East L.A. Blowouts: Walking Out for Justice in the Classrooms

By Kelly Simpson | March 7, 2012

In 1967 Mexican American students throughout the Southwest held a 60% high school dropout rate. If they did graduate, they averaged an 8th-grade reading level. Due to Anglo-centric internal school policies many Chicano students were fielded to vocational training or classes for the mentally disabled. Prejudice from teachers and administrators, both liberally-minded and outright bigoted, instigated stereotypes of Mexican Americans that discouraged the students from higher learning. These inequalities in education led to the 1968 East Los Angeles Walkouts, also known as the "Blowouts," which displayed the largest mobilization of Chicano youth leaders in Los Angeles history.

During the 1950s college educated and professional Chicanos, as part of the Education Committee of the Council of Mexican Americans Affairs, challenged the school system through proper channels, including P.T.A. participation and meetings with school officials and legislators. In 1967 Julian Nava was elected as the first Latino to serve on the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) board of education. Despite these efforts, however, Mexican American students continued to trail behind in the classroom.

The 1960s gave hope for social justice within the Chicano community, as civil rights leaders across the nation demanded change and equal opportunities for people of color. Leaders like Cesar Chavez, Reiss Lopez Tijerina and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales were shaking up injustices in the labor system, presenting Chicano youth in Los Angeles with role models to emulate. Meanwhile, a developing iconography of cultural pride and beauty was empowering Chicanos with art and murals throughout East Los Angeles communities.

To combat the failed efforts toward progress in education, young Chicano activists looked to the changing political climate for a more direct approach for action. From March 1 to March 8 1968, approximately 15,000 students walked out of classes from Woodrow Wilson, Garfield, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Belmont, Venice and Jefferson High Schools, all demanding an equal, qualitative, and culturally relevant education. The protesters were blocked by administrators barring doors to the outside, and helmeted police officers either jailed or escorted students to their principals. Two student beatings were reported during the March 6 walkout at Roosevelt.

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The walkouts were a result of both a changing cultural zeitgeist and the collective efforts of organizing groups such as the Brown Berets, United Mexican American Students (UMAS) and The Young Citizens for Community Action (YCAA), two local newspapers: La Raza and Inside Eastside; and Sal Castro, a Mexican American educator teaching at Lincoln. These leaders, along with local clergy, professionals and parents, formed the core of the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), which served as a voicebox for the fight for equal student rights in the aftermath of the walkouts.

In a special meeting held March 11 1968, the students articulated their needs and injustices through the EICC in a list of 39 demands presented to the Los Angeles Board of Education. Chief among the demands were academic changes to the LAUSD curricula and source material in order to reflect Mexican American history and culture. They demanded bilingual education, Mexican folklore in textbooks, and the recruitment of administrators of Mexican descent in schools with a majority Mexican American student body. Additional demands included improvements to school buildings, facilities and the Industrial Arts Program -- designed seemingly to funnel Mexican Americans to low-paying jobs, which required less critical thinking and communication skills.
Unfortunately these demands fell to the wayside along with the public’s attention. An anti-climactic community meeting held at Lincoln High School on March 28 brought 1200 attendees, who witnessed the Board of Education agree with 99% of student demands, yet not follow through citing lack of funding. When 13 of the walkout organizers, dubbed the L.A. 13, were later arrested on felony conspiracy charges for "disturbing the peace," the focus shifted dramatically to legal defense of those being prosecuted rather than fighting for equal education. The EICC dismantled not long afterward due to discontent between groups within the coalition, who ranged from militant youth to middle-class professionals.

If the walkouts weren't entirely successful, they certainly empowered and unified the East L.A. community under a just cause, while awakening the political consciousness of Chicano youth. With placards that read "Chicano Power," "Viva La Raza" and "Viva La Revolucion," they instigated the first public demonstration of Chicanismo en masse. Their demonstrations were covered by the Los Angeles Times and Chicano newspapers across the Southwest, increasing visibility of working-class, Chicano issues. However, with the grassroots support loss and the organization dissolved into merely a symbol, the needs of the working class were soon faded from the spotlight.
In recognition of the courageous efforts by these students we've listed their original demands below, as noted on Latinopia. The success of changes like 1998's Proposition 227, which introduced a Structured English Immersion model which is currently shaping a new generation of elementary school student in Highland Park, reflects great improvements for seeds laid by the student protesters. Yet much and more has changed since 1968. Read the list to learn more about Chicana/o youth struggles in the 1960s, and see how they fit in with contemporary educational needs:

PROPOSALS MADE BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS OF EAST LOS ANGELES TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION

ACADEMIC

- No student or teacher will be reprimanded or suspended for participating in any efforts which are executed for the purpose of improving or furthering the educational quality in our schools.
- Bilingual-Bi-cultural education will be compulsory for Mexican-Americans in the Los Angeles City School System where there is a majority of Mexican-American students. This program will be open to all other students on a voluntary basis. A) in-service education programs will be instituted immediately for all staff in order to teach them the Spanish language and increase their understanding of the history, traditions, and contributions of the Mexican culture. B) All administrators in the elementary and secondary schools in these areas will become proficient in the Spanish language Participants are to become proficient in the Spanish language Participants are to be compensated during the training period at not less than $8.80 an hour and upon completion of the course will receive in addition to their salary not less than $100.00 a month. The monies for these programs will come from local funds, state funds and matching federal funds.
- Administrators and teachers who show any form of prejudice toward Mexican or Mexican-American students, including failure to recognize, understand, and appreciate Mexican culture and heritage, will be removed from East Los Angeles schools. This will be decided by a Citizens Review Board selected by the Educational Issues Committee.
- Textbooks and curriculum will be developed to show Mexican and Mexican-American contribution to the U.S. society and to show the injustices that Mexicans have suffered as a culture of that society. Textbooks should concentrate on Mexican folklore rather than English folklore.
- All administrators where schools have majority of Mexican-American descent shall be of Mexican-American descent. If necessary, training programs should be instituted to provide a cadre of Mexican-American administrators.
- Every teacher's ratio of failure per students in his classroom shall be made available to community groups and students. Any teacher having a particularly high percentage of the total school dropouts in his classes shall be rated by the Citizens Review Board composed of the Educational Issues Committee.
**ADMINISTRATIVE**

- Schools should have a manager to take care of paper work and maintenance supervision. Administrators will direct the Education standards of the School instead of being head janitors and office clerks as they are today.

- School facilities should be made available for community activities under the supervision of Parents' Councils (not PTA). Recreation programs for children will be developed.

- No teacher will be dismissed or transferred because of his political views and/or philosophical disagreements with administrators.

- Community parents will be engaged as teacher's aides. Orientation similar to in-service training, will be provided, and they will be given status as semi-professionals as in the new careers concept.

**FACILITIES**

- The Industrial Arts program must be re-vitalized. Students need proper training to use the machinery of modern day industry. Up-to-date equipment and new operational techniques must replace the obsolescent machines and outmoded training methods currently being employed in this program. If this high standard cannot be met, the Industrial Arts program will be de-emphasized.

- New high schools in the area must be immediately built. The new schools will be named by the community. At least two Senior High Schools and at least one Junior High School must be built. Marengo Street School must be reactivated to reduce the student-teacher load at Murchison Street School.

- The master plans for Garfield High School and Roosevelt High School must go into effect immediately.
• Library facilities will be expanded in all East Los Angeles high schools. At present the libraries in these high schools do not meet the educational needs of the students. Sufficient library materials will be provided in Spanish.

• Open-air student eating areas should be made into roofed eating malls. As an example, Los Angeles High School.

STUDENT RIGHTS

• Corporal punishment will only be administrated according to State Law.

• Teachers and administrators will be rated by the students at the end of each semester.

• Students should have access to any type of literature and should be allowed to bring it on campus.

• Students who spend time helping teachers shall be given monetary and/or credit compensation.

• Students will be allowed to have guest speakers to club meetings. The only regulation should be to inform the club sponsor.

• Dress and grooming standards will be determined by a group of a) students and b) parents.

• Student body offices shall be open to all students. A high grade point average shall not be considered as a pre-requisite to eligibility.
• Entrances to all buildings and restrooms should be accessible to all students during school hours. Security can be enforced by designated students.

• Student menus should be Mexican oriented. When Mexican food is served, mothers from the barrios should come to the school and help supervise the preparation of the food. These mothers will meet the food handler requirements of Los Angeles City Schools and they will be compensated for their services.

• School janitorial services should be restricted to the employees hired for that purposes by the school board. Students will be punished by picking up paper or trash and keeping them out of class.

• Only area superintendents can suspend students.