

“The Community is Beginning to Rumble”: The Origins of Chicano Educational Protest in Houston, 1965-1970

Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr.

“The Mexican American community is beginning to rumble,” noted Ben Canales, an official with a Mexican American community group by the name of United Organizations Information Center.¹ This comment was made at a committee meeting before the Houston board of education in October 1969 and aptly reflected the Chicano community's growing dissatisfaction with the local school district's unwillingness to improve the conditions under which Mexican American children were educated.

The rumbling in the community noted by Canales referred to the growing restlessness among middle and working-class Chicanos over the neglect by government institutions of their political interests and special needs. Since 1960, Mexican Americans in Texas, especially middle-class individuals who were members of existing organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the American G.I. Forum, and the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO), had worked hard to elect liberal politicians, to enact federal legislation aimed at meeting the educational and vocational needs of Mexican American children, and to ensure the passage of important civil rights measures. Despite their involvement in the political process, Mexican Americans continued to be neglected by authorities and agencies at all levels of government.²

Failure to bring about any significant changes in the treatment of Mexican Americans laid the groundwork for further radicalization and political mobilization. The Farmworkers' strike and its brutal suppression by the Texas Rangers and state police as well as the Minimum Wage March of the summer of 1966 unleashed a series of new organizations with different ideological notions of ethnic identity, political culture, and social change. These organi-

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¹“Education of Latins Called Inferior,” *Houston Chronicle*, October 2, 1969.

²Arnoldo De Leon, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston* (Houston: Mexican American Studies, University of Houston, 1989), 163-170.

³For a history of the Chicano movement's rise and decline in Houston see De Leon.

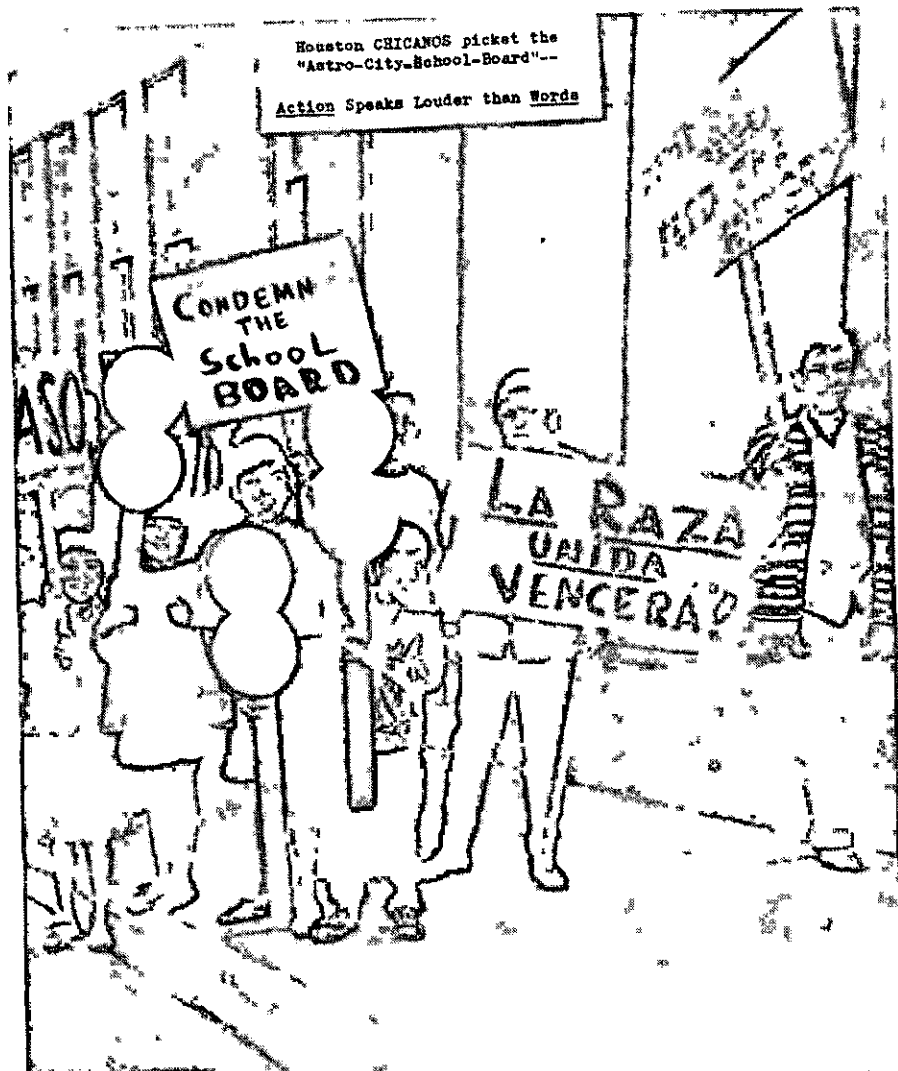


Photo "COMPASS" CPA Houston, Texas

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Local children picket the board of the Houston Independent School District to protest cutbacks in the school lunch program. (Compass, March 1969)

zations began to mount a vigorous campaign against all forms of inequalities in American institutional life. Public education was one of those institutions that increasingly came under attack.³ Canales's statement was in reference to this complex process of ideological fermentation, organizational development, and political mobilization that was occurring in the Chicano community in Houston and throughout the state. The shift in emphasis and tactics in the struggle for adequate education reflected a pivotal change of focus in community activism—from negotiating limited political and cultural change to demanding a broad restructuring of the larger society.

Early Efforts at Educational Reform

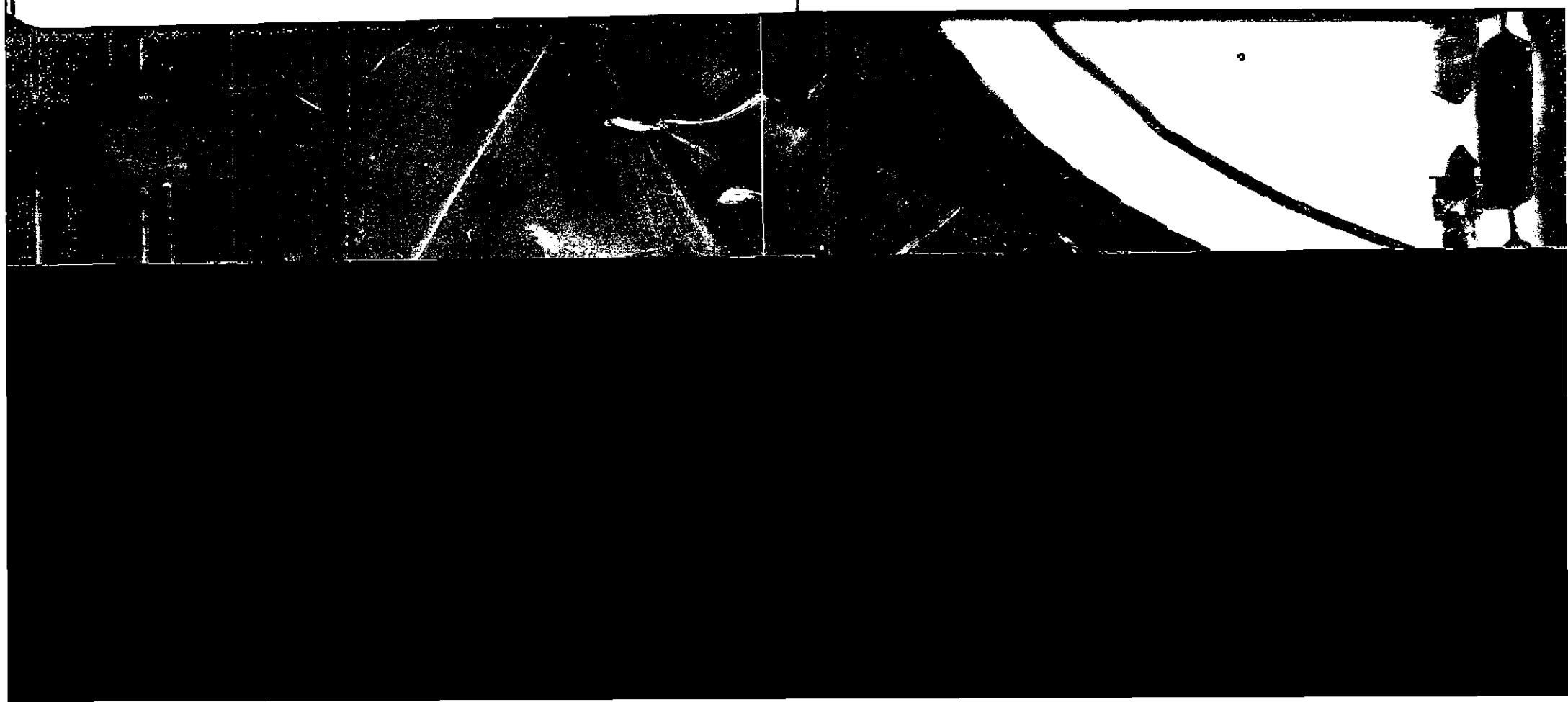
Chicano efforts to promote school reform which aimed at eliminating discrimination and at improving school performance emerged gradually during the 1960s. Several forces fueled the broader movement by Mexican Americans for equality and justice in the United States during this period—the material conditions of the 1960s, the national and international political climate, and the continued efforts by African Americans to eliminate racial discrimination.⁴ These same forces inspired an increased involvement in education, as men and women of different ages and social classes and with multiple ideologies and perspectives worked together or in tandem to change the schools so that they could better serve the Mexican American population.

Although Mexican Americans had a rich legacy of activism in the schools by the early 1960s, it was subdued and narrowly focused. Activism in the schools focused on three areas of activity. First, sporadic efforts were made to improve the treatment of Mexican American children in the schools and the quality of their education. For instance, in the summer of 1961, parents from the Clayton Homes area met to discuss conditions in their local schools. They set up committees to find ways of improving the quality of the school facilities provided for their children. Although it is unclear what happened to these recommendations or what further actions the Clayton Homes tenants took, the establishment of these committees indicated a deep concern for quality education for their children.⁵ At times, specific incidents of discrimination were challenged. One such incident occurred in early 1960 when the school board was engaged in a debate over the need for free lunches in the schools. One school board member remarked that "Mexican American children did not need free lunches because they would rather eat 'pinto beans.'"⁶ This remark incensed the community and led to the study of and

³See De Leon, especially 163-184.

⁴Houston Post, July 27, 1961.

⁵Thomas H. Kreneck, *Del Pueblo: A Pictorial History of Houston's Hispanic Community* (Houston: Houston International University, 1989), 151-152.



support for a free lunch program in the Houston Independent School District (HISD). This study was sponsored by three Mexican American organizations: LULAC, the American G.I. Forum, and the Civic Action Committee.⁷

The second major focus of Mexican American activism during this early period occurred at the University of Houston. In 1963, Mexican American students at the University of Houston founded a branch of the Political Association for Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO) on campus to promote awareness of their community's needs and to endorse candidates whom the group felt best represented the community's interests. Under the leadership of Samuel S. Calderon and Manuel Crespo, the UH-PASO conducted voter registration drives, awareness of the community's needs, get-the-vote-out campaigns, and analysis of political campaigns. For several years, this organization was an important instrument of political change on campus.⁸

Third, and probably most important, was the promotion by LULAC of the Little Schools of the 400 concept, a specific educational innovation aimed at improving the scholastic achievement of Mexican Americans. This concept was the brainchild of Felix Tijerina, a Houstonian and national president of LULAC for four consecutive terms from 1956 to 1959. During the Texas legislative session in 1959, he and LULAC had lobbied on behalf of state support for the Little Schools of the 400 concept. Throughout the following year, Tijerina was feverishly promoting the Little Schools of the 400 program throughout the state. This project was Tijerina's approach to improving the education of Mexican American school-age children and reflected his personal philosophy toward underachievement. Felix Tijerina believed that the lack of facility with English in the early years of child development was at the heart of the high failure rates of Mexican Americans in the schools. The solution to this problem of underachievement was English-language instruction at the preschool level. His strategy for improving academic achievement thus was to change the child, not the school. In 1957, he established the Little Schools of the 400 with this objective in mind. The primary objective of this educational project was to teach Mexican American preschool children 400 essential English words that would assist them in completing the first grade of school and thus in advancing throughout the grades.⁹

⁷The CAC had been founded in 1958 to promote Mexican American involvement in the political process. Roy Elizondo, Alfonso Vasquez, E. P. Lean, and Dr. Alfredo Hernandez played key roles in the evolution of this organization. Kreneck, 151-152.

⁸Kreneck, 153.

⁹Guadalupe San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Quest for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 141. For a history of the Little Schools of the 400 see *ibid.*, 139-163; also Guadalupe Campos Quintanilla, "The Little School of the 400 and Its Impact on Education for the Spanish Dominant Bilingual Children of Texas" (Ph.D. diss., University of Houston, 1976).

The state legislature agreed to fund this project in 1959 and to implement it during the summer of 1960. Tijerina and LULAC promoted, publicized, and helped implement this educational innovation. The success of this promotional campaign was apparent when, on June 1, 1960, the first 614 schools opened their doors to 15,805 Spanish-speaking children. For the next several summers, the number of children and school districts participating in the preschool instructional program increased significantly so that by 1967, when it expired, over 150,000 Spanish-speaking children had gone through the program.¹⁰

The program was relatively successful in increasing school achievement among Mexican American school-age children entering the first grades.¹¹ Despite its apparent success it was heavily criticized by prominent scholars such as George I. Sanchez, Herschel T. Manuel, and others. This program, noted the critics, ignored the positive role that the children's native language played in their intellectual and psychological development. It also was based on unsound educational assumptions about language teaching and learning.¹² This criticism, coupled with the development of similar and new federal programs such as Title I and Project Head Start in the mid-1960s, contributed to its diminished importance in the community and to its expiration by 1967.

In addition to his support of the Little Schools of the 400, Tijerina also ran unsuccessfully for the school board in 1960. He ran on an independent platform and promised to represent all his constituents "fairly and honestly." He said nothing about his ethnicity and, despite his promotion of the preschool English program for Mexican Americans, promised no significant changes in education if elected to the school board.¹³

During the first part of the 1960s, then, Mexican American activism in education was subdued and narrowly focused. By the mid-1960s, however, Mexican American activism in education began to increase and assume different forms. Educational activism increased due in part to the tremendous historic changes taking place in the nation. The passage of important domestic legislation at the federal level and the Black civil rights movement were especially significant. Antipoverty legislation and federal aid to education brought to the forefront issues of poverty, employment, education, housing, and local community organization. The Black civil rights movement,

¹⁰This program expanded in size between 1960 and 1964 and served close to 150,000 Mexican American children before it expired in 1967. San Miguel, 156-160.

¹¹For data on the success of this program in improving school achievement, see Texas Education Agency, *Report on the Preschool Instructional Program* (Austin: Texas Education Agency, 1962). See also San Miguel, 155-157.

¹²San Miguel, 158-159.

¹³De Leon, 164.

among other things, raised the issues of racial discrimination in American life and introduced a variety of unorthodox methods for attacking inequality such as sit-ins, protest marches, and confrontation tactics. The continuing neglect of the linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of Mexican American children by local officials also encouraged activists to seek school changes.¹⁴

The Rise of the Chicano Movement

In the years from 1965 to 1968, most of the increased activism was by existing organizations in the community such as LULAC and the American G.I. Forum. These organizations took advantage of the new federal legislation and developed innovative educational and work training programs for the community's benefit. One such program was the Jobs for Progress sponsored jointly by LULAC and the G.I. Forum. The idea of a job placement referral service originated in Houston's LULAC group during the spring of 1964, in the context of a national war-on-poverty program. The national LULAC office endorsed this idea in February 1965. Two months later, in April, LULAC Council #60, one of Houston's most active chapters, opened the first Jobs for Progress placement office. In June of the following year, the concept of Jobs for Progress received federal funding.¹⁵ It provided education to adults and helped place them in meaningful jobs.¹⁶

These educational efforts by LULAC and the American G.I. Forum did not go far enough, however, in bringing about change in the schools or in the society. They were based on changing the individual rather than changing the society and its discriminatory practices. During the next several years, varied groups with different ideologies emerged to challenge both the political direction of established community organizations and the lack of institutional responsiveness to the needs of Mexican Americans. Of particular importance was the emergence of youth, and especially students, as a powerful force for change in the Mexican American community. Mexican American youth approached educational and social change from a radically different perspective than did the older members of the "Mexican American Generation." Although there were significant differences among youth groups, for the most part they rejected the ideology and identity of the Mexican American Generation. The older generation's identity was based on a complex mixture of cultural, political, and individual beliefs. As Mexican Americans, they

¹⁴De Leon, 163-184.

¹⁵Kreneck, 155.

¹⁶The city of Houston under the Welch administration in 1967 also developed a program similar to Jobs for Progress. Mayor Welch's program, entitled Houston City Job Fair, targeted Mexican American neighborhoods. It involved Mexican American volunteers who assisted residents, particularly youth, in finding summer employment and in encouraging them to further their education. Kreneck, 155.

viewed themselves as a recent immigrant group with a Spanish background on its way to absorption into the great American melting pot, and as victims of poverty and powerlessness. This view also encompassed a noncritical appreciation for United States institutions and a cautious approach to social change.¹⁷

The youth, most of whom came from working-class backgrounds, rejected these assimilationist, laudatory, and accommodationist views and adopted a new one that they called Chicanismo. This new consciousness was comprised of a complex set of racial, cultural, and political ideals and behaviors that were internally contradictory or inconsistent. These ideologies developed at different points in time and with different intensities or emphasis among the youth groups.¹⁸

The components comprising the ideology of Chicanismo were nationalism, a critical perspective of United States society, and a militant approach to change. Whereas the members of the Mexican American Generation accepted assimilationist thought, the emerging Chicano identity rejected it and replaced it with a nationalist one. This nationalist ideology had two major components. First, it was based on a non-white and predominantly indigenous identity. The youth began to view itself, not as another white immigrant group in American society undergoing the pains of assimilation and integration, but as members of an oppressed indigenous group. Mexican Americans, the youth declared, were members of an indigenous "Bronze race" who had been dispossessed of their lands, exploited by greedy economic interests, and whose cultural identity had been trampled upon by ethnocentric Anglos.¹⁹ Second, this nationalist ideology required that the youth actively assert its cultural identity through the establishment of alternative "Chicano-based" institutions, ideals, and behaviors, through the maintenance of Spanish as a primary language, and through the promotion of Chicano cultural tradi-

¹⁷The "Mexican American Generation" was comprised of both middle and working-class individuals who were born or raised in the United States. Community leaders from this group embraced a liberal version of cultural pluralism and a politics of cautious activism. Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13-22.

¹⁸For one recent history of the Chicano student movement and its ideological development, see Carlos Munoz, *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement* (New York: Verso, 1989).

¹⁹One of the first documents written by youth was *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*. Its opening sentence states, "In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage, but also of the brutal 'gringo' invasion of our territories, We, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlan, from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, Declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility and our inevitable destiny." *El Plan*, written in March 1969 in Denver, Colorado, is stapled to an undated Mexican American Youth Organization document in the Luis Cano Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

tions.²⁰

Chicanismo also rejected the Mexican American Generation's view of United States institutions and ideals. Whereas the older group praised American "democracy" and the ideals of "equality," "opportunity," and "freedom," the Chicano generation condemned them. The youth looked to developing Third-World countries and their revolutionary ideals or to its indigenous ancestors for spiritual guidance. Blind allegiance to United States institutions or ideals was not a cherished value among the majority of youth. For instance, the Houston Chapter of the Mexican American Youth Organization—the single most important youth organization in Houston—viewed capitalism as "an exploitative system" that needed to be overthrown and replaced with socialism. It also viewed the police as "pigs," the United States as imperialistic and "the great enemy of mankind," the American social and political system as structurally inhumane, the Church (especially the Catholic church) as an oppressor of the poor, and the law enforcement system as racially discriminatory. In their view, there was little in the American way of life worth salvaging.²¹

Finally, youth rejected the older generation's cautionary approach and nonviolent means to socioeducational change. For the most part, the younger generation of activists were in basic agreement with the reformist goals of increased representation and institutional responsiveness to their community's needs, goals espoused by the Mexican American Generation and the more moderate middle-class organizations.²² However, they opposed the older generation's circumspect approaches to social and educational change. Like their white and black counterparts elsewhere in America and Europe, Chicano youth willingly embraced militant approaches and actively pro-

²⁰*El Plan* reiterated this sentiment throughout. Point number one of *El Plan* noted that nationalism was the key to organization and the "common denominator that all members of La Raza can agree upon." Another one of the *Plan's* points under the heading of culture reaffirms this position: "Cultural values of our people strengthen our identity and the moral backbone of the movement... We must insure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture..." *The Program of El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*, points #1 and #3, Crusade for Justice folder, Gregory Salazar Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

²¹MAYO Positions (undated document), 1-4, Barrio Programs folder, Salazar Collection.

²²In the early 1970s, a fringe group of Mexican American youth did advocate drastic or fundamental change in the socioeconomic and educational structures of the society. But, for the most part, both the youth and the older generation wanted pluralist reforms and militant changes in the society, not significant or revolutionary ones. For a history of the political ideologies of students in the broader Chicano movement of the late 1960s see Juan Gomez-Quinones, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).

moted the use of unorthodox methods, including protest, confrontation, and violence, in their quest for social justice and equality.²³

Armed with a new consciousness and an increased commitment to militant social change, Chicano youth in Houston and elsewhere began to mobilize against all forms of inequalities and against discrimination in American institutional life. Public education was one of the institutions that these youths attacked.

Mexican American Youth and Educational Activism

In Houston, the Mexican American youth began to speak out and organize in 1967. In this year, for instance, a number of students founded the League of Mexican American Students (LOMAS) at the University of Houston.²⁴ LOMAS sought to increase awareness of Mexican American issues among students and worked to formulate an intellectual foundation for the emerging activism by students. In late 1968, the group changed its name to the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), an organization initially founded in San Antonio, Texas.²⁵ Sometime during the 1968-69 school year, junior and senior high school students organized a new group called Advocating Rights for Mexican American Students or ARMAS. The purpose of this group was to bring about school changes that would increase the achievement of Mexican American students.²⁶

Mexican American youth also organized outside of education. The most important and vocal of these groups to emerge was the community chapter of MAYO. This organization became key in increasing the awareness and involvement of Mexican American youth in educational and social change.

These new youth groups came together in the spring of 1968. In April of that year, several youth, under the direction of Joseph Rojo and George Rivera, planned and hosted a Raza Unida Conference. ("Raza Unida" meant "United People," and an ethnic-based third party was later launched under this name.) The purpose of this conference was to bring together leading activists from across the city and to agree on goals and tactics for increasing social change. One of the major outcomes of this highly publicized meeting was the collective call for a "peaceful revolution" for Mexican Americans in Houston and for aggressive action on behalf of "la causa" or the cause.²⁷ Several months later, in June 1968, a new group calling itself Las Familias

²³Munoz; Gomez-Quinones.

²⁴LOMAS was influenced by Tatcho Mindiola, Ramon Villagomez, Al Perez, Ninfa Zepeda, George Rangel, Susie Quintanilla, and others during its early years. See Kreneck, 157.

²⁵Kreneck, 157.

²⁶De Leon, 143.

²⁷Kreneck, 156.

Unidas de Segundo Barrio took up the "revolutionary" cause by protesting the inadequate city services that were provided in the Second Ward barrio.²⁸ The era of youthful protest had begun in Houston.

In public education, the era of protest in Houston began during the 1968-69 school year. Although it was initiated by ARMAS, the context for their actions was shaped by militant developments in other parts of the state. Of particular importance was the walkout by students in South Texas. In the fall of 1968, 192 Mexican American students walked out of Edcouch Elsa High School in Hidalgo County because the school board refused to listen to a list of 15 demands. Sixty-two of the students were expelled and the newly formed Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed suit charging that the expulsions were unconstitutional and violated the students' right to protest. MALDEF and the students won the suit in December of the same year.²⁹ In that same month, the United States Commission on Civil Rights held several days of hearings in San Antonio, Texas. These hearings focused national attention on the invidious discriminatory practices utilized by most social institutions against Mexican Americans. A multitude of school policies and practices, especially no-Spanish-speaking rules and tracking, came under sharp criticism at these hearings.³⁰

Youth in Houston supported and publicized these events.³¹ In December, for instance, one of the youth, Raul Gutierrez, wrote in support of the Edcouch Elsa boycott in the first community newspaper established by young people during this period—the *Compass*. Gutierrez complained that "nada [nothing] is being done in Houston" although conditions such as those at Marshall Junior High School were bad. According to Gutierrez, at Marshall the principal failed to meet on time with parents, there was an intimidating presence of "police protection" at parent meetings with the principal, and the school ignored parental demands, especially those concerning a teacher who was molesting young women. Marshall did not have a Parent-Teacher Association nor a student council. Gutierrez urged that militant action be taken to correct these injustices. The recent walkout at Edcouch Elsa, he noted, was a reminder for the youth in Houston to "do our share."³²

Several months later, ARMAS decided to take action on problems in the Houston schools. The actions ARMAS took during the next two years marked their entry into the local Chicano movement of that era and reflected an

²⁸Kreneck, 152.

²⁹MALDEF, *Diez Anos* (San Antonio: MALDEF, 1978); "Chicanos Boycott High School," *Compass* 2, no. 9 (December 1968): 1.

³⁰USCCR, *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, San Antonio, December 9-14, 1968* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1968).

³¹On the South Texas boycott see, for instance, "Chicanos Boycott High School."

³²Raul Gutierrez, "Mexican Americans Boycott Elsa High School—Greater Houston—Uneasy?," *Compass* 2, 9 (December 1968): 2.

increasing militancy among youth. Student activism moved beyond the politics of accommodation and integration which had been shaped by the Mexican American Generation and the community's middle-class leadership.

The first action taken by ARMAS occurred in March 1969 after the school board forced cuts in the free lunch program that affected 4,000 Mexican American children. Mexican American parents protested this action and demonstrated in front of the school administration.³³ ARMAS supported the parents and passed out leaflets in some of the schools. These leaflets asked everyone—"Mothers, high school students, office workers, [and] laborers..."—for their support.³⁴ Although additional funds for the lunch program were eventually provided, the issues of discrimination in the schools and inferior education were not addressed by local officials. This prompted ARMAS to take more radical action.

Sometime during early September 1969, ARMAS drafted a list of demands that it planned to present to the HISD administration. This list reflected the new consciousness of historical oppression based on race and of cultural pride. It specifically demanded fair treatment for Mexican Americans, the inclusion of Mexican American history and culture in the schools, and the hiring of Chicano counselors "who understand the special problems of Chicanos in high school."³⁵ In order to gain support and publicity for their demands ARMAS planned a demonstration and a general walkout from the schools.³⁶ These actions would take place on *el 16 de Septiembre*, a traditional holiday celebrating the anniversary of Mexico's independence from Spain. On this day, Chicano students, symbolically speaking, would celebrate their independence from Anglo America.³⁷ On Tuesday, September 16, 1969, over 100 students demonstrated in front of Jefferson Davis Senior High School at 1200 Quitman. The principal, J. Paul Rodgers, requested that they not trespass on school property. The demonstrators complied with this request but only after they had read their list of grievances and demands. ARMAS

³³This picket at HISD to protest funding cuts was organized by Abel Alvarez, who argued that the need was for more, not less, funding of the free breakfast program as a way to improve school performance among Chicano children. See "An Example from Houston?" *Compass* 3, no. 3 (March 1969): 6.

³⁴ARMAS, undated handout, Salazar Collection.

³⁵Richard Atwater, "Chicano Students' Walkout," *Space City News* 1, no. 7 (Sept. 27-Oct. 11, 1969), Salazar Collection.

³⁶As early as December 1968, community members and students had been discussing the need for "a revolution of walkouts, sit-ins, or stay outs," as a way of pressuring school officials to improve the schools for Mexican Americans. See Gutierrez, "Mexican Americans Boycott Elsa..."

³⁷"Latins Demonstrate at Schools to Mark Mexican Holiday," *Houston Post*, September 17, 1969.

List of Demands Made by Advocating Rights for Mexican American Students (ARMAS), September 16, 1969

1. Initiation of courses on Chicano history and culture, taught by Chicanos, into the regular school curriculum.
2. Stopping the practice of "push-outs"—that is, when counselors whose main concern is to keep order in the school advise students who are disciplinary problems to drop out of school.
3. Hiring of more Chicano counselors, who understand the special problems of Chicanos in high schools, who understand why only 2% of the students at the University of Houston are Chicanos while they comprise over 14% of the city's population.
4. Elimination of the "pregnancy list" at Davis High School, a publicly posted list of all girls who have left school because of pregnancy—a vicious form of personal degradation.
5. Lengthening the 20-minute lunch break allowed at Marshall. All other schools get at least 30 minutes.

Source: Richard Atwater, "Chicano Students' Walkout," *Space City News* 1, no. 7 (Sept. 27-Oct. 11, 1969), in Gregory Salazar Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

members then encouraged students from Jeff Davis to join them as they moved their demonstration off school property. About 100 students walked out of Jeff Davis.

Students in support of the ARMAS demands also walked out of other schools. At Marshall Junior High School the student newspaper reported that approximately 75 students walked out although the principal locked the gates so no one could leave. An additional 40 students left Hogg Junior High School, 20 walked out of San Jacinto Senior High School, and 20 left Booker T. Washington Junior-Senior High School. A few brave souls from Reagan High School also walked out.³⁹ They all met at Moody Park for a rally to discuss the success of the walkout and to plan for the future.

The principals and faculty at these schools reacted in various ways, most of them negatively. Some principals threatened all the students participating in the walkout with expulsion. A few teachers also threatened to use physical force to keep the students in class and viewed the students' demands as unworthy of consideration. At San Jacinto High, uniformed and plainclothes

³⁸"Latins Demonstrate . . ."

police "were everywhere, shouting insults at the students and spoiling for a fight," noted one observer. Some of the teachers grabbed students and shoved them back into class while others tried to intimidate them by taking down the names of those who were walking out. Other schools, namely Reagan High and Marshall Junior High, were locked up completely and nobody was allowed to go outside.³⁹ "The students who did escape, however, marched around the high schools encouraging those in sympathy to join them," reported one journalist. Although most students were intimidated by the administration's threats as well as by teachers, many of them expressed verbal support for the walkout.⁴⁰

The walkouts were considered by local activists to be well planned and executed.⁴¹ They also helped ARMAS attain one of its primary goals: to gain support from other students for its demands. According to one source, more than 500 students walked out in all and many others showed their support by staying home that day.⁴² But the student strike failed to have any significant impact on the schools or on the community as did other walkouts in different parts of the state or the Southwest. In Los Angeles, for instance, the student strikes of 1968 resulted in significant political developments beyond the issues of school reform and contributed to the further development of community organizations. They also acted as the catalyst for the formation of a Chicano student movement as well as the larger Chicano movement of which it became the most important sector.⁴³

The Houston walkout did not serve as a catalyst for any further school reforms. Lack of publicity and parental support as well as neglect by school officials probably limited the walkout's potential impact, which was confined largely to the junior and senior high school students themselves. One observer believed that the students learned an important lesson from this action: that "if they act together, they can force the administration to acknowledge their demands and respect their Mexican American heritage."⁴⁴ This statement was misleading, however, since the school board essentially ignored the issues

³⁹David M. Yeager, principal at Marshall, said he did not lock the front or side entrance gates to the school or any doors to prevent a walkout as reported in the newspaper. He said that most decided not to participate. See "Latins Demonstrate..."

⁴⁰Atwater, "Chicano Students' Walkout"; unidentified newspaper clipping, Salazar Collection.

⁴¹ARMAS also distributed many leaflets and articles from their newspaper. These leaflets were passed out to gain student support and also to announce the demands made by ARMAS. Atwater, "Chicano Students' Walkout."

⁴²*Ibid.* In another part of the article, Atwater noted the biased and inadequate coverage of the walkout by the mainstream media. He said that it printed distorted versions of the walkout and omitted most of the facts. The *Chronicle*, for instance, reported that only 32 students walked out at Jeff Davis yet according to one eyewitness there were at least 130.

⁴³Munoz, 66, 70-71.

⁴⁴Atwater, "Chicano Students Walkout."



Students who walked out at Jefferson Davis High School. (Photo by Raul Gutierrez, *Space City News*, Sept. 27-Oct. 11, 1969)

raised by the boycott. Punitive actions were taken against the leaders and followers by expelling or suspending some of them but nothing was done to acknowledge or address their demands.⁴⁵ The walkout did, however, have some limited effect on community political mobilization. Perhaps its greatest effect was to increase parental participation in school affairs and to encourage several middle-class leaders to raise questions about the schooling of Mexican American children.

Protest from the Community

A month after the walkout, a few Mexican American community leaders went before the local school board and leveled charges of inferior education and discrimination against HISD. On Wednesday, October 1, 1969, Leonel Castillo, local director of Services, Employment, and Redevelopment, a federally funded "manpower" training agency, went before the school board's compensatory education committee. He charged that Mexican American students were getting an inferior education in Houston. Castillo's comments were based on his experiences with Mexican American students who participated in a college-bound summer school program. These youngsters, who came from several junior high schools including Hogg, Marshall, Edison, and George Washington, had been identified by several educators involved in the summer school program as potential college material and selected to participate in this all-male program. Upon their arrival, however, the organizers of the program found that the reading level of these students was so low that the curriculum had to be revised downward. A majority of the approximately 120 participants were reading at either a second or third-grade level.⁴⁶ These boys, noted Castillo, "had received their education, since the first grade, in the Houston public schools." He also charged that the administrators had a bad attitude toward the Mexican American students, had no desire to improve educational programs for them, and did not want to motivate them to learn.⁴⁷

Ben Canales, an official with United Organizations Information Center (UOIC), a relatively new community organization, charged that in some schools, such as Jeff Davis and San Jacinto high schools, Mexican American

⁴⁵Some student leaders, especially those at San Jacinto, were expelled the day after the walkout but by the end of the week all students were back in class. Atwater, "Chicano Students Walkout."

⁴⁶This program was held at the Strake Jesuit Preparatory School during the summer of 1969. Most of the students were headed into the seventh and eighth grades. Their reading level was determined after they were given a battery of recognized achievement tests. See "Education of Latins Called Inferior," *Houston Chronicle*, October 2, 1969.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

students were constantly harassed by teachers.⁴⁸ He added that the Mexican American community was fed up with the local officials' neglect of the students' needs. "We know that principals and teachers in schools with predominantly Mexican American enrollments are inferior to their counterparts in Anglo schools and they wouldn't make it in Anglo schools."⁴⁹

Canales's charges were based on the legacy and current practice of school discrimination against Mexican American children. In Houston, the origins of unequal schooling for Mexican children originated at the turn of the century when a handful of Spanish-speaking children enrolled in the old Rusk Elementary School in the city's Second Ward. By 1920, there were over 529 Mexican children attending city schools primarily at Rusk, Dow, Jones, Hawthorne, and De Zavala Elementary Schools. These segregated schools in many cases were older than those provided for Anglo children, had less space and amenities than the Anglo schools, and were generally uncomfortable. Few Mexican American children were adequately educated in these deplorable facilities. Not only were the schools segregated and unequal but the cultural heritage of the students as well as the parents themselves were constantly disparaged by local school officials, administrators, and the teachers. The practice of segregated and inferior schools, which continued unabated, had a detrimental impact on the students and led to a pattern of poor school performance. A decade before Canales's complaint, for instance, 90 out of 238 Mexican American pupils at Hawthorne Elementary School were one year behind in school; an additional 57 students were two years behind. As noted by Canales, Mexican American children continued to be victims of inferior educational opportunities in the 1960s.⁵⁰

Students in general, and ARMAS in particular, were conspicuously absent from this hearing before the board's compensatory committee. It is unclear whether the students declined to participate or whether the board only invited selected "leaders." Despite their absence, the issues of discrimination and underachievement raised by ARMAS in their boycott were again presented to the school officials by the Mexican American community representatives.

As part of their presentations, community leaders made specific recommendations for school reform. These recommendations reflected a mixture of new and old ideologies pertaining to language and culture in the schools—a compensatory view of language as a "handicap," an emerging pluralist

⁴⁸According to De Leon, UOIC was founded in 1966 or 1967 to "develop, promote, and encourage, by the preparation and distribution of literature, pamphlets, magazines, periodicals, tokens, and otherwise to act as a clearing house of information." De Leon, 181.

⁴⁹"Education of Latins Called Inferior."

⁵⁰Luis Cano, "A History of Segregation and the Chicano Movement" (unpublished book manuscript, Houston, 1977), Chapter 6, 2-10.

notion of language as asset, and a civil rights perspective of language as an instrument of discrimination. Antonio Criado, vice-president of UOIC, recommended three changes. He proposed that school officials (1) recognize a language barrier as a handicap, "just as deafness and blindness are handicaps," and take steps to help students with this, (2) alter history and other courses that make Mexican American students feel inferior and ashamed of their heritage, and (3) recognize that Mexican Americans cannot be treated like Anglo-Americans in measuring ability by testing. This latter recommendation was most likely based on the emerging view among Mexican Americans that there were inherent cultural and language biases in standardized evaluation instruments.⁵¹

Ben Canales also added that the district should hire Mexican American principals, counselors, and teachers in those schools with large numbers of Mexican American students. Additionally, he stated that the professional staffs of these schools should be sensitized to the feelings and needs of Mexican American students through in-service programs.⁵²

Probably because of the seriousness of the charges, the general superintendent of HISD, Glenn Fletcher, agreed to call a meeting between the Mexican American community leaders and the principals, assistant principals, and counselors of some schools with large numbers of Mexican American students to discuss these problems. HISD also invited additional community representatives, mostly non-Hispanic, to participate in the meeting. "We recognize that problems exist and we are working on them," he added.⁵³

A Need Ignored

On October 13, 1969, top personnel from 25 Houston public schools and their community representatives met with a panel of Mexican Americans. Although it was intended to be a meeting, there was no discussion of the issues. The group of educators merely heard the Mexican American leaders level charges against the school district. Jose Rojo, an attorney with the Houston Legal Foundation, presented a position paper prepared by the UOIC. He argued that there was a pattern of discrimination and harassment against Mexican Americans in the school district. More specifically, he argued that the general feeling by students was that Mexican Americans were fair game for mistreatment or different treatment by teachers and admin-

⁵¹For one scholar's analysis of linguistic and cultural biases in the testing of Mexican American children in the public schools, see Blandina Cardenas, "Defining Equal Access to Educational Opportunity for Mexican American Children: A Study of Three Civil Rights Actions Affecting Mexican American Students" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1974).

⁵²"Education of Latins Called Inferior."

⁵³*Ibid.*

istrators "without fear of retribution." Corporal punishment was administered too frequently against Mexican Americans and without sufficient reason. Some teachers had a negative or hostile attitude toward Mexican American students and called them names. One junior high school coach, for example, called Mexican American students "hoods" and "punks." Teachers, principals, and counselors also were insensitive to Mexican American problems.⁵⁴

In addition to evidence of discrimination Rojo provided data indicating the low median years of schooling for the Mexican American population and especially the high rates of student dropouts. According to him, 89 percent of the Mexican American pupils in Houston dropped out without finishing high school. This, he said, proved that the district's educators were not doing an adequate job.⁵⁵ He recommended the establishment of a task force of educators, parents, student leaders, and others to investigate these charges.⁵⁶

The HISD administrators did not immediately respond to these charges at the meeting, but one of HISD's token Mexican American representatives did. Rosemary Saucillo, a Houston school district graduate who had earned a law degree, disagreed with Rojo's charges and blamed the parents of Mexican American pupils rather than the school administration for the problems of underachievement and high dropout rates. She said heavier penalties should be dealt parents who permitted their children to be absent from school. "Let's do something about the dropout rate even if we have to put the parents in jail," she said. A good number of the HISD-appointed parents, staff, and administrators at the meeting heartily applauded her remarks.⁵⁷

Several days later, the HISD administration responded to the charges of discrimination and harassment. The staff vehemently denied the charges of inferior teachers. J. Paul Rodgers, principal at Jeff Davis, stated that teachers at his school had to have the same requirements and qualifications as teachers in other schools. Ken Mueller, principal at San Jacinto, said, "If anyone can cite one instance of discrimination I will personally apologize to the students." "It's too bad the critics don't see what we are doing here before complaining," noted Rodgers.⁵⁸

A select group of Mexican American student leaders at several of the mentioned schools also denied the charges leveled against HISD by community leaders. Ramiro Marin, 17, senior class president at Jeff Davis, for instance, said he had never been discriminated against in the Houston public

⁵⁴"Latin dropouts, Low Achievement Talked," *Houston Post*, October 14, 1969.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*; "Mexican-American Schooling Held Worse Than Negroes," *El Sol*, October 17, 1969.

⁵⁶"Latin dropouts . . ."

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Ken Sheets, "Latin Student Harassment in City Schools Denied," undated newspaper clipping, Salazar Collection.

schools. Robert Casares, 16, junior class president at Jeff Davis, said no junior had ever complained to him about discrimination and harassment. "I feel I'm getting a good education. I respect the school," he noted. Christina Uride, 18, a senior and president of the Future Teachers Association at San Jacinto, said she knew of no harassment or discrimination. "I think I'm getting a good education here," she said. Jose Garza, 17, president of the Spanish Club at San Jacinto, said, "I think the teachers here are good and would teach anywhere." Gracie Soliz, 17, a National Honor Society member at San Jacinto, said she had received encouragement from the teachers. Finally, Delia Salas, 17, secretary of the Spanish Club at San Jacinto and student council representative for the past two years, said that Mexican Americans got a good education at the school.⁵⁹

Principals Mueller and Rodgers also noted how they had tried to institute special courses aimed at Mexican American students. San Jacinto had a Texas history course that emphasized the contributions of "Spanish-speaking citizens" and recently had tried to start a Spanish-language business education course but could not locate a bilingual teacher. Jeff Davis had bilingual courses in Latin American and Mexican history.⁶⁰

School administrators also noted how, during the current school year, HISD had begun a pilot program in bilingual education in six elementary schools. Both Ben Canales and Antonio Criado maintained that these efforts were not enough. "They are trying pilot programs when they should be trying mass programs," Criado said. "The dropout rate for Mexican American students is a crisis and the school administration doesn't recognize it," he added.⁶¹

Despite the seriousness of these charges, no specific measures were taken to address them by either the board of education or the superintendent. The request made by Rojo on October 16 for the establishment of a task force of educators, parents, student leaders, and others to investigate these charges likewise was ignored. Community leaders found out that local officials were not genuinely interested in addressing the issues of underachievement and discrimination in the schools.

Although ignored, community leaders continued to organize and mobilize against discrimination in the schools. For instance, several months later, on February 13, 1970, a new community group—Barrios Unidos—decided to press the case for school reforms again. It charged HISD with discrimination, inferior education, and insensitivity toward Chicanos. Barrios Unidos also presented the local board with 13 demands for improving the education of

⁵⁹Sheets, "Latin Student Harassment . . ."

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*

List of Demands Made by Barrios Unidos and Submitted to HISD, February 13, 1970

1. Be it understood, where individual negative attitudes toward Mexican-American students may prevail among teachers, principals, and counsellors, those offenders should not be assigned to a teaching environment where they may directly or indirectly react from such attitudinal conditioning;
2. Appropriate personnel action....reprimand, probation, dismissal.... should be initiated against those persons committing acts of mistreatment and abuse of civil rights of Mexican-American Students;
3. Community voice and control of parents' school groups should not be watchdogged by principals and teachers nor should principals have ultimate power over the parent groups' decisions;
4. Schools should be utilized for community use. Either a junior or senior high school should remain open in each barrio after normal school activities. Barrios Unidos is prepared to sponsor community activities at Marshall and George Washington Junior High Schools;
5. Immediate implementation of a method and schedule by which successful Mexican-Americans and representatives of LOMAS (League of Mexican-American Students) from the University of Houston may address junior and senior high school assemblies in predominantly Mexican-American schools. Identification of students with these persons would serve to improve their aspirations;
6. Curriculum and textbooks should reflect the contributions of Mexican-Americans in the Southwest and the country as a whole. We want courses in Mexican-American history, cultural development, and art studies. Words of Mexican-Americans should be placed in the libraries;
7. Accelerate the implementation of bilingual education. Advertise and conduct a sincere recruitment campaign for qualified bilingual teachers, counsellors, and principals to be assigned to predominantly Mexican-American schools. Such a recruitment campaign should not be limited to presently employed bilingual teachers of whom many are not assigned to predominantly Mexican-American schools;
8. Begin an immediate replacement of all teachers and principals who have reached retirement age or have served the required number of years toward retirement; and who are now employed at predominantly Mexican-American schools. Younger qualified teachers are needed instead of older and mediocre teachers and principals;
9. [As printed in *El Yaqui*, demand 9 was an exact duplicate of demand 8.]
10. A school should not be considered integrated where the majority of students are Mexican-American and Negro. The statistical practice of labelling Mexican-American students white is misleading and serves as a technique to disguise minimum efforts in meeting federal integration guidelines. It also serves to isolate two minorities. By practicing ethnic isolation, the school district is creating and ignoring a problem of racial conflict between the two groups. This problem is promulgated by the principals and teachers attitude of fear of what the black students might do and indifference towards what the white students do. The result is a manifestation of abuses against Mexican-American students;
11. Senior students unable to financially meet all the unnecessary graduation expenses should not be threatened by the principal with suspension and no diploma. They should be allowed to graduate without all unnecessary expenses;
12. The present practice of punishing and suspending Mexican-American students for speaking Spanish or, as commonly referred to by teaching personnel, "a foreign language," should cease immediately. No school principal should prohibit Mexican-American students from speaking Spanish on school campuses;
13. Eliminate as much as possible at the Junior and Senior High School level, South American, Spain's and Mexican history, replacing it with MEXICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY....CHICANO HISTORY. WE HAVE MUCH TO OFFER.

Raul Gutierrez
President, Barrios Unidos

Submitted by,

Daniel Resendez
Spokesman, Barrios Unidos

Source: "Chicanos Too! Students Are Not All Black and Anglo," *El Yaqui*, 2, No. 2 (Febrero 1970): 5, in Luis Cano Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Mexican Americans. Unlike the one drawn up by ARMAS, this list was more comprehensive in proposing changes, including taking punitive actions against school staff having "negative attitudes toward Mexican American students," eliminating the no-Spanish speaking practices, and opposing the possible "integration" of schools with students who were Mexican American and African American.⁶² The demands for school reforms "were not presented for the purpose of gaining any type of publicity," noted *El Yaqui*, the newsletter for Barrios Unidos, "but because our children are recipients of very poor quality education, and are the subject of the worst discriminatory practices on the part of teachers, principals, and other students....Barrios Unidos," it continued, "fully intends to pursue this issue until a balanced educational attitude and program has been developed that will enable the Chicano student to receive quality education, and the treatment and dignity to which he is entitled."⁶³ But, as in prior cases, the local board refused to acknowledge these demands or to address them. Once again the community was ignored.

Despite the protestations by students, parents, and community groups, local school officials remained indifferent to their concerns. Their refusal to recognize and tackle the problem of discrimination in the schools increased the Chicano community's disillusionment with public school officials and laid the groundwork for its further radicalization and mobilization. All that was needed was a catalyst to begin the process of mass mobilization against educational discrimination. The federal court decisions on integration during the summer of 1970 provided this catalyst. These federal decisions set the stage for a vigorous response by the Mexican American community in Houston that would last for the next two decades. Local school district intransigence and insensitivity served to sustain the new activism motivated by these unjust federal court rulings. The rumbling of the Mexican American community during the 1960s, in some respects, was a prelude to the coming explosion of political activism. The cataclysmic events of the 1970s would mobilize the community into a political force to be reckoned with.

⁶²"Chicanos Too: Students Are Not All Black and Anglo," *El Yaqui*, 2, No. 2 (Febrero 1970): 5, Cano Collection. It is unclear why Barrios Unidos began to oppose the integration issue at such an early date, since it did not take place until later in the year. In August 1970, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals directed HISD to undertake racial integration of Houston's elementary schools by busing, using predominantly Mexican American schools to provide the "white" students. Community protest led to a long-term boycott of the public schools, the development of alternative schools within the community, and the establishment of several effective community activist groups.

⁶³*Ibid.*