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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between community stability and school conflict in a small rural Texas school district. Data included school district records; newspaper archives; and interviews with school district officials, community members, and officials of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Texas County (a pseudonym) is composed of two communities (Richards and Burnett) with an overall ethnic composition of 55 percent Anglo, 35 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent Black. Richards and Burnett have seen their economic base seriously eroded in recent years, and in 1983, their school districts were consolidated to form the Texas County Consolidated Independent School District (TCCISD). Conflict began in TCCISD in 1990 over minority hiring practices and the lack of Hispanic teachers. The conflict evolved from charges of racism against the superintendent and a principal to a concerted effort backed by LULAC to change the way in which members of the TCCISD board were elected (to allow more Hispanic representation). The conflict within TCCISD is analyzed in terms of the "principles of rural organization": (1) centripetalism, the tendency of various social and economic forces to centralize themselves in one location; (2) inclusiveness, which works to hold community residents together; and (3) social distinction, by which the residents of one rural community distinguish themselves from residents of another rural community. Economic decline and the changing ethnic composition of the school district have broken the assumed cohesiveness of the community along racial and ethnic lines and forced into the open Hispanics' feelings of exclusion. (KS)

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COMMUNITY STABILITY AND SCHOOL CONFLICT: THE INFLUENCE OF THREE SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS

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Community Stability and School Conflict: The Influence of Three Socioeconomic Factors

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This study explores the relationship between community stability and school conflict in a small rural community. It utilizes three interrelated socioeconomic factors as indicators of community stability and is based on two corollary assumptions: (1) the less stable a rural community is, the more likely it will be to experience episodes of community conflict; and (2) given the centrality of the school to the life of the rural community, the probability that community conflict will sooner or later involve the school is high. "Stability," as used here, refers to the presence of general community consensus about core values and purposes for the school and general agreement about the contribution the school makes to the community.

Bryant and Grady (1990) have examined the impact of community factors on the stability of the rural school district. The authors identify four possible causes of school district instability. These are: (1) The school organization itself is poorly constructed or operated; (2) School personnel are incompetent and continue to perpetuate incompetence; (3) The wider community has reached a state of instability that reflects itself in the performance of the school district; and (4) The demands of state agencies produce particular dysfunctionalisms for the rural school district. Bryant and Grady's work is focused on the third source of instability and they have isolated three socioeconomic factors which appear to be determinant of stability in rural communities. The factors, or "principles of rural organization" (pg. 21) are: *centripetalism*, which is the tendency of various social and economic forces to centralize themselves in one location; *inclusiveness*, which works to hold community residents together; and *social distinction*, by which the residents of one rural community distinguish themselves from residents of another rural community. When the influence of centripetalism, inclusiveness and social distinction are strong, a community tends to be stable and school conflict is kept at a low level of intensity. But as the influence of these factors begin to wane, the community become less stable and heightened levels of conflict in the local school district may result.

Several forces can undermine the stability of rural communities. The decline of the community's business hub, the erosion of the wealth of the surrounding geographic area from which the community draws economic support or the shifting of economic, social and organizational ties out of the community all tend to weaken the principle of centripetalism. A rural community's inclusiveness breaks down when significant numbers of community residents no longer feel welcome to participate in community activities. "Old" family versus "new" family conflicts, age stratifications and significant shifts in ethnic or racial balance in the community all work against the principle of inclusiveness. Breakdown of the social distinction principle occurs when members of the community are no longer able to distinguish themselves from residents of a neighboring community. Distinction among residents of neighboring rural communities are normally made on denominational, ethical, ideological or ethnic/racial criteria, which serve to establish a social frame of reference for rural community members. A major element in the maintenance of a separate community identity is the existence of a public school.

Community instability will inevitably be reflected in the school and its performance. Such things as high teacher and administrator turnover or the inability to attract quality school board candidates are signs of problems within the school which may have their origin within the community itself. Other indicators include a growing lack of agreement within the community about the core values

which drive the decisions of teachers, administrators and school board members. In some instances, differing perceptions about the school and the contributions it makes to the community may be accompanied by a loss of moral or financial support for the school and in the extension of community-wide conflict into the school (Bryant and Grady, 1990).

Understanding the Rural Context.

Rural communities and schools have undergone significant changes in the past twenty-five years. The impact of these changes can best be understood by considering four factors. They are : (1) the wide diversity of rural communities and rural schools; (2) the role of the idea of "community" in shaping rural communities and schools; (3) the social and economic changes effecting rural communities; and (4) the dynamics of community conflict. Taken together these forces have reshaped the context in which rural communities and rural schools exist.

Rural diversity. The rural ideal is deeply embedded in American mythology. The term conjures up images of a peaceful, bucolic existence where life is regulated by the cycle of the agricultural year and relationships of kith and kin run deep and strong. Tonnies' division of communities into *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is the classic statement of the qualitative difference between agricultural and urban life-styles (Lutz and Merz, 1992). But the reality of rural communities is far more complex and varied. Rural communities encompass a wide variety of economic conditions and populations (Bender, 1985; Reid, 1988). While the image of rural communities as being predominately agricultural may be accurate as far as land usage is concerned, it is not accurate in terms of employment. Few rural families currently live on farms or derive their livelihoods either directly or indirectly from farming (Reid, 1988). In most rural communities, other economic activities, e. g. manufacturing, mining, forestry products, provision of governmental services or income derived from retired residents, have long supplanted farming (Bender, 1985).

Rural school districts are as diverse as the communities they serve. Several useful classification schemes for rural schools can be found in the literature. Gjelten (1982) has developed five classifications of rural school districts based on specific socioeconomic, cultural and demographic characteristics of the community. Nachtigal (1982) grouped rural school districts into three categories according to the predominant values and political structures of the rural community. Croft (1986) employs the independent variables of isolation and county economic base and the dependent variables of selected school characteristics, selected teacher attributes and selected student attributes to generate his typology of rural schools, while researchers at the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (1988) utilize indicators of rural poverty to identify rural schools and students who are "at-risk." Both rural communities and their schools contain an amazing diversity of social, economic, cultural and educational contexts.

The meaning of "community." Classifying rural communities and rural schools districts according to some readily observable and verifiable basis is important. But categories and typologies do not address the meaning of the concept of "community." As Bender, (1978) points out "...the word community has quite positive connotations that are associated with visions of the good life." (pg.3) The concept of community is one of the most widely used ideas in sociological inquiry, but it is also one of the more difficult to define. The most commonly accepted definition of community is an "aggregate of people who share a common interest in a particular locality." (Bender, 1978, pg.5) Thus the idea of a community carries with it connotations of a common life of shared interests lived in a specific place and time. But the concept of community is more than a place or locality. There is also a connotation of a particular quality of human interactions in a community, of a system of social relationships which are characterized by mutuality and strong emotional bonds. Thus, community is more than a place. It is "where community happens" (Bender, 1978, pg. 6). A viable sense of community identity is an important element in maintaining cohesion and stability

in rural communities.

A sense of community identity is also central to the socialization of children and to the perpetuation of family life in the rural community. This aspect of the sense of community is illustrated by Coleman (1987), who uses the term "functional" to describe the ideal cohesive community. A functional rural community is marked by a close network of kinship and social ties which supplies what Coleman calls "intergenerational closure." This network, in which children's friends at school have parents with friendship links to the family, provides information and support to the child's parents when needed. In a functional rural community, children also have contact with adults other than their parents who assist in the child's upbringing and socialization. For example, an older adult male may take his own grandson and one or two of his grandson's friends on a fishing expedition transmitting not just fishing lore, but also community values and expectations. The advantage of intergenerational closure in a functional rural community is that parents have a support system grounded in a network of relatives and friends which provides norms for governing the child's behavior. The downside of intergenerational closure is that children can become isolated from the outside world and ill-equipped to face its challenges should they leave the close knit rural environment. Functional communities also possess a consistency of values which develop over time in daily face to face contacts among residents. Value consistency "grows through the interactions that are found in a functional community and when it exists facilitates the norms that grow up in such a community" (Coleman, 1987, pg. 196).

Two phenomena contribute to the weakening of the functional community and hasten the process of disintegration. In communities where young well educated parents work and socialize in a nearby urban center, they often cease to identify with the values and people of the rural community in which they live. This results in weakened ties to other community members and to discontinuity between the generations. The rapid growth of communications media and technology also hastens community disintegration. Television, radio and videos now confront rural children with values and norms of behavior that may differ sharply from those of their parents and of the community in which they live, thereby legitimizing competing and sometimes incompatible values. Miller (1991) concludes: "...functional rural communities are an endangered species." They straddle two worlds:

On the one hand, they strive to maintain a world characterized by small-town values where residents look out for one another and kinship and friendship run deep. On the other hand, they face the continual encroachment of urban America and the need to somehow adjust to impending change (pg. 19).

Maintaining a separate and unique identity has become a constant struggle for many rural towns and communities.

Social and economic changes. Far too many rural communities are beset with severe social and economic problems. Isolation, poverty, unemployment, lack of economic opportunity, inadequate financial resources for community development, declining populations, changing age distribution, marginal educational systems and absence of political influence with state and federal authorities are common to many rural communities. Of course not all rural communities are in decline. Rural communities situated within the periphery of an urban center or fortunate enough to possess some degree of natural beauty can be relatively prosperous. But too many rural communities in all sections of the nation are experiencing symptoms of severe decline.

Some of the most perplexing problems confronting rural communities stem from a declining economic base. Poverty, population changes, long-term unemployment and lack of resources for community development are all related to a significant decline in rural economies. This decline is long-term rather than recent. Brown (1989) notes that many rural communities still suffer from the

effects of the recession of 1979-82. Unemployment in timber, manufacturing, mining, textile, clothing and leather goods industries, all located in rural areas, rose sharply. By 1986, when unemployment rates began to decline in metropolitan areas, they actually rose in nonmetropolitan sections of the country.

Poverty remains a persistent problem confronting rural communities. Rural residents have historically been less affluent than their urban counterparts and that situation continues. (Brown, 1989; Stephens, 1988; Reid 1988; Swanson, 1990). Moreover, the nature of poverty in rural areas differs from poverty in metropolitan centers. The rural poor are more likely to be elderly, white and to reside in the South. Poor rural families tend more often than their urban counterparts to be "working poor" with two or more members employed. Rural poverty is also more widespread among youths, among persons over 80 years of age and among families headed by a female.

Problems of persistent poverty are reflected in demographic changes occurring in rural areas. Among the more notable of these are the age distribution of the rural population, differences in household composition and in fertility rates for rural females and differences in educational attainment between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan populations (Fuguitt, Brown & Beale, 1989; Reid, 1988; Brown, 1989). Rural communities contain a higher proportion of children, fewer young adults and middle-aged persons and larger proportions of elderly people. Thus, the population of rural areas tends to have large proportions of young and school-aged children and of the elderly. Fuguitt, Brown and Beale (1989) attribute this characteristic to the higher fertility rates of rural females, the aging in place of rural residents and the net increase of in-migration of elderly persons. The bi-modal distribution of the rural population places a dual burden on rural communities. On the one hand, the increase in the proportion of elderly persons raises issues of economic support and dependency. On the other hand, large number of youth present rural communities with greater need for elementary and secondary education facilities.

Differences in educational attainment also characterize rural and metropolitan populations. The amount of formal education has increased in recent years for both groups. However, rural residents still lag behind in terms of high school completion rates and college attendance. These disparities have implications for the economic future of rural communities.

The social and economic changes buffeting rural communities contribute to a weakening of the ties which hold residents of rural communities together and which are so critical to the community's survival. Miller (1991) describes this phenomena and labels it "dis-integration." Dis-integration occurs when residents of a rural community, who have traditionally demonstrated a high level of cohesion and self reliance, begin to go outside the community for needed goods and services which the community itself can no longer provide. Going outside the community loosens the connections between rural residents (Kohlenberg and Kohlenberg, 1990; Hobbs, 1988) and results in the loss of the sense of belonging to and identifying with the rural community. Not surprisingly, the degree of disintegration in the rural community may be directly related to the community's proximity to an urban center. The farther away from an urban center the rural community is located, the better it is able to maintain its unique character.

Community conflict. The result of social and economic changes in rural communities has been to increase the probability that conflicts will occur. In communities of all sizes, conflict tends to grow out of a set of well-defined conditions and to follow a general pattern from initiation to conclusion (Coleman, 1957). Among the conditions contributing to conflict in communities are such things as differences in economic structure, changes in community values over time, the development of a system of heterogeneous values, population shifts and the continuation of past community cleavages. Once begun, conflicts tend to take on their own dynamic. This includes the expansion of issues from the specific to the general, the introduction of new issues and the escalation of

disagreement to hostile, often personal antagonism. Within the community itself social relationships polarize. New community leaders, frequently people who have heretofore been inactive or on the fringes of the community, appear. Finally, community organizations are drawn into the conflict. Organizations often experience two kinds of pressures in a community conflict. Both sides of the controversy will pressure the organization to join on their side or the organization will be pressured to remain neutral, either because there are strong opposing viewpoints held by members of the organization itself or because the organization must maintain a public position within the community which might be threatened by taking part in a partisan conflict.

Because of size, communication channels and tightly woven kinship patterns, rural communities tend to exaggerate the dynamics of conflict. Moreover, in rural communities, conflict often centers around the school. Not only is the school frequently the largest single institution in the community, but it is also highly visible and therefore offers a readily accessible arena for disputes over political, economic and social issues to be fought out. Several studies of school conflict in rural communities can be found in the literature. Grady and Bryant (1991), for example, examined a set of "critical incidents" involving superintendents and school board members in rural communities which frequently resulted in superintendent turnover. They discovered that these incidents tended to center around: 1) efforts by local school board members to pressure the superintendent into giving special treatment to the board member's family and friends or to employ board member's relatives regardless of qualifications; and 2) misunderstandings of appropriate board member roles in school governance. Grady (1992) subsequently investigated a long standing conflict in a small Nebraska school district which was precipitated by the termination of a seventeen year veteran teacher. The dismissal led ultimately to the superintendent's termination, a recall campaign against school board members and the placement of the school district into receivership. The conflict damaged professional and business careers, had serious emotional impact on participants and dealt community cohesion a possibly fatal blow. Lutz and Lutz (1987) have described the disruption within a rural community which grew out of the school board's refusal to comply with new state-mandated reforms. The conflict was grounded in deeply held values about who should control the educational programs and policies of the school. Community beliefs that learning is not important, that hard subjects need not be studied and that extracurricular activities have first priority came into conflict with state mandates for a more rigorous curriculum and for stricter high school graduation requirements, especially the requirement that students must master 70% of a subject's essential elements before being allowed to participate in extracurricular activities (called the "no pass, no play" rule). Even in relatively calm rural communities, superintendents commonly complain that board members interfere with the daily operations of the school district, ignore established channels of authority, decline to follow recommendations on the employment of personnel and emphasize athletic activities at the expense of academic programs.

Research Approach

This is a case study of conflict in a small rural Texas school district. This particular district was selected for the study based on several criteria, including the terms of the consolidation agreement which created the district a decade ago, the particular nature of the conflict taking place within the community, and the relevance of the conflict to other rural Texas school districts. Data for the study was gathered through an examination of pertinent documents, including school district records and newspaper archives. In addition, interviews were conducted with school district officials, especially the superintendent and the school board chairman, both life-long residents of the community, and another long time school district administrator. Also interviewed were community members, citizen participants in the controversy and officials of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

A Rural Community in Conflict.

Location and Demographics. Texas County (a pseudonym) is located in the south central part of Texas. 50 miles from a metropolitan area containing over one million people. The county is one of the oldest in the state and the site of some of the earliest Anglo settlements in Texas. Organized in 1836, Texas County residents were active in the Texas Revolution and the county celebrates the fact that 32 of its citizens were the last volunteers to break through the lines of the encircling Mexican Army to join the defenders of the Alamo. There are over 80 recognized historic homes and markers in the county, as well as two state parks. Texas County is proud of its part in the creation of the Republic of Texas and the state that succeeded it.

Texas county is primarily agricultural, with corn, peanuts, grain sorghums and some wheat growing in the rich soil of the bottom lands lying along the Tejas River and its tributaries. Gas and oil production is still carried on to a limited extent, but the major mineral wealth of the county consists of clay, which is turned into tiles and clay pots. Agribusinesses, especially poultry production, several feed lots and one boot manufacturing plant round out the economic base of the county. In 1990 the population of the county totaled 17,881 persons. Anglos made up 55% of the population, Hispanics 35% and Blacks 9%. American Indian, Asians and "Others" comprised the remainder of county residents. (Percentages are rounded so will not add up to 100%.) The largest community in the county has a population of 6,553 and there are four other smaller communities, ranging in population from 1,998 to 90. Texas County is fairly typical of the rural counties in this section of the state.

Texas County Consolidated Independent School District (TCCISD) enrolled 966 students grades pre-K through 12 in 1993-94. Students are housed in four school facilities. The high school (259 students) and one of the elementary schools (415 students) are located on a recently constructed single campus in Richards, the larger of the two communities making up the district. Burnett, the smaller of the two communities, lies 8 miles from Richards and contains the middle school (219 students) and one small elementary school of 73 students in grades K-3. The middle school, a stone building originally constructed in 1941, has recently been renovated. The interior has been brightly painted and new carpeting and an air conditioning system installed. A new gymnasium, built in stone to match the original exterior of the middle school, was recently constructed. Ethnically the district's enrollment is 59% Hispanic, 39% Anglo and 2% Black. Hispanic enrollment has been growing in the last few years, due in part to the increase of immigration from below the Mexican border, a scant 150 miles distant. Currently one school board member and five members of a professional staff of seventy are Hispanic. The non-professional staff is about evenly divided between Anglos and Hispanics. The school district is the largest employer in either community. A lack of significant Hispanic representation on either the board or the professional staff in a school district whose students are made up predominantly of that ethnicity is a contributing factor to the conflict.

The voting population of the school district is divided along ethnic lines. The district lies primarily within Texas County, but small parts of it spill over into three neighboring counties. As a total, Anglos comprise 57% of registered voters in the district and Hispanics 40%. In fact, in none of the census tracts of the four counties which are part of the school district are minority voters in a majority. Within the town of Richards, however, Hispanics are the majority voting block, 55% of registered voters versus 40% Anglo. In Burnett, Anglos comprise a slim majority of the voting population, 52% versus 48% for Hispanics. Black voters are a negligible factor in the school district, comprising only 2.9% of the voting population. The dilution of Hispanic voters in the district and the difficulty in electing significant numbers of Hispanics to the TCCISD school board is another source of community unrest.

The ethnic composition of TCCISD is relevant to understanding the conflict within the school district because of the phenomena which Nostrand (1983) calls the "Hispanization" of the United States. Occuring most noticeably in the "borderlands" states of California, Arizona, New Mexico

and Texas, a steady increase both numerically and proportionately of people of predominantly Mexican origin has created a sizeable minority population. It has also resulted in the creation of a distinctive cultural region, where Latin America "shades off" into the United States. States within the borderlands contain sizeable populations of Spanish speaking persons which are both old and deeply rooted and which have made unique contributions to the cultural and economic life of the region. As their numbers have grown, Hispanic citizens have demanded a greater voice in the political and social life of the communities in which they live. Within the state of Texas, this push for a greater voice in community affairs has resulted in dramatic changes in school programs, the ethnic composition of school staffs and the methods by which school board members are selected (San Miguel, 1987).

The Communities. Two separate communities make up TCCISD. The larger, Richards (current population 1,998), is also the newest of the two. The town was platted in 1905-6 on lands granted by the Southern Pacific Railroad. The original platt consisted of 118 acres of land running two blocks wide on either side of the right of way. By the 1920's Richards was a thriving community serving the needs of railroad workers, farmers and ranchers. The community boasted an active business district with over 50 establishments, two banks, a newspaper, a telephone exchange, a two storey hotel and a hospital. Several churches were active in the community. The first public school in Richards was created by the Texas Legislature and opened in 1907. Burnett (current population 471), the smaller of the two communities comprising the district, is also the oldest. Settlers first came to the area in the 1840's, attracted by a large lake which offered as readily available water supply. The lake was used as a holding area for cattle herds moving towards the Chisolm Trail and by local sheep herders. Unfortunately, the lake was overused and had largely dried up by the middle 1930's. The first town was established in 1870 and became an active trading center, featuring a bank, a cotton gin and later a poultry hatchery. There were private academies in the area as early as 1876, but the first public "free school" opened in 1911. Both Richards and Burnett readily fit into Page Smith's (1966) definition of cumulative communities.

As other rural communities, Richards and Burnett have seen their economic base seriously eroded in recent years. Once thriving business districts are now largely boarded up and citizens must go to other larger communities for health care, entertainment and major shopping. Jobs are scarce in both communities. Residents who do find jobs in the communities are limited to working on local farms and ranches or in one of the numerous poultry related business that have sprung up in the area in recent years. The jobs tend to be seasonal and to pay only a minimum wage. These people are the "working poor" of the school district. For better educated members of the communities, or for those who possess land or operate small businesses within the communities, there are job opportunities to be found. Many residents with better educations find employment in high technology, in light industry and in medical services surrounding communities or in the nearby urban center. These jobs, however, require commutes of at least thirty miles one way every day. For residents working in the nearby urban center, the commute means driving as much as one hundred miles a day to work and back. Many residents of both communities are willing to travel these distances because they are native to the area and have strong social and emotional ties to it or because they are refugees from urban areas who value the lifestyle advantages of a rural community.

Some residents simply exist without jobs of any kind, often because of a lack of transportation. As a longtime school district administrator explained it: "This is one of the few places I've seen...[where] you could live without money and no car. You could come to town, get with the people who know what's what, find a little place to rent, either pay later or work for the rent, and head over to the food stamp office. And you don't have to have a car to walk."

The depleted economic conditions of the two communities has resulted in the division of residents into three loose categories based on socioeconomic status. The first, which is largely but not

entirely Anglo, consists of better educated persons who own land, or who operate one of the few remaining small businesses in the communities, or who work in the school district, or who are able to travel to surrounding communities to work in other relatively well paid positions. The second group of citizens, largely Hispanic and frequently recent arrivals to the United States, fill the seasonal and minimum wage jobs available in the community and on the farms and ranches of the adjacent countryside. Finally, there is a category of persons who are unable to find any work and live entirely within the community, rarely able to venture outside of it. These socioeconomic and ethnic divisions places stress on all community institutions.

Consolidation. The Texas County Consolidated Independent School District was created in 1983 through the consolidation of two existing rural school districts. At the time of consolidation, Richards Independent School District had an enrollment of 776 students and Burnett Independent School District had an enrollment of 246. Both districts operated full K-12 programs. Since the communities lay only 8 miles from one another, it was believed that consolidation would provide both communities with a stronger educational program, especially at the secondary level, at a cheaper cost to local taxpayers. More importantly perhaps, the Burnett Independent School District was financially strapped and in need of new facilities. District officials were faced with the choice of either raising taxes significantly or of consolidating. It was they who initiated consolidation discussions with officials of the Richards Independent School District.

Following Texas state law, a Petition of Consolidation was drawn up by the requisite numbers of taxpayers in each of the two school districts and approved by the Commissioner's Courts of the four counties in which the new consolidated district would lie. Clearances were also obtained from the Texas Education Agency and from the United State Department of Justice. (Texas is one of eleven states still subject to the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and no change in the manner of electing any public official can occur without the prior approval of the Justice Department.) An election was held on January 15, 1983. The consolidation question was approved by the voters of both districts. The vote was certified on January 17, 1983 and the election of a new seven member board of trustees was set for April 2. By order of the Commissioner's Courts, members of the new school board were to be elected at large by place. In Texas election of school boards by place is fairly common, especially in rural areas. The process involves assigning each school board seat a number, 1 through 7. Candidates file for a specific seat on the board by number and serve in that numbered place during their tenure. Voting on board candidates is district wide. The Commissioner's Courts ordered that places 1, 2, and 3 on the new board were to be held by residents of the former Richards School District and places 4, 5, and 6 by residents of the former Burnett School District. Place 7 could be to be filled by a resident of either of the two former districts. This division of seats on the board was to be maintained in all future elections. Vacancies occurring on the board between regular board elections were to be filled using the 3-3+1 standard. Thus each community was guaranteed at least three seats on the new school board.

The Conflict. Conflict within TCCISD broke into the open in the summer of 1990, although it had been brewing for some time. The immediate issue was the minority hiring practices of the school district, or rather the lack of minorities hired as teachers, counselors or administrators in the district. At the July meeting of the board, the president of the local chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) challenged the board about it hiring practices, demanding an explanation for the absence of Hispanic teachers in the district. The LULAC president asserted that this lack of appropriate role models contributed to apathy among minority students, created a lack of motivation among minority students and contributed to a high drop-out rate. Before a crowd made up largely of LULAC supporters, the president made three demands of the school district: (1) fill a majority of the then existing nine vacancies with Hispanics; (2) employ a Mexican-American consultant for the sole purpose of recruiting minority educators; and (3) budget \$10,000 for the minority recruiting effort. The demands were backed up by a call for federal mediation assistance and a threat to file a civil rights law suit against the district if numbers of minority professionals did

not increase. Through its superintendent, the district replied that it had made an effort to secure minority educators but, because of stiff competition for a limited pool of minority candidates, had been unsuccessful. The district's inability to pay teachers salaries comparable to those offered by larger school districts also worked against securing minority teaching candidates.

Not satisfied with the reply, LULAC contacted the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice in August of 1990. A letter from CRS dated August 21, 1990 requested a joint meeting between LULAC and school district officials for September 12. The letter also detailed the concerns of the LULAC group, which focused on the underrepresentation of Hispanics on the professional staff of the district and a perceived lack of meaningful career counseling available to minority students. The district agreed to participate in the mediation effort and several sessions were held between the parties over the next few weeks. On October 26 a Memorandum of Agreement and Understanding was signed. The district agreed to make a good faith effort to find and employ minority educators, to involve Hispanics and other minorities in the recruitment process and to consider hiring a minority contractor to recruit minority teaching candidates. The district also agreed to the creation of a Superintendent's Community Advisory Council to insure that all educational issues, including those of minorities, were considered. The parties addressed the counseling issue by agreeing to develop and implement career planning programs and to establish a student financial assistance plan to improve all student's opportunities to pursue a college education or other post-secondary options.

Reaction to the agreement was generally favorable, with both district and LULAC officials sounding optimistic in newspaper interviews. "I have no hesitancy in bringing in folks that are going to help us enhance opportunities for our youngsters," The superintendent was quoted as saying. "We look forward to trying to increase minority representation on our staff." LULAC was also satisfied with the agreement. The local chapter president commented "With the help of the U. S. Department of Justice, we have reached a negotiated agreement that should help solve the problem....It will encourage the school district to try harder to recruit minority teachers." But any residue of good feelings were short lived. In early November an incident occurred which was to involve two district administrators in alleged racial slurs, initiate demands for their immediate resignations or firing and bring forth a Texas Education Agency investigation of the school district.

On November 8 an Anglo teacher in the middle school went to the superintendent with complaints about a sixteen year old eighth grade student urinating on the floor of his classroom. It was the fourth such incident, according to the teacher, and his purpose was to request counseling for the student. According to the teacher's account, the superintendent is alleged to have remarked that "urinating on the floor is an ethnic thing" and refused counseling for the student. The teacher claims to have threatened to take the incident and the superintendent's racial remarks to persons outside the district and in turn have been asked to resign. A week later, the teacher claimed to have been confronted by the middle school principal and asked when he intended to leave. The teacher alleged that he told the principal that he did not intend to leave. The principal was then alleged to remark that urinating on the floor was a "cultural thing" and not to make such a big deal out of it. The teacher became angry and left the building. Local LULAC officials soon learned of the incident and reacted angrily.

LULAC's response was to call on the Texas Education Agency for help. LULAC's local chapter sent a letter to TEA describing the incident and attaching a copy of the teacher's "affidavitt" about his conversations with both administrators. The "affidavitt" consisted of two short, hand written notes and a biographical clipping which was published in the local paper when the teacher was hired. The president of the TCCISD board was also contacted to demand an immediate meeting of the school board. Although the board president was reluctant to schedule a special meeting, preferring to wait until the next regularly scheduled meeting of the board and expressed his strong disbelief that the superintendent would actually make a racial slur, a special meeting was finally

arranged for November 29. The board meeting was a stormy affair, held behind closed doors in executive session. Television cameras from a nearby city were present and there were shots of angry demonstrators demanding the resignations of the superintendent and the principal and interviews with local LULAC officials, the mayor of Richards, an Hispanic, and the teacher involved. During the interviews one of the reporters labeled the student whose actions precipitated this incident as "emotionally disturbed," although no testing had ever been done to substantiate that characterization. The reporter also elicited a comment from one of the student's friends that the boy had bladder troubles and could not control his bodily functions, although no medical evidence was ever presented to substantiate that claim. The Richards mayor addressed the crowd in Spanish and English demanding the immediate ouster of the superintendent and calling for the removal of the board if they were too "sorry and weak" to do it.

When the board emerged after three hours of interviews and discussion, it called the incident a "series of misunderstandings" which contained "no malicious intent to insult any group." The board called for no one's resignation but did add that it had contacted the Texas Education Agency and asked for a complete investigation, during which it pledged its full cooperation. Both the superintendent and the board president emphatically denied that the teacher had ever been asked to resign from the district. LULAC responded to the board through its local president saying that it would accept nothing short of "immediate termination without pay" of the administrators involved.

A Texas Education Agency investigation team was in the district during the first few days of December. The resulting report is dated December 14, 1990. After reviewing the background of the incident and observing that the comments of both administrators, if in fact they occurred, "lacked sensitivity" and could be misconstrued by the community, the report concluded:

The Texas Education Agency is of the opinion that it is the responsibility of the school administration to undertake positive steps to repair the district's damaged relations with the community. It is also of the opinion that it is equally the responsibility of the community to react positively to these steps so that there can be the cooperation between school and community that is so necessary to a successful educational program.

The investigating team strongly recommended that the district utilize the already established Superintendent's Community Advisory Council to develop a mission statement and an action plan to improve community relations. Evidence of compliance with the findings of the investigating team was to be submitted to TEA by February 14, 1991. The required action plan and a revised constitution for the Superintendent's Citizen Advisory Council were submitted to TEA on January 28, 1991.

The district remained relatively quiet for over a year. In August, 1992 a review of progress on the Memorandum of Understanding signed in October, 1990 was held. A representative of the Community Relations Service regional office met with LULAC representatives and the new TCCISD superintendent (the former superintendent died the previous spring) met to review district compliance with the Memorandum. In evidence of its efforts, the district submitted several documents, including minutes of the Superintendent's Community Advisory Committee meetings; vacancy announcements sent to over forty college placement offices and five professional organizations regarding professional vacancies in the district; a complete list of over one hundred applicants for fourteen teaching vacancies to be filled before the start of the 1992 school year; a copy of a letter sent to superintendents of similar sized school districts requesting information about their minority recruitment programs; a copy of the community relations improvement action plan submitted to TEA in January 1992; a plan for a career explorations night to be held for students in grades 6-12 in the fall; an alumni survey; and a sample of an information packet on college scholarship application procedures which was to be distributed to seniors at the high school. For its part, LULAC agreed to assist the district in its recruiting efforts by accompanying district

officials on recruiting trips and by contacting superintendents of two school district which had been particularly successful in attracting minority teachers. LULAC also agreed to assist the district in sponsoring a job fair and in recommending candidates for the Superintendent's Community Advisory Council. The district agreed to draft an affirmative action plan and to submit it to the board at their October meeting. All parties agreed that the district had made a good faith effort to meet both the letter and the spirit of the Memorandum of Agreement.

During the review session, the issue of changing the way school board members were elected was raised. LULAC still strongly believed in the need for more Hispanic teachers in the district, but now had shifted to a demand for more Hispanics on the TCCISD school board. Their chosen vehicle to accomplish this end was to replace the election of board members at-large with a single-member district system. Under the single-member district system, the school district would be divided into at least five separate election districts, with each district having its own board member position. The board member elected from each single member district would have to reside within that district and only voters residing in the district could vote for him/her. Several central Texas School districts have moved to single member districts since 1986 to increase minority representation. The superintendent replied that the district was already looking into the issue and had hired a demographics expert to determine whether or not the move to single-member districts would enhance the potential for electing Hispanics to the school board. The demographer was scheduled to submit an interim report to the school board in October. In point of fact, it was the superintendent who had initiated discussions of single member districts with the school board. His concern that the issue would soon confront the district was based on observations of events in neighboring school districts where Hispanics sought access to positions of power in local governmental agencies. Rather than waiting to be publically confronted on single-member districts or to be sued by LULAC or by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) the superintendent, with the strong support of the Board President, took action.

The demographer's report indicated that the switch from at-large elections to single-member districts would result in the election of at least two and possibly three Hispanics to the board. As the result of the report, the board directed the superintendent to establish a committee to study the data and to make recommendations to the board regarding a possible change in the way board members were elected. The committee consisted of ten citizens, five from each of the two communities. LULAC assisted with the selection of committee members, so that their views were represented. The committee studied the demographic data and held public meetings in both Richards and Burnett to let citizens comment on the proposed changes. LULAC committee members did not appear as members of the committee at the largest and most heated public meeting in Richards on November 30.

During the meeting held in the high school cafeteria, LULAC restated its opposition to continuing any at-large elections and threatened a civil rights lawsuit if the board election process was not changed. The threat of a lawsuit was reinforced by an attorney representing LULAC who told the audience and committee members that "...either you change in a cooperative manner or it will be stuffed down your throats." LULAC spokespersons also claimed that the failure to elect Hispanics to the school board was based on racism in the community and threats by employers to their Hispanic employees. The charge of racism and the use of threats was hotly denied by other community members, who maintained that the whole issue of a change in the way board members were selected could be traced to the disappointment of the President of the local LULAC chapter over her failure to be elected to the board after three attempts. Residents of Burnett were also unhappy with the possibility of losing their three guaranteed seats on the school board. "[T]his is like playing with one set of rules and then someone wanting to change them in the middle of the game and saying they will take their ball away if they don't get what they want," one Burnett resident told the committee. "Its not fair." A representative of the Justice Department, who had been working with the district and the local LULAC chapter since 1990, seemed genuinely

surprised by the hostilities expressed during the meeting, telling a local reporter "I see that there are more deep-rooted feelings than I knew."

The trustees committee presented its recommendations to the board in December, 1992. Their report endorsed the change to a single member district election process but opted to preserve the split residency requirements for board membership. It also recommended that new board elections be postponed until August, 1993, so that the district would have time to acquaint the public with the change. The proposed single member district arrangement would create three school board districts of relatively equal population in the town of Richards and three similar districts in the town of Burnett. Board member districts 2,3 and 4 would be located within the boundaries of the former Richards Independent School District. These would be majority minority districts with minority populations of 66.4%, 70.5 % and 68.8% respectively. Single member districts 5, 6 and 7 would lay within the boundaries of the former Burnett Independent School District and have minority populations of 29.9%, 29.8% and 46.7% respectively. Proposed District 1 would cover the rural area west of the two communities and have a minority population of 29%. If adopted, the plan would assure the election of Hispanics to the school board while preserving the pattern of three seats on the board for each community. The plan was not formally adopted by the board, but it was forwarded to LULAC for their comment in January, 1993. On January 27, 1993, the district was informed that MALDEF had been retained to represent the local LULAC council in taking legal action against the district. Since then, no formal response to the plan has been received from either LULAC or MALDEF, despite repeated requests from the district and its legal counsel. Through informal channels, however, district officials have been informed that LULAC/MALDEF has concerns about the continuation of the split residency requirements and the numbers or percentages of minority voters in the proposed majority minority districts in Richards.

The district has taken no further action on the plan and has maintained the 3-3+1 at large election system for school board members. In the May, 1994 board elections, in which two seats were available, an Hispanic businessman was elected to the board from Richards, receiving 275 votes district wide. The other seat, also representing Richards, was retained by the popular Board President, who received 336 votes district wide. Both candidates ran unopposed.

Analysis

The principle of *centripitalism* holds that in a cohesive small town, various socioeconomic forces tend to centralize. Economically, the small town becomes "the focal point of a bounded region." (Bryant and Grady, 1990, pg. 21.) Residents buy, sell and trade in the town and it is the center of life for both town residents and those living in the surrounding country side. The forces that work against centripitalism are : the decline of the town's business hub, the erosion of the wealth of the surrounding region and the shifting of social and organizational ties to other communities. The principle of centripitalism no longer applies to the communities of Richards and Burnett. The major factor contributing to the weakening of centripitalism is the decline in the economic wealth of both communities and the surrounding "bounded region." The lack of economic opportunity has forced residents to seek employment in other communities or to settle for low paying and seasonal employment. Social and organization ties for many residents are also focused outside of the communities, with residents travelling to larger towns in the surrounding counties or to the nearby urban area for entertainmet, medical services and major shopping. Neither Richards nor Burnett are the exclusive centers of residents's lives any longer.

Inclusiveness is the "glue" that holds small towns together. It measures the extent to which all residents are involved in the social and political life of the town. In traditional small towns local organizations "automatically extend membership priveleges widely to members of the community" (Bryant and Grady, 1990, pg. 23). These memberships provide community members ways to establish a position in the local social hierarchy and to achieve a local social identity. Richards

provides several opportunities for community residents to get involved. There is a Lions Club, a Masonic Lodge and a local historical society, all with small memberships made up predominantly of middle class Anglos and Hispanics. There is a "Frog Cook Off" in October and the Labor Day celebration has been converted into a major activity open to all community residents. Weekly athletic events during the school year, also provide participatory opportunities for all residents. Political participation, especially in Richards, has also been open to all community residents. The former mayor of Richards is an Hispanic and Hispanics and Blacks have served in elected positions in the city government. Over the years, minorities have been elected to positions on the school boards of both communities before consolidation and to the TCCISD Board since consolidation. The problem for many minority residents of the communities is that minority representation has often been sporadic.

Within the school district, sustained participation of minorities has been hampered by the at-large election system. The growing numbers and political clout of Hispanics within the school district will probably change this. Based on the present status of negotiations between LULAC and the school district and on legal action in surrounding school districts, it is reasonable to assume that a single-member election system will replace the current at-large system. This change will institutionalize minority representation on the school board. But beyond this, a positive result of the conflict has been to open up lines of communication between district officials and leaders of the Hispanic community. The conflict has also made district officials, most of whom are Anglos and long-time residents of the communities, aware of ethnic tensions which had existed just below the surface of a seemingly placid community. As the board chairman remarked, "I guess there were things going on out there that I wasn't aware of. But I am now."

Social distinction refers to the ways in which residents of a rural community distinguish themselves from residents of other rural communities. "When the residents of a town are no longer able to distinguish their town from others, a fundamental principle of social organization is violated." (Bryant and Grady, 1990, pg. 24.) Distinctions are normally made on the basis of religious, ideological and ethical criteria which establish a social frame of reference. One of the primary focal points of community distinction is the school. With consolidation a decade ago, the ability to distinguish themselves from the community of Richards disappeared in the minds of many long-time Burnett residents. Feelings of resentment about having their school "taken" from them are still voiced openly. As late as this fall, these feelings surfaced when space limitations necessitated transfer of the third grade class from the school in Burnett to a larger facility in Richards. To many old time Burnett residents, "they" will not be happy until the school is closed. These feelings, of course ignore some very real space limitations at the Burnett Primary School and fail to recognize the dollars spent by the district in renovating and upgrading the building currently housing the districts middle school students in Burnett. Ethnic factors also play a role in the weakening of social distinction. The conflict has impelled some Anglo and Hispanic residents to think of themselves first and foremost as members of an ethnic community rather than as citizens of the towns in which they have lived their entire lives.

Other concepts are also useful in understanding the conflict within the Texas County Consolidated Independent School District. These include: the expansion of issues; the escalation of disagreement to personal hostility; and the emergence of new community leaders (Coleman, 1957).

Expansion of Issues. The original impetus for the conflict was the lack of Hispanic teachers on the TCCISD staff. The conflict evolved through charges of racism on the part of the superintendent and a principal to a concerted effort backed by a powerful state wide organization to change the way in which members of the TCCISD Board are elected. This last effort will likely be successful and will change the way in which the school district operates for a good long time.

Escalation of Disagreement. Frequently a dispute that has begun fairly dispassionately over issues

will escalate into an antagonism focused on one or two individuals. In the TCCISD a conflict that had begun over what some community members saw as the districts lack of effort to recruit minority teachers quickly escalated into personal hostility directed primarily at the district superintendent, who was accused of making racial slurs. That hostility ended only with the early retirement and subsequent death of that superintendent. The current superintendent is a local who was born in Richards and graduated from Richards High School in 1967. He returned to the community after completing college and serving for a short time as a teacher and coach in a neighboring community. He appears to have been successful at deflecting personal hostility and in keeping the dispute focused on issues rather than personalities. At this point it seems unlikely that the conflict will return to the level of personal hostilities.

Emergence of New Leaders. Community conflicts often bring new leaders to the fore, many of whom have not been community leaders before the conflict began. This can be seen in the TCCISD dispute. The then president of the local LULAC chapter who lead the battle against the school district was not an acknowledged community leader before 1990. Even though she had been active in the PTA and with the small LULAC chapter, she failed to be elected to the school board in three tries, despite the fact that she was running in Richards where Hispanics form a voting majority. During the controversy, she served as public spokesman for LULAC and was active in bringing state officials of that organization into the dispute. Since the dispute, she has assumed a statewide office in LULAC. The extent of her community-wide influence seems to have waned as the conflict has wound down.

Conclusion.

Bryant and Grady's "organizing principles" have contributed a strong theoretical framework for understanding and explaining the conflict within the Texas County Consolidated Independent School District. The weakening of community forces undergirding centripitalism, inclusiveness and social distinction have contributed to the conflict that developed in the school district. Of particular importance in this case are the economic decline of the "bounded region" which the school district lies. Economic decline has forced community residents to either seek employment outside of the community or to accept low paying, seasonal employment within the communities. Education, availability of dependable transportation and to some extent ethnicity are factors in determining who works outside the community and who must remain behind. A second contributing factor in the conflict is the change in the ethnic composition of the school district, which has broken the assumed cohesiveness of the community along racial lines. One of the results of the conflict has been to force into the open feelings of exclusion on the part of many Hispanics. What has struck some Anglos most strongly are the depth of those feelings of exclusion on the part of Hispanics with whom they went to school and who they assumed to be "friends." The political consequences of the breakdown of community cohesiveness will soon be felt. TCCISD is a minority-majority school district, even though the two communities comprising it remain Anglo by a slim margin. The shift in enrollment demographics is of recent origin, as is the militancy and concern for their own culture which marked LULAC leadership within the district. Hispanic parents, whose children make up the majority of students, are no longer satisfied to be excluded from the sources of power within the district. This dissatisfaction is evidenced in the drive to change the way in which TCCISD board members are elected. If successful, and all indications are that it will be, that change will alter fundamentally the power relations between the two cultural groups within the district. Taken together, the twin genies of economic and race have produced powerful forces for conflict within this small rural school district.

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