas reflects a centuries-long history of de facto educational segregation, discrimination, and inequality for Mexican American students, who are still frequently treated as “foreigners.” Recently, efforts to support MAS have become even more belligerent in light of a strong national push for teaching “American Exceptionalism.” Based on the ideology that all schools should have an explicit “mission” to “defend the legacy of America’s founding, the virtue of America’s heroes, and the nobility of the American character,” American Exceptionalism seeks to ignore or erase many of the injustices that indigenous, immigrant and non-white populations have faced throughout American history (White House, 2020).

This report begins with a brief history of Mexican American educational inequality in the U.S. and an overview of recent attempts to institutionalize MAS in the K-12 curriculum in heavily Hispanic school districts, such as those in Arizona and Texas. The second part of the report draws on interviews with South Texas-based professors, public school teachers, administrators and community activists to better understand the impetus behind their persistence in bringing MAS to all K-12 students, the challenges they have faced, and their strategic plans to both legitimize, maintain, and ultimately scale this work. It has been an uphill battle, but one with many triumphs, that has created a strong leadership agenda along with a growing number of new collaborations and coalitions. The report concludes with actionable recommendations for diverse leaders – including curriculum developers, institutions of higher education, public school teachers and administrators, policymakers, and community activists – as to how they can support this work moving forward.



METHODOLOGY

I interviewed eight educators in South Texas who are at the forefront of developing and promoting MAS in K-12 schools, community sites, and institutions of higher education. These educators represented professors of MAS and teacher education, practicing teachers in K-12 schools and school district supervisors and curriculum developers. After asking them to tell me about their own educational experiences and areas of expertise, among the questions I asked them were: 1) Why do you think it is important for K-12 students in Texas (and other states) to have a dedicated course on MAS? 2) What is the importance of having standards and a textbook that is accurate and vetted by MAS scholars/teachers? Where do things stand on those fronts currently? 3) Why do you think there is so much opposition to MAS given the data that it has been so effective in Tucson and other places? 4) What have been some of the biggest challenges you have faced in teaching MAS at your school specifically and at the district/community/school board/state policy levels? 5) What kinds of support and professional development opportunities would you like to see in the future for teachers or teacher candidates who want to support MAS? 6) What kind of leadership and commitment will this require, and from whom?

In choosing who to interview for this report, I began by contacting Lilliana Saldaña, Associate Professor of Mexican American Studies at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). Saldaña, who has been at the forefront of the MAS movement, is the creator and Director of the Mexican American Studies degree program at UTSA and co-Director of UTSA Mexican American Teachers' Academy. Saldaña then provided me with names of K-12 teachers, district-level instructional coordinators, and curriculum developers who have been leading the quest to make MAS an integrated and permanent part of the K-12 curriculum in Texas public schools. A full list of educators interviewed in this report can be found in Appendix A.



A Brief Overview of MAS in American Education

“OTHER WHITE”: MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY AND DE FACTO DESEGREGATION

In some ways the educational history of Mexican American students in the United States parallels that of African Americans. Mexican American students have typically attended segregated, underfunded schools that are vastly inferior to those of their wealthier White peers.¹ These schools are housed in decrepit buildings and lack textbooks and other resources needed for students to excel (Guadalupe, 2005). Also, as with African American students, expectations for Mexican American students' academic achievement have been inherently lower than average, as students are pushed into vocational tracks and not encouraged to or likely to finish high school. As recently as 2018 the national dropout rate of Hispanic students was 8%, nearly twice that of White students.² Like African American students, Mexican American students have been subject to overt and covert racism, including being called “wetbacks,” and having to challenge stereotypes that they are stupid, and/or inherently lazy (Ballon, 2015; Godfrey, 2008; Guadalupe, 2005; Vela, 2012; Valencia, 2008).

WHAT IS MAS?

MAS is the acronym for Mexican American Studies. Mexican American Studies (also known as Chicana/o Studies, Chicana Studies or Raza Studies) is a multidisciplinary academic field of study that examines Mexican American history, culture, language, psychology, and art. MAS seeks to challenge outdated stereotypes and to correct historic misconceptions and omissions regarding Mexican Americans in the United States, including deficit model ideologies that “dehumanize and pathologize Chican@ youth” (Acosta, 2014, p.10). While originally offered at colleges and universities, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Ethnic Studies in the 1960s, MAS has recently become part of the K-12 curriculum in many public schools, especially those states with high Hispanic student populations such as California, Arizona, and Texas. MAS has a distinct pedagogy that embraces interdisciplinary, collaborative and student-centered learning, family and community engagement, and critical inquiry. While there have been no longitudinal studies of MAS, preliminary data suggest that it has increased student engagement and college graduation rates.

¹ In 1930, 90% of schools in South Texas were segregated. Retrieved at: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6584/>

² National Center for Educational Statistics (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>).



In other ways, however, the Mexican American experience is significantly distinct from that of African Americans. Until as recently as the 1970s, Mexican Americans were legally classified as “other white,” making it difficult to argue for desegregation and educational equity for Mexican American students based on race. In fact, in the wake of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), many Mexican American students were transferred to formerly all-Black schools as a way of fulfilling the state’s legal mandate to desegregate Black students (Ballon, 2015). As Godfrey (2008) notes: “This tactic ensured that both Mexicans and African Americans continued to receive inferior educational opportunities, in comparison to [Whites]” (p.255).

At the same time, their “other white” status reflected a still prevalent belief that Mexican history, culture and language is something “foreign” rather than indigenous to the United States (Godfrey, 2008). This, in turn, has left many Mexican American youth with an identity crisis and a strong push to assimilate by embracing a colonized narrative (Vela 2012; Valencia, 2008). Because of their “other white” status the battle for Mexican American educational equity-focused primarily on issues of citizenship, language and culture. Advocates for segregation, for example,

argued that Mexican American students need to be assimilated into American culture before they could share a classroom with White students (Vela, 2012; Valencia, 2008). In a 1945 lawsuit, for example, the defense argued that “Mexican American children possessed contagious diseases, had poor moral habits, were inferior in their personal hygiene, spoke only Spanish and lacked English speaking skills” (Vela, 2012, p.169).

Throughout much of the 20th century, Mexican American students continued to experience de facto segregation and systemic racism, wherein many students still found school to be marginalizing and traumatic (Valencia, 2005). Students with Mexican names, for example, were automatically put in special classrooms based on the asserted need for them to assimilate and learn English, despite the fact that they were never individually assessed for their English language skills (Ballon, 2015). Students were also forbidden to speak Spanish at any time during the school day. As profiled in the documentary *Stolen Knowledge*, students who testified in the landmark 1957 lawsuit *Hernandez vs. Driscoll Consolidated Independent School District* remember being hit with a paddle and punished for speaking one word of Spanish, even while on the playground.

Among other inequities raised in the court case was that Mexican American students were forced to stay in first grade for *three years* so that they would always be segregated from White students. To achieve this, schools created a separate track for all Mexican American students regardless of academic prowess or linguistic ability: First Grade, Low-One, and High-One.

While the judges sided with the plaintiffs, the “slow” and “lazy” stereotypes persisted and are persisting to this day. As one teacher interviewed for this report recalled: “As a child, I faced some racism that I didn’t even realize as racism. It was just so subtle. I was just unaware. It was something that was all around me. I had a baseball coach who when he would tell us to hustle, he would tell us it wasn’t Mexican Day, that we needed to hustle.” Ballon (2015) underscores that curriculum tracking is still a prevalent aspect of Mexican American schooling, noting that: “studies have consistently shown that Latino students are overrepresented in non-college bound and low tracks,” and “are more likely to be in remedial, vocational and special education programs” (p.60).

Challenges to these stereotypes go hand-in-hand with the movement to create a separate Mexican American or Raza studies curriculum that would not only teach students about their culture and history but would engage them in critical inquiry about issues of education inequity, identity, belonging, citizenship, equity, and civil rights. California, Texas, and Arizona – states with the largest numbers of Hispanic students – while at the forefront of these efforts, have also experienced many setbacks.

A WAKE-UP CALL: THE RISE AND FALL OF MAS IN TUCSON, ARIZONA

One of the earliest and most well-known efforts to bring MAS to public schools was one state over from Texas, in the Tucson Unified School District in Arizona. Tucson’s program, which began in the late 1990s and persisted until 2012, was noteworthy not only in its content, but for using a culturally relevant and learner-centered pedagogy in which students worked collaboratively and engaged their own families and communities in oral history and action research projects. Perhaps even more unconventional at the time, the program encouraged students to challenge the ways that history had been traditionally taught, including identifying ways in which Mexican American history and culture was largely ignored, misrepresented and/or framed from a deficit perspective. Interviews with MAS students in Tucson were moving tributes to the success of the program, wherein a student demographic that was formally disengaged and at high risk of dropping out of school were learning to embrace education and become advocates for their own learning. According to one study, the program produced a 100% graduation rate, 85% of whom were going to college (Cabrera, et. al. 2014).

Nonetheless, in 2008 and 2009 then Arizona Attorney General Tom Horne introduced legislation to ban the program arguing that it was “based on divisive, separatist, politicized pedagogy that taught students to see themselves as exemplars of an oppressed ethnicity,” and further that students in the program were “creating a hostile atmosphere in the school for the other students, who were not born into

“I think the younger the student the less comfortable people in authority are with them asking questions, with them challenging the status quo. And I think the MAS literature is all written from the margins. A lot of what it is saying is this other truth that people aren’t talking about: We’re not seen, and we should be seen. We have value.” —Andres Lopez

“Maybe it is hard for some people to educate themselves on things, thinking: ‘Wow, I’ve been doing it wrong this whole time,’ or ‘My ancestors did it wrong. I’m the bad guy.’ Instead of seeing it that way, why don’t you educate yourself now? Show people that we don’t repeat those things and that we can see things from a better perspective of those that are oppressed.”

—Araceli Manriquez

their ‘race’” (Acosta, 2014, p.5). In 2010, the Arizona State Legislature passed a bill banning the teaching of ethnic studies in public schools. Despite multiple attempts by students and teachers to invite legislators to observe their classes in action, student testimonies at school board meetings, and eventually, a student-led (peaceful) public protest, in 2012 the school board voted to shut down MAS and banned most of the books used in the program. After several years of additional protests and a student-initiated lawsuit in 2015, it was ruled that the closing of the MAS program had violated students’ first amendment rights. While the school board agreed to create new classes designed to include support for Hispanic students (mainly through academic remediation in math and reading), all vestiges of the previous program with its culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice focus were erased.

Although there were concerted efforts to integrate MAS studies into the Texas curriculum before this highly publicized battle in Arizona, Texas educators and activists paid close attention to what happened in Arizona, knowing that if they were to succeed, they needed to be prepared to address resistance and to build strong coalitions and leadership infrastructures to support them moving forward. As one Texas-based MAS middle school teacher interviewed for this report, Araceli Manriquez, noted, “Teachers in Texas are not just still fighting to have these kinds of courses, they are simultaneously trying to ‘stop them from being taken away.’”



MAS in Texas: Creating a New Conocimientos

“It’s important for K-12 students in Texas to learn, not so much about MAS, but to engage their students through MAS. MAS, which is rooted in the anti-colonial struggles of the Chicano movement, cultivates a positive academic identity for students, while sustaining their cultural and linguistic practices and ways of knowing/ways of being in the world. MAS also nurtures critical reflection as an important part of creating new conocimientos or knowledge for personal and social transformation where students/teachers begin to see themselves as leaders and agents of change for and with their communities and the larger world around them.” —Lilliana Saldaña

The present-day movement to integrate MAS into public education in Texas is much more than developing a new set of state standards or adding more historical content knowledge to the curriculum. There is no doubt that these are both important goals for MAS teachers and activists, yet as everyone I interviewed for this report stressed MAS is a *pedagogy*, a way of teaching that seeks to create new conocimientos (transformational knowledge), for students who have been historically disengaged and marginalized in public education. According to Anita Cisneros, a dual lingual MAS teacher at Bonham Academy in San Antonio: “Personally it helped me to know that my ancestors were intelligent, hard-working people who have contributed to our society. It made me feel proud and pushed me to be the same even though society and the school system treated me otherwise.”

MAS educational leaders interviewed for this report outlined a number of the explicit goals and benefits of MAS in Texas public schools including:

- Increasing student academic engagement, love of learning, and graduation rates through culturally relevant learning, collaborative inquiry, youth participatory action research (YPAR), and authentic problem-solving.
- Critically analyzing the ways that MAS history and culture has been traditionally represented from a deficit perspective in the education, law, politics, and national rhetoric.
- Promoting self-esteem and pride in the rich body of MAS literature, art, language and culture, including many novels and biographies that are entirely new to many Mexican American students.

- Increasing family and community engagement through the collection of oral histories, stories, and testimonios, and by honoring Spanish as a first language.
- Encouraging students to see multicultural education and education equity as a critical step towards active citizenship and preserving American democracy.

Other important aspects of MAS include an interdisciplinary approach that builds on community resources, such as engaging local writers, artists, and historians who join the class as guest speakers, and field trips to art exhibits, historical sites, theatrical performances, murals and alters created for Dia de los Muertos. MAS likewise embraces a model where adults and students are both learners and teachers.

As Andres Lopez, one of the first teachers in Texas to create a high school course on Mexican American Literature, shared: "I work alongside my students to make meaning from these works and to find connection to my students' stories and universal, existential questions." According to Lopez, his students' response has been extremely positive:

I have seen students, some of them extremely shy or seemingly disengaged from school, come alive when the right poem, short story, or piece of art activates something within them. Other texts open their eyes to the vibrant history or culture they take for granted in San Antonio and Texas. One student told me that my class was her first opportunity to read literature with characters that "speak like my family and me." My students realize that the stories of their own families and cultures are valuable and worthy of study.

Araceli Manriquez, a Mexican American Studies middle school teacher at Bonham Academy similarly notes that "We start off the year with identity. You go to your family and you ask them, where are my roots from? What did my grandparents do? And that helps them learn so much about themselves." In response, she found that her students "became really passionate about the topics we talked about

in class and it helps them to develop their voice a little bit, whether that is through writing or reading or just learning about themselves and others." Due to a lack of MAS standards, textbooks and lesson plans, however, Manriquez admits that she is "basically making up a class on my own." As a result, she includes her students in the building of curriculum, taking the opportunity to tell her students "This is our class" and beginning each semester by surveying their interests. When Manriquez asks her students what they want to talk about, her students write down topics ranging from Black Lives Matter to women's rights to immigration, which underscores the broader civil rights focus of MAS.

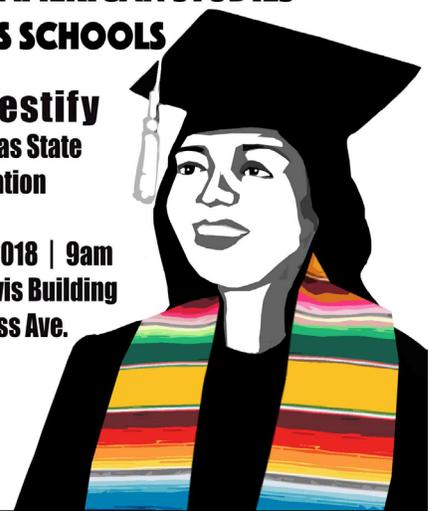
Educators interviewed for this report also shared concrete examples of rises in student academic achievement. Andres Lopez, for example, shared the following anecdote about a student in his MAS literature class: "Recently, on a student panel in front of 40 other educators, one of my students said the class has completely changed her trajectory. She is no longer someone who thinks college is out of

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her reach. She plans to attend college to become a teacher.” Lopez believes that courses such as his, coupled with a culturally sustaining approach to the core curriculum “can drastically reduce student disenfranchisement.” Likewise, Elizabeth Rivas, an instructional coach and facilitator in the Harlandale School District, believes that MAS helps students “access information that is hidden or in the margins.” She finds this representation is critical for students who “feel validated” when they see themselves in history and learn about the on-going contributions of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Tejanos and Chicanos to society. According to Rivas: “When students are represented in history they will want to learn. They will gain academic achievement.”

As educators have begun a strong foundation for teaching MAS in the PK-16 curriculum, there has been a parallel push to offer the same opportunities to parents and community members. Anita Cisneros has been particularly active in creating community-based programs at libraries or even local taco places as a way of offering MAS and Chicano studies to people who did not have an opportunity to learn about it in school. According to Cisneros, who founded a community-based literature program, The MAS Circle: “Chicano studies should be in the community. Not all

of our people are able to afford to go to college.” Cisneros further notes that “Parents and students are grateful and participate in all cultural activities. This is one way we get parents’ involvement in the schools.” Cisneros emphasized that part of her motivation to bring MAS to the community was based on initial resistance from her school supervisors: “I was at a school in which teachers opposed it, so that is why we started the after-school MAS Circle - as a volunteer no one could tell me no.”

Perhaps most importantly, MAS prompts students to be self-reflective and embrace their own intersectional identities. As Anthony Gonzales, a high school history teacher in San Antonio puts it: “My student population, a lot of them, their parents speak Spanish, but they don’t. And I think that sometimes they feel that makes them less Mexican American or less Chicano. It’s cool to help them realize that being Chicano is a mindset, it’s not a checklist.” Gonzales believes that conversations about history and identity between students and their families “can be healing” for students who themselves feel like they exist on the hyphen, caught between two cultures. Despite the efforts of the educators profiled herein; however, battles to institutionalize MAS in Texas, like those in Arizona, have faced significant hurdles.

“I decided to become a teacher so I could be the teacher I wish I had growing up. I did have great teachers. What was lacking was the language and cultural component—I was being forced to assimilate and I refused to. I want my students to be proud of being bilingual and bicultural. Now students are multilingual and multicultural. Parents and students are grateful and participate in all cultural activities. This is one way we get parent involvement in the schools.” —Anita Cisneros

Current Challenges to MAS in Texas

On April 9, 2014, the Texas State Board of Education met to address educators' request for a dedicated course in Mexican American History. While the course would be offered as an elective available to individual Texas school districts and teachers, it would be designed to meet the state standards known as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and would have a dedicated curriculum and textbook. Texas-based educators are still fighting for all of these and are coming up against a series of significant challenges, including: 1) MAS is still not fully aligned with TEKS and, furthermore, these standards themselves are lacking in scope and diversity; 2) There is still no MAS textbook and it is difficult for educators to obtain curriculum materials and lesson plans; 3) Teacher education programs still lack a focus on culturally relevant pedagogy and practicing teachers, many of whom know little themselves about MAS, need increased opportunities for mentoring and professional development.

CHALLENGE #1

BUILDING THE CURRICULUM TO STATE STANDARDS

According to Christopher Carmona, chair of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies: "Currently, the Latinx population of students in Texas public schools is at 52% percent, and yet we do not have curriculum that reflects that in our school system.... We need to take control of our children's education and unify our efforts to lay the groundwork for culturally relevant curriculum for all students" (Mendina, 2016). The educators interviewed here, however, widely agreed that MAS courses would never be prioritized by curriculum developers, state legislators, local school districts, or even many teachers themselves, unless they were tied to state standards. As it stands, the majority of

Texas schools do not offer the course and those that do offer it as an elective despite the fact that in some local districts the student body is 97.7% Hispanic. This creates issues not only for scheduling the class with existing staff, but also making sure that students interested in the course have already fulfilled their graduation and college admission requirements. As a result, many of the students who take MAS courses are Advanced Placement (AP). According to Anthony Gonzales: "MAS and ethnic studies classes empower our students and give them agency. So, I think that I would love to see courses that are geared toward the entire student population." While acknowledging that AP classes have their place, Gonzales believes that *all* students are capable of college-level work and aspirations with the right nurturing and support: "I think to deny them their history because they are not working at AP level, that is not O.K."

CHALLENGE #2**REJECT THE TEXT**

An additional hurdle for educators seeking to tie MAS to TEKS is that there is no official text for the course. Numerous attempts to create one did not go well. The first textbook submitted for review, titled *Mexican American Heritage*, was widely decried as politically slanted, inaccurate and racist, prompting over 200 educators to gather in San Antonio to “reject the text.” One passage in the text, for example, outright stated that: “Chicanos....adopted a revolutionary narrative that opposed Western civilization and wanted to destroy this society” (Mendina, 2016). Another passage noted that: “Mexican laborers were not reared to put in a full day’s work so vigorously. There was a cultural attitude of ‘manana,’ or ‘tomorrow’ when it came to high-gear production” (Mendina, 2016). Lilliana Saldaña was a member of the committee reviewing the text. Saldaña concluded that: “The entire text, in my assessment, is written from a White supremacist, Euro-American perspective.” It later turned out that the authors of the textbook had no background in MAS scholarship, and the publishing company was headed by a former School Board member who wrote a book in 2008 condemning public education as ‘tyrannical’ and a ‘tool of perversion’ (Mendina, 2016).

After that textbook was eventually rejected as “beyond repair,” a second textbook was put up for review. The *Mexican-American Studies Toolkit* by ethnic studies activist Tony Diaz was also rejected this time due to factual errors and poor grammar. Diaz countered that he had only seven months to produce the text, while the normal process to introduce a textbook is two years. Diaz suggested that this was reflective of the fact that the school board “dreams up its own rules, debates its own rules, and votes on its own rules,” and that the school board “does not seem to want to give Mexican-American studies a fair shot or to implement it” (Martinez, 2017). MAS advocates stress the importance of having MAS scholars and teachers play a critical role in vetting textbooks and

the creation of curricular materials and lesson plans. According to San Antonio Instructional Coach/Curriculum Coordinator Elizabeth Rivas:

Individuals with little or no expertise in MAS do not understand the full history of Mexican Americans. The same can be said of individuals with little to no expertise in curriculum development. With no real classroom experience and instructional training, these individuals do not know how instruction is transferred therefore should not be part of the process.

CHALLENGE #3**MAS TEACHER PREPARATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The fact that only one out of 18 teachers teaching MAS holds a bachelor’s degree in MAS was part of what prompted Lilliana Saldaña to create the MAS major at UTSA and accompanying MAS Teachers’ Academy. According to Saldaña: “There’s definitely a need to ensure that we have teachers who are qualified to teach MAS, teachers who have foundational knowledge in the field of Chicana/x/o Studies and who are rooted in social justice and culturally sustaining teaching/learning approaches.” Saldaña’s vision is to “see MAS across all grades, content areas/disciplines, and program models, including dual-language and bilingual education.” Elizabeth Rivas went a step further, stating that in a perfect world teacher preparation programs would make multicultural education courses part of their “core requirements” and preservice teachers would learn and understand frameworks like Critical Race Theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. Rivas underscored that: “The reality is that most university teacher programs are based in the traditional frameworks.”

Educators and activists interviewed for this report agreed that teacher preparation programs needed to increase their focus on culturally relevant teaching. Many felt that their teacher preparation programs adopted a “colorblind” approach to teaching. As Anthony Gonzales recalled:

I remember one time a professor [I had in college] said “I don’t see color. That is not something that is important to me.” And I remember raising my hand and saying, “But I want you to see my color.” What I really meant is “My color is not only just the color of my skin, it’s my heritage, my family, my culture.” And I remember her being kind of annoyed with me like I was being nit-picky or something.

Genevieve Rodríguez-Quiñones, an Instructional Coordinator at Las Palmas Elementary, similarly believed that even being in a bilingual education track in her teacher education program did not prepare her to work with culturally diverse students, particularly Mexican American students. According to Rodríguez-Quiñones: “Nothing prepared me for families who were being deported. I had no experience. You would assume that this may be something I’m going to come across as a teacher for bilingual students... Nothing in the coursework prepares you for those points of conversations you are going to have with kids and their parents.”

Andres Lopez concurred, noting that: “Few teacher training programs and universities provide teachers with the tools needed to adjust their practice and expand the curriculum based on the students in their classrooms.” Lopez warned that: “If we cling to the educational status quo in Texas, we will begin a long, slow decline, a state that cannot compete in the economy of the future. Most importantly, we will not deliver on our promise to parents and students to do our best to serve.” Of note: UTSA’s MAS program recently submitted a proposal for a teaching certificate in MAS to meet the demand for qualified teachers in ethnic studies. The program also offers a dual credit course in MAS for high school students, some of whom may be inspired to go to be teachers themselves.

While incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy at the pre-service level is important, providing mentoring and professional development for in-service teachers are equally critical. According to Anthony Gonzales: “People don’t understand the daily lives of a high school teacher. We have six classes, usually those can be two or three different classes....and then creating a 36-week curriculum of MAS from scratch takes a lot of time. To ask a teacher to do all of them, there is a lot of teachers who will not do it... I can convey information to my students, but how am I going to check that they are engaged?” Gonzales is part of a team working to package multidisciplinary MAS curriculum materials and lesson plans so that “a brand new teacher who has a million things going on can take this and everything is ready for them. They can add whatever they want and teach a well-developed MAS course.” Despite Gonzales’s efforts, as well as other educators profiled in this report, public resistance to MAS remains a steady roadblock.



Ongoing National Resistance to MAS

Among the questions I asked each educator I interviewed was: “What do you think is at the root of resistance to teaching MAS and to ethnic studies in general?” Their answers were not particularly surprising. Most prominently was the idea that MAS threatens the “status quo” (White supremacy), but educators also talked about the fact that any time students ask critical questions about American history or politics it makes people uncomfortable. According to Andres Lopez: “I think the younger the student the less comfortable people in authority are with them asking questions, with them challenging the status quo....Saying, we’re not seen and we should be seen. We have value.” Anthony Gonzales agreed, noting that: “By having this class you are acknowledging right off the bat on day one that not all of our stories have been acknowledged, not all our stories have been told.” Gonzales further noted that he believes that people in power fear that when minoritized communities start questioning what happened in the past, “it is going to lead to unrest.”

In some sense, this is true. MAS does lead to unrest, but this is not necessarily a bad thing in the face of years of discrimination and marginalization. MAS challenges students to resist these negative stereotypes and helps them believe that they can be successful in school, go to college, and become successful professionals. According to Genevieve Rodríguez-Quiñones: “Once you know who you are, there is no stopping what you are capable of

doing.” Elizabeth Rivas concurred, sharing that: “When students are represented in history they will want to learn. They will gain academic achievement.” Unfortunately, however, this is not a goal that everyone supports. As Rivas continues: “People in positions of power want to maintain class structure and power dynamic. Anything that may change this will always be villainized. Ignoring the role race, ethnicity, and gender have played in setting up power dynamics and class structure will result in further hegemonic rule over people of color. Courses like MAS are perceived as a threat, therefore are scrutinized and criticized.”

Again, it is important to emphasize that while MAS does seek to redistribute power by creating educational equity, opportunity, and access for Mexican American students, the program is grounded in principles of shared humanity. According to Lilliana Saldaña, one of the biggest misunderstandings is that MAS is divisive. In her opinion, “MAS is quite the opposite. It cultivates solidarities across generational, racial, class, language, and gender identities to create greater consciousness of our human and planetary values.” Saldaña further believes that “MAS cultivates community, empathy, humanization, mutuality, solidarity, and respect – values that are shared among many ethnic groups.” Anita Cisneros agrees, sharing that: “We are teaching about ourselves and our students will carry this knowledge and pass it on, it is tradition.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

While educators in Texas still have a long way to go until MAS is a fully integrated, accepted, and standardized part of the K-12 curriculum, the educators profiled in this report are shining examples of what can be accomplished through leadership, activism, and collective focus. To sustain and grow this work, it will take ongoing collaboration among K-12 teachers and districts, institutions of higher education, policymakers, and community-based organizations. One might think that in the midst of a worldwide pandemic that this work might slow down, but it has not. As Genevieve Rodríguez-Quiñones stated strongly: “Nothing is going to stop us, not even a pandemic.” While she wondered whether her school district was going to ask her to wait until the pandemic is over to reinstate efforts to integrate MAS, she concluded that: “No, we need the work to be done now. It needs to be started now.” The following are recommendations for both preserving and expanding the exceptional work that has been put into legitimizing MAS in Texas schools to date.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Curriculum Developers

- **Make sure MAS textbooks and curriculum materials are well-researched, accurate, and not written from a deficit perspective.** The rejected textbook, *Mexican American Heritage*, serves as a strong warning of how MAS can be co-opted to reflect negative views of Mexican American culture.
- **Develop MAS textbooks and teaching materials that are aligned to national, state and local standards.** Without aligning MAS to standards, it will continue to be a marginalized or “extra” unit that teachers do not have time to teach.
- **Have people who are experts in MAS intricately involved in the creation of textbooks and curriculum materials.** Honor indigenous voices.
- **Develop MAS textbooks and teaching materials that are aimed at different grade levels and are interdisciplinary.** MAS is not just a topic for history courses, there is a rich body of literature and art that reflect MAS culture and that can be the basis of a rich curriculum.
- **Provide sufficient time for scholars to create high-quality MAS texts and ensure that these materials are vetted before being distributed to teachers and schools.** The *Mexican American Studies Tool Kit* is an example of a well-intentioned effort that was stymied by typos and factual errors when written in a rush.
- **If classroom teachers are developing curriculum materials, make sure they are compensated for their time and given sufficient support and resources to succeed.** Many of the educators interviewed for this report were at the forefront of developing new, innovative, and interdisciplinary MAS curriculum materials, however, they believed these efforts were not sustainable or scalable without sufficient compensation.

Teacher Education Programs at Institutions of Higher Education/Teacher Educators

- **Develop courses that provide candidates with a deep dive into the history and culture of different racial and ethnic groups.** Multicultural and survey courses have their place but are insufficient by themselves. The “one-off” multicultural education course that most teacher education candidates are required to take is insufficient on its own. MAS is based on an extensive knowledge of and understanding of the complex history of Mexican Americans that goes far beyond a surface-level “heroes and holidays” approach.
- **Increase focus on culturally relevant pedagogy and integrate it across all methods and content coursework, with an emphasis on critical reflection.** MAS is based on a distinct pedagogy that seeks to empower and engage MAS students, re-centering their experiences, critically examining issues of race, power, privilege, and engaging their families and communities in the learning process. Moreover, teacher candidates are often unaware of their own assumptions and stereotypical viewpoints about students of color. Teacher education coursework needs to engage candidates in critical reflection and train them to be culturally proficient educators.
- **Provide scaffolded opportunities for pre-service teachers to spend time in authentic classrooms from the beginning of their teacher education programs, and to engage with the larger community where students live, such as in-service projects, tutoring, home visits, and visits to cultural institutions.** In order for future teachers to fully support and engage students of color, especially bilingual and immigrant students, it is critical that their preparation programs allow them to see their students as more than a “test score.”

Public School Administrators and Teachers

- **Adapt standardized curriculum materials to include MAS history and culture.** While teachers are still bound to standards and standardized curriculum, there is no reason that the units and goal posts cannot be adapted to be more inclusive of Mexican-American and other minoritized cultures.
- **Create opportunities for MAS to be available to all students, not just AP students.** At this point and time, most MAS courses are at the AP level when there is evidence to suggest that all students can benefit from them.
- **Integrate MAS across all grade levels and disciplines.** While typically seen as a history course, MAS is, in fact, interdisciplinary. MAS also lends itself to collaborative, inquiry and project-based learning.
- **Ensure that MAS includes texts and literature by MAS authors.** Students respond positively when they see themselves authentically reflected in the curriculum and have role models that come from similar cultural backgrounds.
- **Create assignments that allow for student-centered learning such as oral history projects with family members and the larger community and youth participatory action research.** One of the most significant aspects of MAS, aside from its content, is the opportunity for students to be active learners.
- **Provide teachers with the needed time and support to develop new MAS curriculum materials.** As already noted, teachers are under pressure to “teach to the test;” if they are going to make MAS an integral part of their curriculum, it must be prioritized by their supervisors.
- **Help teachers find open educational resources and publicize MAS efforts across schools and districts.** Many schools – particularly those in low-income neighborhoods, have limited access to curricular resources. Teachers need to be directed to central sites where they can obtain needed materials for teaching MAS.

- **Provide ongoing mentorship and professional development opportunities for in-service teachers, keeping in mind that they need time and incentives to do this additional work.** Even the most experienced teachers need ongoing opportunities to continue learning and to engage and collaborate with other educators. Given the professional load that teachers already are subject to, many teachers simply cannot take full advantage of these opportunities unless they have release time or stipends.
- **Create opportunities for parents and community members to engage in MAS.** Although it is critical that this work is supported in schools, it is equally important that community members have places to come together and learn about their history and explore their cultural identities.

Educational Policymakers, Funders, and Researchers

- **Support the creation of state and national standards so that MAS is an integral part of the K-12 curriculum and not relegated to an elective.** While the use of national standards – such as the Common Core – is highly disputed among educators, the reality is that our schools must pay attention to them and curriculum that does not align in some way to these standards will continue to be marginalized.
- **Read the research – and support additional research – that demonstrates ways in which ethnic studies and MAS is effective in engaging “at-risk” students, keeping them in school, increasing their academic achievement, and broadening educational and career goals.** There will always be resistance to educational initiatives that challenge the status quo. Multi-method high quality research is needed to support the assumption that MAS can actually improve academic achievement and engagement.
- **Challenge the idea that having students learn about MAS history and culture is divisive and unpatriotic and be brave enough to support a more expansive education curriculum, even if it is critical of systemic inequity and injustices.** Acknowledging that the United States has a history of inequality and discrimination does not detract from all of the admirable qualities of its democracy. Indeed, it is due to the checks and balances on the democratic process that we strive to be a better nation.
- **Consider ways that MAS is important not just for students of Mexican-American descent and identity but will benefit all students by presenting a more accurate and nuanced understanding of U.S. history, literature, and culture.** Much of the “multicultural” education that takes place in public school falls prey to a Black/White dichotomy. While the history of African Americans must be a vital part of the K-12 curriculum there is room to include the experiences of other minoritized groups. It is not either/or.

“Having dedicated courses like MAS helps in the accessing of information that is hidden or in the margins. I believe that representation is critical for students. When they ‘see’ themselves in history they feel validated. They learn that Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Tejanos, and Chicanos did and continue to make significant contributions to society.” —Elizabeth Rivas

Appendix A: Leadership Profiles

MAS EDUCATORS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT



Lilliana Saldaña

Associate Professor of Mexican American Studies, The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA)

A self-described activist-scholar, Saldaña created and directs UTSA's bachelors' degree program in Mexican American Studies. Saldaña is also the Co-Director of UTSA's MAS Teachers' Academy and directs a dual credit MAS course for San Antonio high school students.



Anthony Gonzales

Teacher, Marshall High School, Northside Independent School District (ISD), San Antonio, Texas

Gonzales is a Chicano teacher, activist, and community organizer born in San Angelo, TX. For the past seven years, he has taught U.S. History at John Marshall High School in the Northside ISD. Gonzales was the first teacher to teach Ethnic Studies: Mexican American Studies at Marshall, one of the original Northside ISD schools to incorporate MAS. He also established and sponsors the Mexican American Studies Student Association, the first of its kind at Marshall. He received teacher of the year for the 2018-2019 school year. Gonzales is working to create MAS lesson plans that other teachers can easily adapt.



Elizabeth Rivas

Instructional Coach/Curriculum Coordinator, Harlandale ISD, San Antonio, Texas

Rivas is a native of San Antonio, Texas. She earned a Ph.D. in Culture, Literacy, and Language from The University of Texas at San Antonio. In addition to her position in the Harlandale School District, Rivas works with the Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI) in promoting the contributions of Mexican American and Chicano activists. She is also a lecturer for The University of Texas at San Antonio where she teaches courses that center on Mexican American Studies and ethnological theory.



Andres Lopez

Teacher, Stevens High School, San Antonio, Texas

Lopez has taught English Language Arts for over 15 years. For the last four years, he has taught on-level and dual credit English at Stevens High School where he established San Antonio's first high school Mexican American Literature class. Recently, he was recognized as Northside ISD's 2018 Educator of the Year and was the district's 2018 nominee for the Trinity Prize for Excellence in Teaching. Lopez is also an active member of Somos MAS, a group of educators organized to support MAS in San Antonio and Texas.



Araceli Manriquez

Mexican American Studies, middle school dual language teacher, Bonham Academy, San Antonio, Texas

In addition to teaching social studies, Manriquez started a Mexican American Studies class and helped start a Mexican American Studies summer camp (MASLI) on her campus for middle and high school students in her district. The two-week camp focuses on MAS history, music, arts and crafts and features prominent Mexican American speakers. In addition to her work and passion for ethnic studies, she is very involved with her teacher's union, the San Antonio Alliance.



Anita Cisneros

Dual Language, Mexican American Studies teacher, Bonham Academy, San Antonio, Texas

In addition to teaching elementary school, Cisneros is a longtime activist who created the first MAS community-based program for youth called the Xicana/o Education Project. She also hosts an after-school Mexican American Literature Circle for the larger community, including many parents. Two of her mottos are "Mi compromiso con mis estudiantes va más allá del salón de clase. My commitment to my students goes beyond the classroom" and "Orgullosamente Bilingüe. Proudly Bilingual." Her community activism continues to form her practice as a teacher.



Genevieve Rodríguez-Quiñones

Literacy Coach, Las Palmas Elementary School in Edgewood ISD, San Antonio, Texas

Rodríguez-Quiñones is an advocate for empowering student voice, seeking equity and representation for all, and is passionate about providing students access to quality multicultural children's literature. Above all, she is a mother, wife, sister, hija, educator, y maestra...always learning.



Enrique Alemán

Lillian Radford Endowed Professor of Education and the Director of the Trinity Tomorrow's Leaders Program, Trinity University

In 2013, Alemán executive produced and co-wrote "Stolen Education," a documentary about the forgotten history of a little-known federal desegregation court case from the 1950s, *Hernandez et al. vs. Driscoll Consolidated School District* (1957). Alemán is also co-editor of *Transforming Educational Pathways for Chicana/o Students: A Critical Race Feminista Praxis*.

“The fact that there is no standard curriculum out there makes it difficult for teachers who want to teach MAS but don’t necessarily have the background in MAS. I can convey information to my students, but how am I going to check that they are engaged? My goal is to create a package so that a brand-new teacher who has a million things going on can take this and everything is ready for them. They can add whatever they want and teach a well-developed MAS course.” —Anthony Gonzales

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