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White Rock Valley Vs Richardson ISD : The Fight for Exclusion

In the heart of East Dallas lies White Rock Valley, a 1.4-square-mile neighborhood known for its close-knit community of white-collar families. The neighborhood boasts everything a middle-class family could want: beautifully shaded sidewalks lining the affluent homes, a spacious park and police station nearby, a neighborhood school within a five-minute walk from any house, and even White Rock Lake, just across the street from the community. White Rock Valley is the *perfect* place to live. But behind the seemingly perfect neighborhood lies a dark history of classism and racism that would eventually influence the minds of an entire school district. Through their decades-long actions, White Rock Valley exemplifies a larger issue where powerful individuals use their privilege and affluence to serve their interests, often while employing exclusionary narratives. This isn't an isolated example; it is part of a bigger problem of using race and class for power and influence.

In February 2016, the Richardson ISD Board of Trustees voted to approve a proposal for a \$437.1 million bond referendum. \$47.53 million of the bond would be spent to alleviate the larger neighborhood overpopulation, particularly in the White Rock Valley area. This included the potential of adding a new elementary school and purchasing a new piece of land to accommodate the growth. Richardson ISD decided on a piece of sloped land on the corner of White Rock Trail and Walnut Hill Lane to build a school, prospectively named White Rock Trail Elementary.

"The building is not the factor; it's the nostalgia of the area that makes a school sacred," Bob Templeton, RISD's demographer, stated in a Lake Highlands Advocate interview discussing the current school, White Rock Elementary. Residents of the neighborhood sure did agree. In August 2016, a Facebook group called "We Have A Voice Lake Highlands" was created to oppose the construction of a new elementary school, White Rock Trail Elementary. "We Have a Voice Lake Highlands is opposed to the construction of a school at WRT and Walnut Hill," stated the Facebook page. The social media group allowed a space for frustrated community residents, especially those in the parent-teacher association (PTA) to organize ways and ideas to oppose the addition of the new elementary school (*We Have A Voice Lake Highlands* 2016.) Critics of the new school pointed to the unsafety of its location, as it is not walkable, poor use of the land, and potential for traffic problems.

While the critic's argument looked like an innocent call for action rooted in safety against traffic and narrow

streets, it was actually a ruse to blind outsiders and ignorant followers of their real intentions—exclusionary racism and preservation of their status quo.

The story of White Rock Elementary and its surrounding community stretches back to the 1990s when a *D Magazine* exposé-esque article painted a picture of the institution as a "Norman Rockwell of neighborhood schools." (Miller 1990). White Rock Elementary was the school to enroll your children in, Test scores in math and reading were high, and teachers were active in community events, *D Magazine* explained.

Families in the area often had a traditional structure with mothers at home and volunteering at White Rock Elementary School. The parent-teacher association played a very influential role, shaping not just school activities but the entire surrounding community. They organized book fairs, after-school clubs, and fundraisers for the school. The PTA was extremely influential in fundraising and shaping school policies related to parental involvement.

To further induct community members into their clique, the White Rock PTA created its own blog with a specialty page for "White Rock-isms," the general terminology for the neighborhood's newcomers. The jargon is filled with PTA-related definitions promoting the parental organization.

The consensus of the neighborhood was if a nuclear family moved in, they would be intermixed by their surrounding neighbors into the parent organization and take control over their child's school. It was exactly the encumbered parents, especially those in the PTA, dishing out their time and money, that would start the cat-

alyst of hate and ostracization that would remain engraved in the school's and neighborhood's culture for decades to come.

In March of 1989, the Federal Housing Administration released the New Fair Housing law that replaced the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988, which muddied the waters and puzzled landlords on how to go about housing for families. For decades, landlords were allowed to build "adult-only" complexes that discriminated against families with children under eighteen. (The Fair Housing Act 2022) The Discrimination in Housing *Based Upon Familial Status* under *The Fair Housing Act* states that "landlords may not locate families with children in any single portion of a complex, place an unreasonable restriction on the total number of persons who may reside in a dwelling, or limit their access to recreational services provided to other tenants" (The Fair Housing Act 2022). The act's passing meant landlords could run business as usual, but they no longer held a bias against families with kids. While this affected property owners the most, the hidden afflic-

Before the passage of the non-discriminatory act, White Rock Valley was a majority hub for upper-middle-class white families, it was "the mecca of urban white flight, a trump card for suffering Dallas real estate agents." (Miller 1990) However, succeeding in the act, White Rock Valley saw an influx of low-income families in their school zones. One former White Rock Elementary educator recalls that the neighborhood school had few minority children before *The Fair Housing Act*. Still, after its ratification, the approximately 25 factious children turned into 130 out of about 500 total school kids. (Miller 1990) This offset the cliquish culture of the pretentious neighborhood. Parents were afraid of exposing their children to the customs of the minority children and relayed their harmful views to their descendants. "Apartment kids," a term coined by the parents and the PTA, floated around to describe young children of the \$350-a-month apartments. (Miller 1990) The Parent-Teacher Association did everything seemingly possible to resist the change in their beloved school. When

a low-income child was in need, the PTA turned their heads. Fundraisers, after-school programs, or any tradition that could potentially leave out the children who lived in apartments, the PTA turned their heads and refused to accommodate them. While the exclusion seemed isolated to just the parent-teacher association, it was truly a snapshot of the entire community. Although the stories mentioned in the *D Magazine* stopped making the news cycles for nearly two decades, class and race discrimination and the

"Staff Appreciation Week": PTA-sponsored week to show how much we appreciate the entire staff at WRE.

"Room Reps": Two parents per class help coordinate classroom volunteers and volunteers needed for PTA events.

(White Rock Elementary PTA 2022)

tions affected school attendance zones.

fight for exclusion persisted. Most of the low-income apartment residences eventually got uprooted and moved away from the area when their lease incentive expired or when nearly all of the inexpensive housing fencing the neighborhood of White Rock Valley was torn down in the mid-2000s to make room for the upcoming town square (an incidental occurrence, that happened to benefit the homogeneity of the neighborhood). While the neighborhood's parents never did anything to the school board to spite the change, their community school reverted to its normal, majority-white origins. Compared to nearby elementary schools, White Rock Elementary had a significantly lower amount of low-income, Black, and Hispanic children. In turn, the neighborhood school had the highest standardized testing scores and became one of the most affluent schools in the district, according to a 2016 Dallas Observer article. (Nicholson 2016)

In Richardson ISD, the cap for the elementary school student population is 912. For years, regardless of the population of low-income or minority children, White Rock Elementary stayed under the population threshold. However, in 2017, district officials reported that White Rock Elementary had hit the overpopulation margin and had passed it by nearly 200 students. (Nicholson 2016) Richardson ISD had previous issues with overcrowding before, but with White Rock Valley growing at a high exponential rate, the district sought immediate action to relieve the problem in the form of a bond, or a sum of taxpayer money that, with consent, would go towards fund-

ing repair and construction for schools.

The 2016 RISD bond and the \$47.53 million given to accommodate the growth with its primary use to acquire new land for an elementary school. Richardson ISD decided on a piece of sloped land on the corner of White Rock Trail and Walnut Hill Lane (see Figure 1).

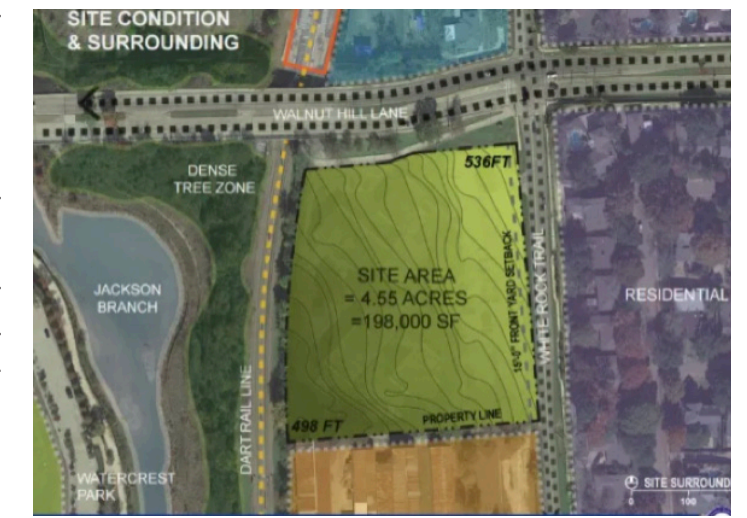


Figure 1 : Site for White Rock Trail Elementary

This intersectional piece of land, infamously described as imperfect for a school, just so happened to be available and available enough for Richardson ISD to purchase to tend to the extreme growth in the surrounding area. The land and possible elementary school would be about half a mile from the nearest school and would squeeze itself into the White Rock Elementary attendance zone.

The new attendance boundary for the White Rock Trail Elementary School (the yellow highlighted area in Figure 2) would dissect the current zone parallel through White Rock Trail, splitting the area basically in half. The parts highlighted in yellow would be the new attendance zone for the

White Rock Trail Elementary. The purple highlighted areas would remain in the White Rock Elementary zone. As the maps show, students' socioeconomic backgrounds in the two attendance zones differed greatly. The streets west of White Rock Trail in the new zone have a median income of around \$45,000 (Kreider 2010), especially the residents in the tail protruding southwest. The houses to the east of White Rock Trail all have a median income of \$125,000 (Kreider 2010). The northwest portion of the map has a median income of \$35,000 (Kreider 2010) while the northeast section has a median household income of \$99,000 (Kreider 2010).

The graphs in Figure 2 display the race distribution and economic disadvantage percentage for the enrollment of White Rock Elementary in 2015-2016, estimations for the new elementary school, and the updated White Rock Elementary projections. The new projections show that White Rock Elementary and the new school would still be majority white. Still, compared to the current enrolled data, the new WRE would increase in Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander students. While it might not have been a big change, the lower student density makes the changes more significant for the now smaller schools. Additionally, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students would be lower for WRE compared to the new elementary school, but both percentages remain relatively low. Both elementary schools would have a student population below the capacity cap, and the two-year projections would have the institutions staying under the threshold.

Despite the new elementary and the

projections being the most effective solution for overcrowding in the area, much to the school district's dismay, White Rock Valley parents were unhappy with the suggestion for change. Even though families of the neighborhood schools were the first to admit that the elementary was overcrowded (most point to the overflowing gymnasium and cafeteria), the idea of possibly changing the attendance zones made the community more than discontent.

Those opposed to the new school also pointed to a 1978 deed referencing the land RISD would use for the new elementary. White Rock Valley residents believe that the nearly forty-year-old deed stating that the potential elementary site could only be used for the following: Single-family detached homes, Bank without a drive-through, Medical/Dental/Optical clinic, and General Office. The deed did not state that the land could be used for a school. However, a Dallas City Councilman (who resides in the area) disagrees. Councilman Adam McGough tells the Lake Highlands Advocate that Richardson ISD is not limited to the previous restrictions (Toler 2016). Despite the deed restrictions being thrown out as a possible obstacle for the new school, the opposing group went straight to the board to continue advocating for their cause.

On May 6, 2016, several White Rock Valley parents objected to the White Rock Trail school, this time with a new line of advocacy, keeping the community together. "I appeal to you to please consider, keeping a neighborhood that made a school amazing together," one parent pleaded to the board. "If we need to figure out a

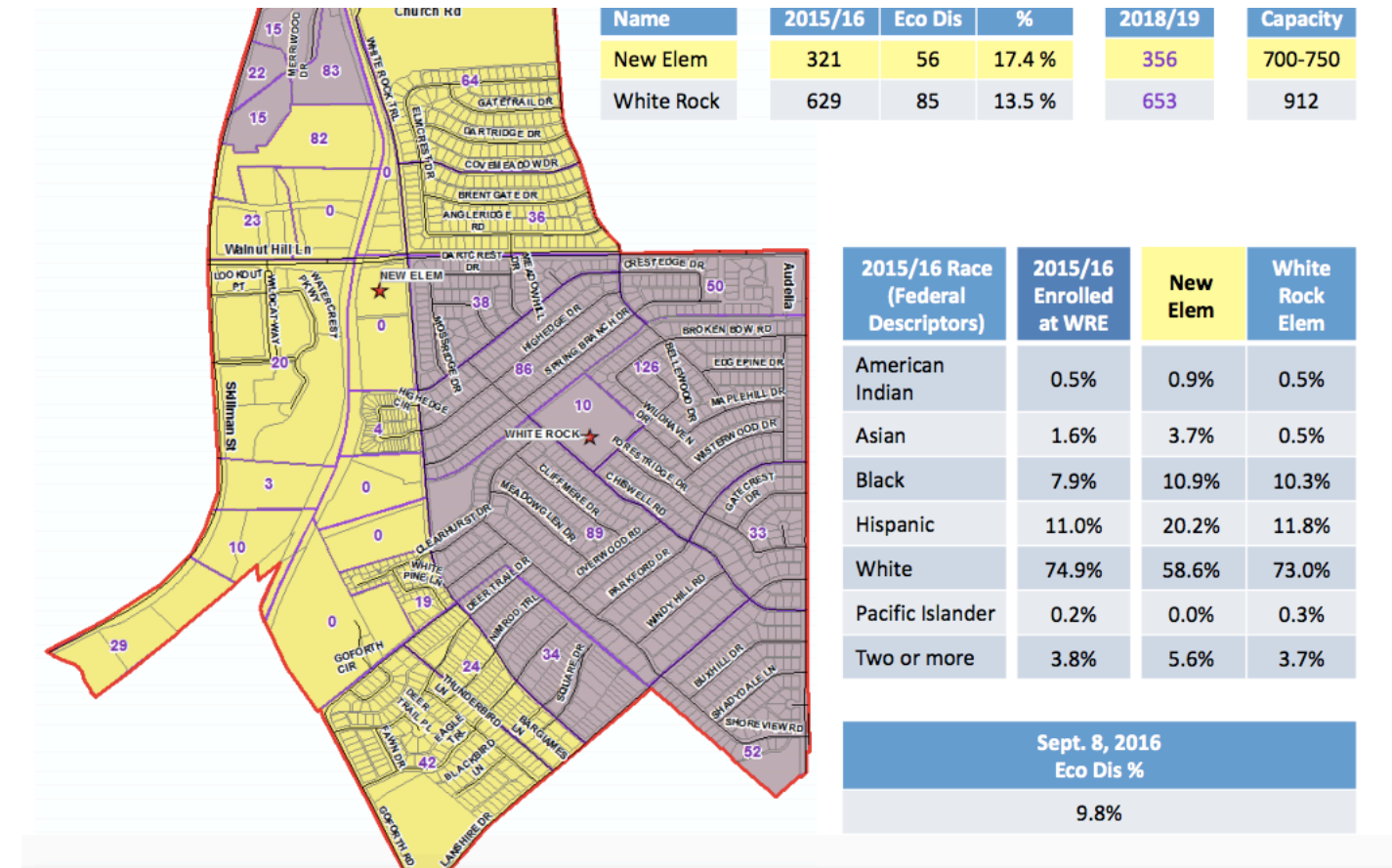


Figure 2: Suggested Attendance lines. (Richardson ISD, 206)

model for other areas to do that, then let's fight to do that, but don't break up that's been working so well," the parent continued. It is to be noted that what the parent pointed out to be "working so well" was years of exclusion from the area, and other parents agreed. "If Lake Highlands' upper-middle-class neighborhoods can put aside their differences and broaden their perspective, they can craft a solution that benefits all kids." Ben Solomon, a parent of a nearby elementary school and supporter of the White Rock Trail school states (Nicholson 2016). Other parents of nearby schools started to grow impatient with the ostracization of the White Rock neighborhood, especially since White

Rock Elementary was the biggest target of overpopulation in the area. Parents of the surrounding elementary schools grew frustrated that the clique-like neighborhood wasn't willing to take on the area's poverty and were keen on keeping it away even if it meant that their children were going to be taught in portable classrooms, located in shacks outside of the elementary school.

However, parents continued to show up to board meetings, threatening to vote against the 2016 bond that would solidify the plans to build the school. Even after parents residing in the district were openly calling White Rock Valley families "smug racists" (Nicholson 2016).

The “We Have A Voice Lake Highlands” Facebook page gained support, even after an opposing group rallied together to fight against the rival ensemble.

Even as the White Rock Valley community continued to fight back against the 2016 bond, their efforts were outweighed by an overwhelming majority of those in favor. Figure 4 shows how only five precincts voted against the 2016 bond, including the southernmost precinct in light green, White Rock Valley. While their attempt to reject the bond failed, those opposing the White Rock Trail school continued their efforts.

Months and months of back and forth continued until Richardson ISD officials broke. On November 17, 2016, Richardson ISD Interim Superintendent, Dr. Jeanie Stone, posted a statement stating that RISD would indefinitely suspend planning for the new White Rock Trail school. Stone stated that the school district would move forward with a solution that worked with the White Rock community. Opposers of the new school celebrated the progress and continued to rally support for their cause.

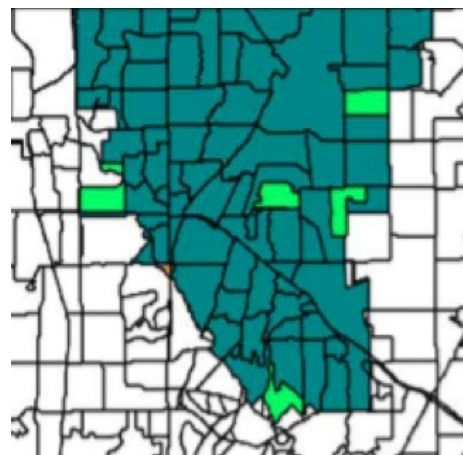


Figure 3: Bond Election Results: Dark Green: In Favor, Light Green: Not in Favor

While the decision was finalized in February of 2017, the story continues. After years of fighting against the creation of the White Rock Trail elementary school, Richardson ISD committed to addressing the overpopulation issue by expanding on the standing elementary and not through building another campus. White Rock Valley parents were ecstatic, with their Facebook page putting out a statement reading, “6 months ago, RISD said that WRT would be built, we had no choice, we would just have to accept it. Instead, we organized, we spoke loudly, we participated, we cared and we challenged RISD. RISD tried to quiet us in the news, they said we were a few loud voices, they tried to use code enforcement to silence us and they went low and knocked our sign down not once but twice. RISD spent \$4.5mm in tax dollars to buy property that could not be used, then they spent more money to hastily demo a building... but in the end, a school will not be built at White Rock Trail.” (*We Have A Voice Lake Highlands* 2017)

Discrimination is not always vocal; it is sometimes extremely subtle and happens only through small actions. While seemingly insignificant in the grand scheme, the neighborhood's small racist acts snowballed into a big push of alienation for marginalized residents. Powerful groups of privileged individuals, such as the White Rock Valley parents, were able to set a precedent that, because of their race and class, they could shape their surrounding area and sway the minds of an entire school district to serve their best interests. White Rock Valley's actions have gone unchecked for decades and will

likely continue to go unnoticed as a new generation moves into the neighborhood, continuing the status quo. The school board's eventual ruling against the new elementary school allowed the White Rock Valley parents to set a precedent that exclusionary and racist practices can win with relentless rallying and intimidation.

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