

EWA Radio Episode 9

This transcript has been edited for length and clarity

Emily Richmond: This is EWA Radio. I'm public editor Richmond, here with your weekly guide to what's hot on the education beat.

Welcome back to EWA Radio everyone. I'm joined today by my colleague Mikhail Zinshteyn.

Mikhail Zinshteyn: Hey everyone.

Richmond: Today, we're going to be talking to Francisco Vara-Orta, an education reporter from the San Antonio Express-News. He spent seven months on a project looking into one local middle school's innovative approach to school discipline. With zero-tolerance policies in the spotlight, and the ways they might be contributing unfairly to the so-called school to prison pipeline, Francisco's story is certainly a timely one.

Francisco, welcome to EWA Radio.

Francisco Vara-Orta: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Richmond: First of all, congratulations on a fantastic story. Obviously, a tremendous amount of work went into it. I want to start out by asking you, how difficult was it to negotiate this kind of access? Did you have to make any kind of promises to that school district?

Vara-Orta: That's a great question. I initially met with them to see if they would be open to me being able to have the student's names and photograph them, and said, 'This story isn't going to be told well unless we can get that information, because we really need to put a face on these students. The numbers only go so far.' They said that they would be willing to work with me. For example, some students may have domestic violence situations at home and they may be in the school and the other parent doesn't know they are there. Certain situations like that, we had to work around, but everyone they put me in touch with, and that I was allowed access to, was pretty much a no-holds-barred situation with those students.

Zinshteyn: Francisco, to follow up on that, you used student names and you mention some of their transgressions, but are there larger student privacy concerns in your reporting? For example, is the district clear on whether the paper trail for these interventions are open to the public?

Vara-Orta: As far as I know, usually they are not. There were exceptions made in this case, as far as publishing them in the newspaper, because they felt that it was important to put the student's story out there. To really tell the public what their teachers are dealing with. Normally, this wouldn't be something I could really FOIA and get. In fact, toward the end of the story, I had to go and do typical reporter sleuthing around the school and try to find people that could corroborate what happened to one of the main characters, because they cited family law for not being able to give me the information.

Richmond: Wow. That's really a challenge. I'm curious, what did you have to leave out of the story? Did you observe any student behavior you decided not to write about, because it might influence the reader? Did you have to protect anyone?

Vara-Orta: No. I didn't. That's what made this story so remarkable and I think that's why my editors supported me doing it the way I wanted to do it, even though that was a process and negotiation in my newsroom as well, because it took a lot of time. The only thing I omitted was something all newspapers really still do is, expletives. I couldn't put in the actual words that were being said in front of me, or that I was reading in documents. For example, the N word. The F word. In one way, I kind of wanted to put that in there, because I still think, as a reporter, I was shocked in these classrooms hearing kids say these words, like it was nothing.

Zinshteyn: In the story, you handled that pretty well, I think, in lieu of the N word, you used, 'typical racial slur,' I think that is verbatim what you wrote.

Vara-Orta: 'Commonplace racial slur.' Yes, that's close. I think that people may be able to connect those dots.

Zinshteyn: I thought that was clever. I have a question about the teachers. In your article, you mentioned that a number of teachers have quit over the restorative justice framework, because it's just one more thing added to the pile of obligations that they have, in a time of budget cuts and other demands. Can you talk more about teacher response? Why did teachers really leave? The teachers who do support this, why do they support it?

Vara-Orta: That was a challenge for the story, because I couldn't find the teachers that had left. It would have taken more work than the deadline I was given. Unfortunately, that is kind of something you sacrifice. I put my eggs more in the basket of working with the students and getting their information, because I had such a rare access, I felt.

With the teachers, I relied a little bit more on what teachers told me about other teachers, and what the administration told me about the teachers. Unfortunately, the state is not required to report publicly what the teacher turnover rates are at the campus level. I have it for the district, but I don't have it for the campus. That was one piece I just couldn't get in time. Once I was out there, the corroboration was that it just seemed like one more thing to do. I think teachers, in general, at least in the state of Texas, feel a little bit like they have been slapped in the face, because of all of the budget cuts and some of the other things they feel are being forced down their throat right now. I think they just were kind of fed up and I think this was the last straw for some of them.

Zinshteyn: One of the administrators you quoted said, 'If you're working at a Title I school, these are the sacrifices you have to make.' That really resonated with me, and I'm wondering, as a teacher at a Title I school, if it's not pay that's drawing you, because we have all of these inequitable pay schemes, what is the incentive for teachers to work in districts that are adding more and more? Is it just commitment to instruction?

Vara-Orta: It's that missionary zeal you hear about in education reporting regarding high performing charters in low income areas. In title one schools that are bucking the trends and having great results when it comes to student achievement and graduation rates. You go into the schools themselves, and you can figure out who are the leaders, because they have relationships with students. The students will respond well to them. They want to be engaged by them. Other teachers, you can tell, are a little bit more checked out, and they don't feel like that's their responsibility.

In the story, I felt I could tell that. I tried to tell all these aspects through humans, but that's not always going to get you through a hundred and five inch story.

Rufus Lott is this half-black, half-Latino assistant principal. He's younger, he knows about Drake and can talk about The Source and Hip Hop Magazine and that resonates with those students. He grew up in a very similar community, here in the city. Different side of town, but very similar demographics, and he just remembers that there were no role models.

As someone from a minority background myself, I know what that feels like. To just look around the school and not see anyone in leadership that looks like you. That's where I think this assistant principal felt this missionary-like devotion, to the point where he was comfortable saying, 'I love you,' to a student and admitting that he cried when another one

got sent to alternative school. Which is just not something I hear teachers feel comfortable admitting on the record.

Richmond: Francisco, I want to circle back to something you mentioned, which was that you were shocked by some of the language and profanity you were hearing from students in the classroom. Can you give us a sense of how drastically different is this middle school environment, not necessarily from other middle schools in the district, but from the middle schools that we sort of think about? How different was it from your middle school experience? Have kids really changed that much?

Vara-Orta: I think middle school students, you talk to any of them, they have those baseline problems. What inflames [those problems], I think, is that there is this swagger in their culture, that they think it's okay to talk back to adults and to call each other the N-word and say a certain profanity that I don't remember, when I was in school, I went to private school, I went to Catholic school, so that was strict, but my other friends, I asked them, 'What was it like?' They said, 'Some students would do that, but you wouldn't see it so much until high school.'

The campuses I've toured, some people are probably on their best behavior, but I'm around for several hours. You overhear students and you hear a bad word here or there, but there was kind of a confrontational tone in this campus between the students amongst themselves, and with some of the administrators.

Some would just ignore an administrator and walk out of class when they wanted and just take their time getting to class. They would throw each other signs and looks that I just don't see too often in our school districts here. We have a lot of poverty in our schools in San Antonio. That doesn't surprise me. What did, was that these teachers are dealing with a very confrontational personality. Like they were from the most ghetto background. Although, they were more lower income than some of the other wealthy students in the district, when you really actually get down to their personal stories, a lot of them were not. They were posers. They weren't even from those backgrounds. Their parents both had jobs. It was like they wanted to roll with those folks who were considered 'street.'

Zinshteyn: What do we know about the reasons behind students being suspended before and the drop in the suspension rate after these interventions? Is this a matter of creating a school culture where administrators are more lenient on students, or has behavior actually changed among the student population?

Vara-Orta: The jury is still out on that one, because they are in the middle of this pilot project. Previously, it was all zero-tolerance. Sarah Kline, who is the teacher in the story ... I wanted to pick people that I felt told a lot about the story, so I couldn't put a bunch of teachers in there, as much as I wished, but I did speak to several. Sarah Kline talked about when she got there the first week, she was zero tolerant. That's what the district essentially said, that's what she was taught in education school.

Zinshteyn: What's an example of zero tolerance?

Vara-Orta: If a student gets up out of their chair at the wrong time. Send them to the office. Write them up. That's zero tolerance. They say something, in maybe a disrespectful tone. Write them up. Send them to the office. They were checking their cell phone when they weren't supposed to. Write them up. Send them to the office. It became this cyclical process. Almost a mechanical reaction to when a student was doing something that generally people would think they shouldn't be doing, because they should be focusing on learning. Then if they got a little confrontational with them, not so much in Sarah's case, but like in the other assistant principal's case, Kevin, he was this coach, shaved head. He looked like he could roll with a biker gang. He talked to me and he was a really nice, gentle guy, but he said when he first got there, he felt like he had to be that real tough love football coach, and that just rubbed the students the wrong way.

If they got confrontational in his face, he would get right back, because he thought he had to, to kind of make them submissive. They weren't being submissive. Then they were just getting suspended, because that's all he knew what to do at that point.

Zinshteyn: Are you seeing a behavioral change among students. Were you at the school before these interventions were implemented, or did you hear from administrators, 'Yes, the attitude among the student body has changed.'

Vara-Orta: Yes. I had to corroborate it several ways. I talked to administrators, teachers, and students about how behavior has changed. In some cases yes, and in some cases they didn't. Some students relapsed. Others like Jaylen, who is one of the principle characters, he has continuously shown a sustainable change in behavior. I followed him for all of this last semester, all of spring. Other students kind of had hiccups here or there, where they would act up a little. Like one of the administrators would hear them give a little attitude and they would be like, 'Hey, keep it in line,' but they wouldn't write them up. With Jaylen, he was kind of

viewed as a model student, which puts a lot of pressure on him. I think they are still learning and they are still 12, 13-year old boys that are trying to figure out themselves. Jaylen was an example of someone that sounds like he got it, he understood the importance of talking out your problems. How simplistic it may seem and how even 'girly' it may seem, to some degree.

There is a macho culture there amongst the boys. He has seen that these circles have improved his relationship with his friends. He didn't realize that him gossiping was hurting other people and causing fights between others. It was when I talked to him and asked him why, that it really seemed like something clicked. He really realized how his behavior wasn't just hurting him, it was hurting people around him, that didn't want that behavior, but were acting out too. Getting into fights, because of what he was saying. They felt they needed to defend themselves.

You hit it right on the head about climate. It's about climate change in that school. Not the scientific climate change, but by changing the school climate. Make it into a more positive environment. Where learning is appreciated. Where it is prioritized. It's not about who is going to be the biggest or baddest, or did you hear this about this person. Trying to minimize that and get students to appreciate the value of paying attention in class and being respectful of one another.

They are also growing up in this culture that is finally, I think, hitting a lot of people about technology and just how easy it is to bully people. How the internet has created this sea of commenters with negative comments. They deal with a lot of critical comments about one another that follows them out of school on Facebook or Twitter. A lot of these kids start getting phones at that age. They have to kind of defend themselves all the time, even outside of school, and so they bring it back to school with them the next day.

Richmond: I think that's really what's different. I think it's the immediacy of the bullying and the immediacy of the back and forth has given like an amplified time frame to all of these interactions. Something that would have taken a week to play out at my middle school now happens in a matter of seconds. Just because it pings so quickly. The information is shared so fast. I think you're right, that has definitely given this sort of an accelerated tension.

Vara-Orta: It has. It's hard to understand, I think that's why these administrators are having a difficult time. As a reporter, I wanted to, of course, stay third party and as independent as possible. Why I felt a sense of trust in doing

this story and working around some of the parameters with law and access. Which, again, I had more or less great access. I came several times and spent the whole day there. I didn't have someone following me around all the time. The administrators were very aware this could fail. They said, 'Well, it's between just letting things stay the way they are, or at least trying something, and if it doesn't go well, or if it doesn't have the desired result, then at least we say we tried something different, because the way we are doing it is not working. So what other choice do we have?'

They feel like there is no other choice. That's got to be debilitating, if you want to try to raise your test scores and improve teacher retention and students wanting to come to school and learn. The whole environment needed to be changed. That did not happen in one school year. It takes several years.

Richmond: What's going to happen when these kids head on to high school? What kind of discipline program are they going to find there? Is anyone talking about some sort of an alignment in putting in restorative justice to the upper grades?

Vara-Orta: Yes. Exactly. They are hoping to keep the program with them. Kind of like what you do with dual language education. You can start a program in kindergarten and then the goal is that cohort makes it all the way to high school and you just keep building the program with them. That's kind of the same concept here, because these students that are going to start going to high school soon, already are very aware of this methodology. They are more receptive to it. They understand how it works. That's why, in the story, I showed the grading of students, and where they are at on this. Some students still have their wall up. Others are kind of open to it. Others are totally on board with it.

The idea is to keep capitalizing on that with them in high school. They all feed into another high school just a couple of blocks away. Physically, it's not a big difference and it's the same school district that has been supporting this the whole time.

At the same time, they want to start it in the elementary schools. So that all the weight isn't put on the middle school. The idea is, the middle school is the biggest trouble zone for most of these students, but if you can get to them earlier, then you weed out a lot of these behavior problems earlier on. That really helps lessen the number of suspensions and discipline problems in the middle school, according to what the

research has said in other states and from what they feel would be the domino effect if they started this program in elementary school.

Richmond: You mentioned other states in your article. Minnesota was presented as an inspiration for the school district to use this restorative justice framework. Is this happening in other states and are there any differences between what's happening in Minnesota and what's happening at the district you cover?

Vara-Orta: There are not many states doing it holistically. I think, from what my research told me, and from the interviews I did with experts, it sounds like Minnesota was more or less at the forefront of it. Oakland has embraced it. The New York Times has written about Oakland's program. Unfortunately, we don't have the budget to fly me out to either Minnesota, or California. I would have loved to have gone and seen their program, so I could easily see the differences. It's very customized. Each district can do it differently. With thousands and thousands of districts in our state, and in our country, they could look different. I don't really know how exactly how it would look in other states, except that the bottom line is the same, which is, you just talk it out. It's a very simple concept. Instead of spending all the time dealing with the discipline process or suspension, you're going to use as much time, probably, maybe a little bit more, but you build a relationship. It's trying to change the mindset with teachers in these places about that. That it's okay to have a relationship with your students.

Richmond: Francisco, one last question. What are your plans to follow these students? Are you going to check in with them over the coming academic year?

Vara-Orta: I hope so. Since this is in summer, the story ran in summer, I'm waiting for some feedback from the district. I haven't gotten a negative call yet, or an angry call. Which means they probably were receptive to the story. I think they have no reason to be upset about it. I think it's a very fair piece. I forewarned everyone about the format of it and it was going to be somewhat critical and be really raw.

I'm hoping they'll grant me access again. I don't know how these students are going to respond to it, because it's summer and I haven't been able to reach out to all of them, or catch them at their homes. My hope is that, next school year, I'll be able to go in and do that, and follow up and see how their eighth grade, their final year is at Ed White and see, especially in the case of the students that have had some relapses, if there is any

hope for them to get back on the right track and not end up suspended again.

From what the students tell me, there is temptation always around to act up and get back into a fight and argue. It's kind of like an endless story. I could probably have like a whole beat on it. Texas is really known for being that zero tolerance state, when it comes to not just school discipline, but in general, a lot of the criminal justice system. You're shifting a mentality that could have long-term effects in the justice system and how we treat people that are arrested.

Zinshteyn: I just wanted to add to that, you mentioned in your story that 80 percent of Texas prisoners are high school dropouts.

Vara-Orta: Yes. Which blew my mind. I knew there was probably a correlation. That study has been widely accepted by everyone, by Democrats and Republicans. That's what the numbers are. People look at it from all different ways. It's a social cause, as an economic cause, because this costs a lot of money to keep these kids in juvenile and then eventually lead them on the path to prison. I think there is some recognition that even if you don't feel the need to socially help them, economically, this is hurting your workforce and hurting all the money you spend on your state budget.

That's why it's miraculous, that it has bipartisan support, in a state right now, and in a country that's very polarized. I think that's why another reason why I fought so hard to do the story and to get the time to do it. There is pressure to feed the beast, but I think this is the kind of story that, if this program works, the state now believes it can be replicated. It's not a McDonald's-like approach, each district, each campus is going to have to look at it and say, 'Well, we like this, or we don't like that. That works for us, or that doesn't.'

That's why, I think, I've just touched a granule of sand on the beach of this one.

Richmond: Francisco Vara-Orta covers education for the San Antonio Express News. He joined us from their news room. Francisco, thanks for making the time for EWA radio.

Vara-Orta: Thank you so much.

Richmond: I think this project is a great example of why some education stories don't benefit from a quick turnaround. There is just no way for educators, or

the readers to evaluate the effectiveness of a discipline program, so it's been given time to work. I would also argue, that it's certainly worth Francisco making his return visits over the coming school year to see if there has been real change in the campus climate.

Zinshteyn:

Yeah. I think that his project will have a sort of actuarial budget consideration effect on state legislators, because in his reporting, he notes that these interventions cost about \$50,000 per school. Most of that goes to a dedicated staff member. If you consider the price or the cost of locking up juveniles, and likely, they are returning to adult prisons, that versus fifty thousand dollars for one middle school, I think there is a clear budgetary road ahead.

Richmond:

I think that's an excellent point. Certainly that is the tension here. The short term, versus the long term. Are they willing to make the short term investment in that additional counselor for that long term benefit? I think that's something we're just going to have to wait and see.

That wraps it up for this edition of EWA radio. Just a reminder to check out EWA.org for the latest news. Our handy topics pages on everything from teachers to MOOCs, to Federal Education Reform. We've also got our calendar of upcoming events.

Next on the docket, EWA is headed to Dallas, September fifth and sixth for our higher education seminar. Travel scholarships are available to qualified reporters and you can get all of the information online. Have a great week everyone.