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The Other Struggle for Equal Schools

Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights Era

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THREE

Emergence of Grassroots Activism

Conflict is the best word to describe the civil rights era of the 1960s. Protest became a conventional method for social, political, and economic redress. People from different backgrounds were taking part in a cultural revolution that was changing American life. The Black Power movement, the Vietnam war, and the struggles of women and minority groups accelerated the unravelling of any sense of American consensus. In the midst of these social movements, Mexican Americans were becoming politically active throughout the Southwest. This period of enormous change inspired Mexican Americans to challenge the politics, assumptions, and principles of the established social order. "[P]olitical activists," noted historian Juan Gomez-Quiñones, "became increasingly concerned with understanding how economic and class exploitation and racism had shaped the Mexican American experience in the United States."[1] In addition, they looked to a cultural renaissance that fostered pride in their ethnic background, language, and history. Some Chicano intellectuals emerged during this period, as they found literary expression in their scholarly journals, political organizations, and academic meetings.[2] Others joined the effort of Cesar Chavez to organize and unionize Mexican farm workers. There were those who joined the Raza Unida Party, founded and led by Jose Angel Gutierrez in 1970, and those who joined Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzalez's Crusade for Justice in Denver, Colorado. Chicano youth were in the forefront of social change. Their political identity was charged with optimism that U.S. society could be reformed. For example, many Chicanos were drawn to the "Spiritual Plan of Aztlan," which claimed that the American Southwest was the home of their forefathers, that they did not recognize capricious boundaries formed by Anglo invaders, that the "Bronze Continent" belonged to the indigenous people who worked the land, and that the spiritual plan was "the only road to total liberation from oppression, exploitation, and racism."[3]

In a similar vein to the Plan of Aztlan, some Chicano youth were influenced by Armando Rendon's *Chicano Manifesto.* Rendon held that American society was but "a bastard issued from the promiscuous concubinage of several hundred of ethnic and racial people who have cast their cultural identities into the American melting pot." He portrayed North American culture as "callous, vindictive, arrogant, militaristic, self-deceiving, and greedy."[4] Chicano thought, however, was probably most clearly expressed in Rodolfo Gonzales's epic poem entitled *I Am Joaquin.* The poem was a social statement of the Chicano experience in the United States. In the words of Gonzales:

> I am Joaquin, lost in a world of confusion, caught up in the whirl of a gringo society, confused by the rules, scored by attitudes, suppressed by manipulation, and destroyed by modern society. My fathers have lost the economic battle and won the struggle of cultural survival. And now! I must choose between the paradox of the victory of the spirit, despite physical hunger, or to exist in the grasp of American social neurosis, sterilization of the soul and a full stomach.[5]

Gonzales despised technical civilization, abhorred capitalism, repudiated the technical and industrial giant called progress, and refused to be absorbed by a nation that rejected him. Though the poem represented only one of the many strands in early Chicano thought, his work was read by scholars, activists, and students alike.

Though Mexican Americans were concerned with larger issues of social justice, many focused their attention on the quality of their schools. They were convinced that social justice was linked to the extent to which their children were able to acquire a good education. Public schools, however, were oriented toward the white middle-class community. Moreover, Mexican American communities lacked sufficient political hegemony to be taken seriously by their schools. As Mario Fantini and Marilyn Gittell claimed, white middle-class communities were served well because "their values were shared" with educational professionals. In addition, public schools had distinctive problems sharing power with the poor, the working class, and racial and ethnic minorities.[6]

During this period, scholars such as Frederick Wirt and Michael Kirst began to provide different ways of understanding the political web of school and community.[7] From Wirt and Kirst's perspective, there seemed to be a blindness or indifference reinforced by conventional wisdom that "schools had somehow been sanitized against politics."[8] Within this context, school-community studies entered into the educational literature. One of the most important studies at the time was written by Donald McCarty

and Charles Ramsey. They showed how power was wielded in different school systems and communities, specifically in their classification of community power structures, types of school boards, and the styles of superintendents. They further argued that the type of community power structure determined the nature of school board types and the administrative styles of superintendents.[9]

McCarty and Ramsey's work, however, was criticized. William Boyd, for example, claimed that instead of public schools being dominated by powerful community elites, educational policymaking was typically controlled by influential school administrators at the top.[10] Harmon Zeigler and Harvey Tucker documented how the American lay public was generally excluded from educational policymaking, finding that superintendents initiated nearly half of all discussions and that "educational professionals account for nearly 70 percent of the agenda; school board members control 24 percent of agendas, members of the public 7 percent, and representatives of other governments less than 1 percent."[11] Their main points were that educational policymaking was almost always restricted to those inside the school system. Joseph McGiveny and James Haught found that central administrations, mostly middle managers, resisted input from the public and tried to maintain control over most educational policies.[12] They found that the most important need of central administrators was to see themselves in control of situations.

Despite school administrators' actions to exclude the lay public across the nation, Fantini and Gittell described how some communities challenged traditional roles of lay participation, the mutually supportive roles of white middle-class associations with schools, and the political practices that denied poor and minority people access "to determine or influence policy decisions that affected them."[13] Public schools became entangled with ethnic politics because, in part, they had failed to achieve what was required by the civil rights legislation of 1964—namely to rid the schools of racial/ethnic discrimination and to provide equal educational opportunity. With increased participation by ethnic minorities came new issues, new challenges, and new forms of participation. But although the federal government instituted mechanisms to encourage parents who had been on the fringes of educational policymaking, the record of institutional participation through Title I Parent Advisory Councils, Follow-Through Councils, and Bilingual Parent Councils, for example, was yielding poor results.[14] While there is a large body of research on the issue of minority parent participation in educational policymaking, especially in large urban school systems, very little exists on the Mexican American experience.

To the extent that most Mexican American communities lacked political power within their school systems, very few scholars have documented the

ways in which some were able to challenge local educational power structures during the civil rights era. Those few that have are important in that they have provided insights into how Mexican American communities gained the knowledge, the experience, and the resources necessary to be taken seriously in their attempt to shape local schools after their own vision. This chapter examines the mobilization of Mexican Americans, their quest for equal schools, and, with this context in mind, looks at how school officials and the white community responded to their demands and pressures. Moreover, it looks at how their efforts in Brownfield differed from those in other districts.

WAKING THE SLEEPING GIANT

Although Mexican Americans numbered more than five million in the Southwest during the late 1960s, they were, as Helen Rowan put it, "A minority nobody knows."[15] Their invisibility seemed ironic because most were living in "conditions that are worse in every respect than those of [other] nonwhites in America." Substandard housing, high unemployment, and low educational attainment characterized life for a large percentage of the Mexican American population in the United States. What was especially remarkable about this situation was not just that such conditions existed but how little was known about it. Rowan wrote that in "California Mexican Americans outnumber Negroes by almost two to one but probably not one Californian in ten thousand knows that simple fact." Despite their numbers and the social conditions of Mexican Americans, very few white Americans in the 1960s were discussing the issues that related to them. The news media gave little attention to their plight, politicians ignored their conditions and, reported Rowan, even "do-good organizations" focused their interests on other problems.[16]

Within this atmosphere of neglect, Mexican American communities began to organize, they started to demand better educational opportunities, and they even called for specific curricular and pedagogical reforms.[17] In East Los Angeles, the largest Mexican American community in the United States, parents formed a group in 1963 called the "Mexican American Education Committee." Before bilingual-bicultural education became a heated issue in American society, these parents were calling for specific reforms: for boards of education in the area to recognize their children's language and culture; for the teaching of Spanish at the elementary level; and for the inclusion of the history and literature of Mexico and other Latin American countries in the curriculum. Moreover, parents pressed school professionals to develop unbiased testing instruments that assessed their children. More important was their desire to "recruit, hire, and place

bilingual teachers, counselors, and administrators [who understood] the Mexican-American child" in their schools.[18]

It was not until President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration that the federal government began to direct some attention to the plight of the Mexican American. Some Mexican American leaders wanted national visibility, "preferably through the lens of a White House Conference [that] focused on their many problems."[19] Demanding their fair share of the Great Society programs, they pushed for reforms that were "specifically designed for Mexican Americans."[20] Acknowledging that public schools were perhaps not serving Mexican American children as well as whites, the U. S. Office of Education created a Mexican-American Affairs Unit to find out how Mexican American children were faring in U. S. public schools. Directed by Armando Rodriguez, the unit was intended to coordinate and improve educational opportunities for Mexican American children in the Southwest. The task was to coordinate federal, state, and local officials to develop culturally and linguistically relevant curricula and pedagogy, special training for teachers, and various social services to meet the educational needs of Mexican American youth. Though the unit held only an advisory role, it was one of the few instances where the federal government dealt specifically with the schooling of Mexican American children.[21]

The Mexican American Affairs Unit viewed the plight of Mexican American youth with a sense of urgency. Although they already knew that Mexican American children were being underserved in many schools, they discovered that in Texas 80 percent fell two grades behind their Anglo class mates, most were leaving school in their junior high school years, and 89 percent were not completing high school. In California, 50 percent of Mexican American youth dropped out by the tenth and eleventh grades and, although they made up 14 percent of school enrollments in the state, they represented 40 percent of enrollments in "mentally handicapped" classes. In addition, Mexican American enrollments in the seven University of California campuses made up less than 0.5 percent.[22] As a response, California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Max Rafferty began to investigate the status of Mexican American education. State Assistant Superintendent Eugene Gonzalez was instructed by Rafferty to begin strategies to improve schooling opportunities for Mexican American youth, such as collaboration between schools and social services, curriculum and pedagogy, and ethnic relations. Among several projects focusing on curricular and instructional materials, Gonzalez pushed for research in technical assistance for specific school districts. While some members of Gonzalez's research team began serving certain school districts, they started to collect data to determine the extent of the problems Mexican American children were facing in schools.[23]

The Gonzalez research team surveyed 896 California school districts during 1966 and 1967. They found that 86 percent of the districts lacked programs for students with limited English proficiency, 68.5 percent failed to conduct regularly scheduled conferences between Mexican American parents and teachers, 80 percent had inadequate financial resources to serve migrant children, more than 50 percent of teachers were not qualified to work with these students, and 77 percent of district professionals did not participate in activities to help them prepare curricular materials for Mexican American children. Though school officials in these districts confessed that little was being done to serve Mexican American children, they absolved themselves of responsibility for this situation. They claimed that it was the students' poor home environment, nutritional deficiency, low aspirations, and unpredictable residency that contributed to their school failure.[24] The stereotype was that Mexican American parents were not interested in educating their children.[25]

In response to these inequalities, educational reformers in California began to organize special conferences to discuss the schooling of Mexican Americans. Eugene Gonzalez, John Plakos, and other members of the Mexican American Education Research Project held one conference in Lake Arrowhead in August 1966 and another in Anaheim in April 1967.[26] The purpose of the conferences was to promote the academic success of Mexican American youth and to explore strategies and programs to enlighten school boards about their educational needs. Conference organizers claimed that the educational standing of the Mexican American child was so poor that if something was not done immediately it was going to be a serious "loss to society as a whole." Some believed that mainstream curriculum and instruction were the major problems. Others claimed that real changes were not possible until teacher education programs were reformed. And there were those who felt that ethnic relations needed to improve before schools could be ameliorated.[27]

Educators at the Lakewood and Anaheim conferences were ideologically split about how to school Mexican American children. Some wanted to assimilate Mexican youth at all costs, convinced that it was wrong to keep "these children 'Mexican'" in the United States. They called for "total assimilation without reference to Mexican cultural traits, traditions, or values."[28] But there were those who felt it was essential to make "the Mexican cultural heritage known to its pupils as a form of educational enrichment." This perspective took the view that cultural and linguistic difference was an asset and that its elimination "would be a gross error and waste on the part of the United States." Mexican American educators supported the idea of taking "'Mexican' cultural traits and values into account when planning educational programs for these students." But the

question became how white middle-class teachers were going to foster learning environments that allowed Mexican American children to "adapt successfully to a different culture without destroying their bilingual ability and without making them feel ashamed of the word 'Mexican.' "[29]

At about the same time the Lake Arrowhead and Anaheim conferences were held, a California State Advisory Committee to the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights was conducting meetings with minority communities. In East Los Angeles, state officials found enormous differences between Mexican and white student experiences. The number of school years completed for Spanish-surnamed persons, for example, was 8.6 while the figure for whites was 12.1. And although the East Los Angeles community was 76 percent Mexican American, 7 percent had no formal schooling and 9 percent had completed only one year of college. The dropout rate for both groups was especially striking. At Garfield and Roosevelt high schools (on the east side), the Mexican American dropout rate ranged from 47.5 to 53.8 percent while in Monroe and Palisides (the west side), the white student dropout rate ranged from 2.6 to 3.1 percent.[30]

Mexican American parents, educators, and activists alike were convinced that the culprit behind high dropout rates was negative teacher attitudes toward Mexican American children.[31] Parents had always believed that schools in the east side were used as a dumping ground for incompetent white teachers. "We feel that we are getting second-rate teachers," Mexican American parents said, "in all the Mexican American areas." Parents knew that many white teachers resented their teaching assignments in the barrio schools. But more important, the parents resented teachers' complaints about their children's lack of ability to learn.[32] Ben Gomez, a teacher in East Los Angeles, explained that Mexican American parents had a legitimate concern about white teachers expecting less from their children. "I have heard some remarks in the teachers' room," said Gomez, "like '[T]hese Mexican kids, why do they have to be here?' "[33]

Elnore Schmadel challenged the myth that Mexican American parents did not care about their children's education. She pointed out that Mexican American parents had always tried to participate in the East Los Angeles schools, but that most schools had made them feel unwelcome. Educators often conveyed messages to Mexican American parents that they did not know enough to participate.[34] One Mexican American parent in Los Angeles said she attempted to get involved in her child's education. She stopped trying because she was either ignored or told by teachers that "they don't want you there."[35] Other Mexican American parents stayed away from schools because it was difficult for them to forget their own negative "or even miserable school experiences."[36] But there as another dimension to the problem. Coming from a sociocultural background that

held teachers in high esteem, many Mexican American parents, especially recent immigrants, believed it was not their place to challenge the schools. They regarded teachers as trained professionals serving all children. Some critics came to believe that it was this "unwarranted respect for the wisdom of teachers and principals" that created so many problems and "one reason why they have allowed their children to be pushed around for so long."[37]

Los Angeles teacher Frank Serrano characterized and challenged the stereotype of Mexican American parent indifference in the following way:

> We have heard many comments about the Mexican American parents, that they are not interested in the education of their children. We have heard that they are lazy, that we cannot communicate with them. But let me be as emphatic as I may—without taking my shoe off and pounding it on the table—that the Mexican American parents are very much concerned with the education of their children.[38]

A large segment of the Mexican American population recognized that white middle-class educators viewed them as uncooperative consumers of public education. This view became deeply embedded in the culture of schools as well as part of the defensive posture of educational practitioners. Without actually knowing Mexican American parents and without actually hearing their point of view, teachers and administrators developed negative stereotypes that justified their exclusion.[39]

Since the early 1960s, Mexican Americans in California had been complaining to state officials that schools were not meeting the needs of Mexican American children in general and the limited English proficient (LEP) in particular. The State Department of Education responded and created the Bilingual Task Force. Its aim was to develop special programs for Mexican American LEP children, in-service training for teachers, counselors, and administrators, technical assistance in program evaluation, improved school-community relations, and bilingual teacher training. The goal was to implement these reforms in districts "with the highest concentration of Spanish-speaking youngsters and the highest percentage of such students scoring in the first quartile on statewide reading tests."[40]

Similar to the pre-*Brown* era, very few scholars were challenging conventional wisdom about Mexican American school failure. Thomas Carter, however, presented three explanations for the problem. In the first, Carter maintained that mainstream educators saw Mexican Americans as culturally deficient because their parents did not possess the cultural currency to socialize their children to succeed in schools. From this perspective, many educators believed it was the responsibility of the school to transform Mexican American children as much as possible into average

white middle-class children. Carter rejected this perspective because it meant schools had to artificially provide Mexican Americans "with those experiences that the middle-class enjoys naturally." This approach was also biased because Mexican American children would be measured by the degree to which they became more like their middle-class peers.[41] Within this context, Carter claimed that there was "no clear evidence that the school can remake the ethnically distinct child into a facsimile of the standard American child."[42]

Carter's second explanation claimed that the academic structure of schools encouraged Mexican American children to fail. He arrived at this conclusion based on his findings that many schools in the Southwest were "sustained by such common conditions as cultural exclusion, fostering too rapid Americanization, rigid tracking, curricular rigidity, rote teaching, overly rigid behavioral standards, ethnic cleavage, de facto segregation, and biased and pessimistic staffs."[43] The major task, he believed, was to transform schools to better serve the Mexican American child. Even though many educators recognized that "standard middle-class schools have failed many Mexican Americans," very few were willing to institute "programs to substantially modify curriculums, teacher attitudes, school climates, home-school relations, or other crucial areas." Educational institutions were not "flexible enough to realistically adjust to local situations," observed Carter, "and a very limited number have objectively investigated negative school social climates." Carter believed that change did not necessarily begin with curricular and pedagogical reforms, but with the preparation of teachers. From his perspective, teachers needed to be trained at a very sophisticated level. They had to understand "and grapple with the often intangible, but multitudinous, aspects of their own and others' society, culture, language, learning styles, personality, and behavior." In short, teachers needed to possess a wider understanding of school and society as it related to the Mexican American experience.[44]

Carter's third explanation received little attention in the educational literature, perhaps because it was too controversial. Carter believed that the distinctive features of the agricultural economy and caste-like community structures of the American Southwest provided limited opportunities for Mexican Americans. Similar to Gilbert Gonzalez's view that schools processed Mexican American children as a source of cheap labor during the pre-*Brown* era, Carter maintained that education was organized around a conservative sociopolitical ideology that advocated the political disfranchisement and economic subordination of Mexican Americans. Moreover, academic perseverance and high school graduation, said Carter, did not necessarily guarantee Mexican American youth social status and economic rewards. Educational change was possible, he predicted, if local school

boards and educators led "the way to change these community conditions and belief patterns." This change was unlikely, however, because "educational leaders [were] too intermeshed with conservative community power elements."[45]

As more Mexican American communities began challenging their schools, various state officials and the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights were forced to take a more active role in promoting the success of Mexican American youth.[46] One of the more notable efforts by the U. S. Commission was a booklet they produced to familiarize Spanish-speaking communities with services and recourses to achieve school reform. The publication provided a description of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the significance of Title VII, how programs functioned, how they were implemented, and a sample of successful programs.[47] This information had some impact on various Mexican American communities, especially those that were searching for ways to challenge their school districts. It served as a useful reference on federal, state, and local responsibilities to Mexican American children.

THE MOBILIZATION OF DISSENT

After 1965, Mexican American parents in Brownfield began arguing that their schools were failing to serve their children adequately. Their impression was that school officials were either unconscious of, or resistant to, curricular and pedagogical changes that would encourage the students' academic success, stimulate their cultural pride, and affirm their ethnic self-worth. It seemed that as long as schools were performing adequately for white middle-class children, almost nothing needed to change. Moreover, educators did not consider the Mexican American community as a serious threat because it lacked political power in the community and a collective voice to challenge the schools. Their silence, however, did not necessarily mean they were living harmoniously with their schools. It was more of an indication of the frustration and rejection parents felt because they were unable to communicate with their schools.

The idea that schools were inadequately serving Mexican American children only became an issue when the local press pointed out that the Brownfield schools were ignoring the problem. In the tradition of Oscar Lewis, local educators held a deficit perspective of Mexican children and felt that their home environment prevented many of them from attaining the necessary experiences to succeed in school.[48] But whether school failure was attributed to social, cultural, or economic differences, the local newspaper reported that it was difficult for Mexican Americans to earn a decent living, attain respect from the dominant society, or acquire posi-

tions of social status. From the local editor's perspective, Mexican Americans were unable to "take [their] rightful place in the community throughout their adult lives."[49]

Two years later, local newspaper reporter Bob Cohen wrote an article about Mexican American and white perceptions about education and ethnic discrimination. The groups differed dramatically on the issues, Cohen said. Whites looked "aghast at the suggestion that discrimination is practiced against Mexicans in town." Despite race or ethnicity, white residents felt everyone had an equal chance to succeed in school and local society. But after interviewing several Mexican Americans, they enumerated "case after case, many of them documented, of subtle, but definite discrimination." Housing discrimination was one example; many Mexican American families were living in substandard housing and paying above-market rents. In other cases, some property owners refused to rent to Mexican families.[50] But educational discrimination became the focal point of Cohen's article. Unlike the housing problem, unequal education was more difficult to document. One anonymous informant challenged the notion that everyone was receiving an equal education in the Brownfield schools. He asked why then were educators deciding "beforehand that [Mexican Americans] go to vocational programs, and that Anglos go to college." Teachers, he stated, "automatically expect that a kid's going to be a certain way because he's a Mexican."[51]

Although Mexican American parents and the local press had charged that the local schools had fallen short in serving the Mexican American child, it was the work of Nate Warran (a VISTA employee) that prompted school officials to discuss the issue more seriously. Warran specifically studied the problems Mexican American youth were facing at the local high school. He found that their dropout rate was forty-two percent in 1967, when Mexican Americans represented twenty-two percent of the school population.[52] Though teachers, counselors, and administrators looked at the dropout problem from different vantage points, most blamed the problem on social discrimination in general and the Mexican American family in particular. For example, one teacher believed that social discrimination, whether "real or imagined," certainly added to the dropout problem. As the Mexican American student population grew, it became marginalized by the structure of the school. The teacher also added that Mexican American youth were so pessimistic about their futures that regardless of their academic performance many believed they would "not have a chance in life." Mexican American youth were on the social periphery of the school; they rarely participated in clubs, academic organizations, or other extracurricular activities. Their isolation was so imbedded in the culture of the school that few could be found eating in the

cafeteria. In a more revealing look at their social experiences up to the mid-1960s, Mexican Americans did not appear among the school's superlatives, the "wittiest," the "best looking," or the most "likely to succeed."[53] One teacher said that Mexican American students were so withdrawn from school that by the time they reached high school they were "almost unalterably alienated to school, adults, and even most of their peers."[54]

In Brownfield, as in other school systems experiencing racial and ethnic demographic shifts, Mexican Americans were unsuccessful at adapting to a structure that traditionally served white, middle-class, mostly college preparatory students. They clashed with an assimilationist ideology that expected them to rise within the school's "meritocratic" academic order. Along the same line depicted in Gerald Grant's study of Hamilton High, Mexican Americans at Brownfield High were feeling "a widespread sense of failure." Grant partly attributed minority school failure to negative teacher attitudes: Most lacked interest in adjusting to a curriculum and a pedagogy that were culturally relevant for African American youth.[55]

Within this context, Warran informed school officials and other members of the community that Mexican American students were dropping out because the high school had so little to offer them. Its unfriendly social climate and negative teacher attitudes, he said, were pushing them out of school. A hostile response could have been expected from the central administration and school board, given that conventional wisdom had always blamed the Mexican American family. But contrary to that expectation, John Bowing, the head counselor for the high school, agreed with Warran's report. Bowing said the report was "fair in its assessment of the situation, particularly in regard to the attitude of rejection of Mexican American students." Though he admitted that the high school was perhaps less than a welcoming environment for Mexican American youth, he also said many saw "no value in [education]" and that most wanted "to get out" of schools as soon as they could.[56] Bowing's view reflected a general contradiction: Educational professionals admitted that public schools were inadequately serving Mexican American youth yet they were unwilling to make any changes because they believed many of these youth lacked interest in school.[57]

School officials downplayed the schools' unfriendly environment and ascribed the dropout problem to the Mexican American's low socioeconomic standing. Joey Windham, the district's director of child welfare and attendance, for example, found that a significant number of Mexican American youth who were leaving school during their freshman and sophomore years were living below the poverty line. Keeping these students in school was a difficult task, he said, because most of them were "concerned about money." On the one hand, Windham said, many of

these students wanted dignity and respect. Instead of implementing a culturally relevant curriculum at the school, Windham envisioned "a wide work experience program that will get these students out earning the money they need."[58] He focused on a work-study program because he had "nothing to offer them in the way of a school program." Even if special programs were in place, he said, "most of them don't even want one." It was ironic that while compulsory education laws required all children to stay in school until the age of sixteen, Windham said he would "just have to look the other way and tell the father, through an interpreter, to please keep his children off the street."[59]

Instead of creating an educational experience that was responsive to the Mexican American language and culture, school officials were convinced that a structured work-study program would benefit the Mexican American LEP student. Despite the displeasure some Mexican American parents expressed over their children's receiving vocational education while many white children were being prepared for college, John Bowing insisted that a work-study program would help Mexican Americans see "more value, more reality, more relevance in . . . education." He introduced a program in which two hundred students would be enrolled in part-time work, which would succeed, he suggested, because the district was "getting a lot of cooperation from businessmen in the community."[60] Conventional wisdom continued to assume that reform was unnecessary because Mexican Americans were uninterested in school, and that they would be satisfied serving local labor market needs.

Work-study programs were becoming standard features in secondary schools serving non-college-bound students. Allowing these students the opportunity to earn money while attending school was the main objective. Although there were some successful programs, most tended to prepare Mexican American youth for minimum wage jobs within local labor markets.[61] Carter, for example, maintained that most work-study programs in the Southwest prepared Mexican American "girls to become domestic servants, restaurant helpers ('busboys'), garment workers, or perhaps waitresses." Mexican American boys were "introduced to shop skills, electricity, body and fender work, and mechanics." The expressed goal was to prepare Mexican Americans for skilled vocations, but most obtained menial jobs in their communities.[62]

Educational reformers looked at work-study programs from different vantage points but most concluded that it was the best approach to remedy their high dropout rate. Some Mexican American parents, a few white liberals, and the local press pointed out that work-study programs were unlikely to solve the problem. From their perspective, it was the curriculum, pedagogy, and negative attitudes that were pushing Mexican

American students out of school. Despite this challenge, school officials refused to make significant reforms.[63] Given the recalcitrant stance of most educational professionals, a number of Mexican American parents started to challenge the Brownfield schools more vigorously.

It was difficult to determine how much impact large inner-city school protests and college campus unrest had on the Brownfield Mexican American community at the time. One outgrowth was unequivocally clear: Mexican American pride began to grow, the years of self-doubt began to loosen, and they started to question the conventional educational order with an organized voice. Rejecting deficit models of education that explained why their children were failing in school, several parents complained that "too much talk has been going on lately," and they demanded concrete action from the schools.[64] Jim Torrez, president of the local Mexican American Political Association chapter, said parents were displeased with their schools and called for educational reform. They confronted the board by telling them that they would itemize a list of twenty problems and if the school board solved just one, the parents pledged to restore their faith in the system.[65]

Parents were especially concerned about teachers treating their children differently from their white peers. School board member Dr. Kim Barnes responded that in many cases Mexican American youth were creating problems for themselves. She described the rudeness her daughter was experiencing on the bus from Mexican American youth. Barnes implied that Mexican American parents needed to take more responsibility for their children.[66] In a subsequent board meeting, approximately thirty-five Mexican American parents attended. One parent, Manuel Rendon, told the board he wanted nothing more than his child to be recognized as being as good as a white student. One of the major problems in the district, said Rendon, was that "many students and even teachers regard Mexican Americans . . . as third-class citizens." He said some teachers believed Mexican American children were "wasting their time in the classroom." Some teachers felt Mexican American students were better off working in the fields.[67]

One of the most important studies that partially dealt with negative teacher attitudes toward Mexican American children took place in a small rural school district in Northern California. Theodore Parsons described how white teachers in this school systematically ignored Mexican American children and consciously gave special attention to white children. Teachers explained that white students deserved extra attention because they were going to be future community leaders, and, more importantly, that Mexican American children might as well accept being led by Anglos.[68] Teachers stereotyped Mexican American children as "dumb" and inferior

in capacity and performance. They also instilled in them the belief that whites were naturally superior to Mexicans. Ability grouping was practiced to such an extent that high-ability classes were almost entirely filled with white children. One teacher told Parsons that such classes were kept as "small as possible because we feel that brighter pupils deserve a chance to get as much as they can out of school without being held back by the kids who are dull or just lazy or don't care."[69]

Parson's analysis suggested that Mexican American schooling experiences within "colonial settings" were common phenomena in the Southwest. Douglas Foley described a similar situation in a South Texas high school, where he observed a teacher ignore Mexican American students and noted how he "mainly interacted with the Anglos." Similar to the Parson's study, the high school teacher in Texas told Mexican American students that they were "too slow to be in school" and that they were better off "in the fields doing something useful."[70]

School officials in Brownfield began to face inequalities that were increasingly hard to ignore, not because Mexican American parents were challenging them but because the local press was pointing out that Mexican American children were being "neglected, often exploited, sometimes repressed." No one was "more acutely aware of these facts," said local reporter Joe O'Neil, than officials from the Brownfield schools.[71] Though school officials acknowledged that Mexican American children were unlikely to perform well because schools were oriented toward "middle-class values in the community," the reforms that would substantially give access to a curriculum and pedagogy that would value their language and culture were discounted during this period. This attitude sparked the growth of a more militant movement by a small number of Mexican American parents.[72]

THE MEXICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY STARTS TO RUMBLE

The exclusion of minority communities in school politics became a familiar topic of discussion in seminars, symposia, and conferences across the nation. Although researchers were consistently referring to the problems of African American communities, most remained silent when it came to Mexican American experiences.[73] Like African American activists, Mexican American educators pointed out that educational professionals were asking the wrong questions about how to improve schooling conditions. Professor Manuel Guerra remarked that educational professionals should ask what was wrong with the way they were teaching the Chicano child, rather than what was "wrong with the Chicano child." Guerra advocated a culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy and in-service training for

teachers. He underscored the importance of including Mexican American parents in "school board meetings and in other policy making bodies."[74]

Minority communities throughout the nation knew they were being marginalized by their schools, they knew their children were missing out on quality education, and they knew educational policymakers were failing to adequately use federal funds to serve their children. Carl Grant suggested that minority parents were being excluded from the knowledge needed to participate; no one "told [them] where they can find" the information and, in some cases, "guidelines of many federal programs [were] intentionally . . . withheld from minorities and the poor."[75] During the first years of Title I programs, for example, there were complaints of blatant misuse. In some locales, revealed Donald Reed and Douglas Mitchell, the money was being used "to supplant, rather than to supplement, regular state and local funds." In some districts, school officials were using Title I funds to "buy tuxedos for high school proms and band uniforms." Reed and Mitchell found that federal funds rarely found their "way to the poor," that school officials were "slow to establish the required new advisory councils," that they were slower to grant minority parents "considerable authority of Title I," and that they "did little to help citizens understand the program."[76]

The discourse on Mexican American education at the national level had some effects in the Brownfield community. The Mexican American pursuit for equal schools in Brownfield grew from individual complaints to the birth of an organized movement. Parents began to articulate basic questions about their exclusion. A small group of Mexican American parents came together in 1968 and formed the organization called Communidad Organizada Para Educación (COPE). Wanting to be included on decisions that affected their children, COPE sought curricular, pedagogical, and policy reforms.[77] Searching for ways to be included in the district's decision-making process, Mexican American parents discovered that the Brownfield schools had been receiving Title I funds but could not account for how these funds were being spent. COPE demanded clarification of the mechanisms that linked federal moneys to the Brownfield schools, how the district qualified, how funds were being spent, and what was being done to improve the education of "disadvantaged" youth in the district. Moreover, the group asked how school officials had created the Title I advisory committee, how it operated, and what kind of training was being planned for teachers and aides to serve disadvantaged children.[78] This challenge served to increase Mexican American activism in the community, and it became the impetus to question the educational power structure more vigorously.

COPE was able to acquire the support of other local Mexican American organizations. Pressing for educational reform, the Mexican American

Political Association, the United Minority Coalition, and the Dollar Club (a church organization) closed ranks (calling themselves the Educational Coalition) and presented a list of demands to the school board in a meeting. "[S]cores of people, many of whom could not speak English," one newspaper reporter wrote, crowded into Brownfield High School "to demonstrate their concern about what they considered the failure of the school system to provide their children with meaningful education." In their presentation to the board, Mexican American leaders said they were "forced to tolerate conditions that guarantee the perpetuation of continual poverty, bad housing, malnutrition, and ill health." In their challenge to the board, they said they would rally against an "education that has guaranteed that the majority of our children drop out of school without meaningful tools to break this cycle." Mexican American leaders were both critical and cordial but firm that their voices needed to be heard.[79]

Drawing school authorities into a heated discussion about local school reform, Mexican American leaders demanded the following changes: special training for Mexican American parents so they could evaluate Title 1 programs; accounting from school authorities on Title I expenditures (and dissemination of the information to all interested groups and the media); three bilingual aides to work with a district community liaison officer to serve as a link between the Mexican American community and the schools; support services for minority parents to encourage their participation; bilingual aides for minority schools; on-going training for all teachers in the methodology of English as a second language (ESL); aides for teachers working with Mexican American children; the inclusion of minorities in the curriculum; and free lunches served at low-income targeted schools.[80] The Brownfield school board agreed to hire between thirteen and fifteen teacher's aides but refused to implement the rest of the demands because, from their perspective, the district lacked the financial resources to make such reforms. Elias Orozco, a member of the United Minority Coalition, said Mexican American demands seemed reasonable to him since they had "been waiting 20 years for a satisfactory educational program." The superintendent told Mexican Americans that the district was making "sincere, honest attempts to meet the problems of Mexican American pupils."[81]

But Mexican American parents refused to believe that the professionals were serious about reforming the schools. Social and academic conditions were so inadequate at the high school level, for example, that three to four hundred students walked out in protest. Among their demands, Mexican American students insisted that teachers stop making "derogatory statements" about them, that school officials hire a female dean of girls, and that the school incorporate courses in the history and culture of U. S. minorities.[82] One major concern for protesting students

was the lack of Mexican American educators in the high school. To give an example of their underrepresentation: In 1967, Mexican American students composed 27.5 percent of the student body in the district but only 3.7 percent (18 out of 477 teachers) of the education professionals had Spanish surnames.[83] This problem was evident in other communities outside Brownfield. It was a problem many school districts in the state were confronting. In 1968, for example, Mexican American students composed 21 percent of California's public school enrollments. Yet only 2.2 percent of teachers in the state were Mexican American.[84]

At Brownfield High, Mexican American enrollments had grown from less than 7 percent in 1960 to 22 percent in 1967. In spite of this increasing number, school officials refused to make reforms that would benefit the Mexican American population.[85] The school had a long-term commitment to educational excellence that manifested itself in an inflexible loyalty to a rigid academic tradition. In some ways the school mirrored certain issues that Gerald Grant described in his study of Hamilton High. Although Brownfield High (built in 1894) had a much longer history than Hamilton High (built in 1953), both schools were regarded as first-rate institutions when they were predominantly white.[86] But as minority student enrollments began to grow, demographic shifts began to strain the school's social, cultural, and academic structures. Recalcitrant teachers, administrators, and school board members were reluctant to adjust to the changing needs of their student clientele. The ideology in both schools was that minority students needed to change, adopt new values, and assimilate into the mainstream of school life. Although some individual teachers were willing to accommodate to the special needs of minority students, the basic structure of the high schools functioned to promote the success of white middle-class students. In Brownfield and in Hamilton, most minority students who remained in school were typically in low, average, or vocational courses. It was the exception rather than the rule for minority youth to be enrolled in advanced courses during the 1960s.[87]

One educator at a nearby community college, Rodolfo Orellano, remembered the walkout at Brownfield High. He said that the event was entangled with a silent politics of racism, power, and privilege. Among those students walking out of the school, said Orellano, "was a feeling that white students were privileged and Mexicans were second-class citizens." From Orellano's perspective, school authorities lacked the "sensitivity, the openness, and the attitude to open up the possibility to communicate with the Spanish-speaking community." After Mexican American students dropped out of Brownfield schools, some came to the community college. As a counselor, Orellano reports that Mexican Americans were excluded from advanced courses at Brownfield High. Some of these students "as-

pired to become doctors, lawyers, and engineers," said Orellano, "but the doors were slammed shut." Part of the problem was that many teachers believed "Mexican American students were not bright enough." Administrators, counselors, and teachers were so biased that even Mexican American students who "showed accomplishment were not given the encouragement and courses so they might be prepared for college." Orellano explained how some of them had enrolled in the local community college and then later transferred to four-year institutions and received their degrees. "There were not a lot of them," says Orellano, "but it makes the point." To the extent that the Brownfield district was undergoing dramatic social, cultural, and academic changes, Orellano noted that it "must have been so difficult to ask of those [white] folks, after being so successful with that [white] population, to change."[88]

The Mexican American student experience in Brownfield resonated throughout the Southwest. "Mexican American children who . . . aspired to careers other than those of their fathers," said Meyer Weinberg, "were often explicitly discouraged by school personnel."[89] Weinberg used the testimony of Texas Senator Joe Bernal in a state hearing during the late 1960s to demonstrate how Mexican American youth were being excluded in school. Looking back at his high school years, Bernal remembered telling his high school principal he wanted to transfer to a school in the northern part of San Antonio. The principal told him it was a bad idea because, in his words, there was "no use [of] your going to the North Side schools because you're not going to compete. If you stay over with your people," the principal said, "you may end up being a leader. If you go over there, they are going to minimize your potential and you are going to be competing with white students. Rather than have you mongrelize and water down the races," he advised Bernal, "stay [in] your part of town."[90]

These types of experiences triggered student protests or "blowouts" in high schools throughout the Southwest. "In Texas alone," noted Weinberg, "demonstrations occurred in Uvalde, Crystal City, Edcouch-Elsa, Kingsville, Alpine, San Antonio, Sierra Blanca, Lubbock, Abiline, and San Marcos."[91] But the largest and most publicized Mexican American student walkout took place in East Los Angeles. "Thousands of Chicano high school students [some 12,000] staged a dramatic walkout," noted Carlos Muñoz, "from five city schools located in the general East Side area of the Los Angeles metropolis." Among a list of thirty-six demands, Mexican American high school students wanted classes that were culturally relevant and the hiring of Mexican American teachers, counselors, and administrators.[92] What was particularly striking about the East Los Angeles protests was how Mexican American parents, in general, supported their children's

demands. Some parents even called for the dismissal of "administrators and teachers that show forms of prejudice towards Mexican or Mexican American students."[93] The "student walkouts," observed Muñoz, "represented the first massive urban demonstration in the history of Chicano America and became the catalyst for Chicano political mobilization and protest against the schools." Moreover, this public school student unrest became one of the most important signs of "oppression and powerlessness [that] awakened many Chicanos to the need for political action against the educational power structure and generated a drive for community control of the schools."[94]

Data collected by the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights showed that Mexican American's academic achievement, holding rates, and participation in extracurricular activities all lagged behind those of their white counterparts.[95] Douglas Foley described the overrepresentation of Mexican American students in practical classes in North Town. Even after Mexican American parents had complained to the school board that their children were disproportionately placed in low-ability/practical classes, very little was done to reform the school. Tracking was so obvious, said Foley, that "Mexican political activists were fond of saying that Anglos had to be retarded before they were placed in the practical sections."[96] In ethnically "integrated" schools, the social, cultural, and academic climates were organized around an ideology so obvious that it became an insult to white students to be placed in classes with Mexican American students.

SEARCHING FOR A SCHOOL ETHNIC COMMUNITY COMPROMISE

Brownfield Mexican American parents were becoming more resentful at school officials because very little was being done to construct social and academic environments that would allow their children to flourish. COPE began an aggressive campaign to support a reform agenda that would bestow respect on Mexican American students. Within a few days, COPE multiplied its size from a small group of parents to approximately 550 dues-paying members.[97] As the group grew in size and political cohesion, it asserted its agenda more confidently against the local educational power structure. One concern was the lack of communication between Mexican American parents and the schools. Petitioning for a "community liaison" to improve ethnic relations, Marcos Santillana, a COPE member and a prominent entrepreneur, argued that the position would "strengthen communication between Mexican Americans and the school district."[98] In addition, the group reminded school officials that the use of Title I funds fell within federal guidelines to hire a community liaison. The board hesitated but was persuaded by Mexican American leaders to authorize

the position.[99] Mary Guerra, a native of Brownfield and one of the few Mexican American women in the community with a college degree, was asked to fill the position by Mexican American leaders. In accepting the position, Guerra pledged to serve all poor people in the community. It was unjust to exclusively serve the Spanish speaking, she said, but it just happened that most poor people in "the area are Mexican Americans."[100]

Because racial/ethnic tension between Mexican American and white communities was escalating throughout the Southwest, the federal government encouraged school districts to use community relations specialists to soothe ethnic tension. Susan Navarro Uranga, from the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, advocated that districts serving large Mexican American communities utilize relations specialists because they could "serve as a link between the people and the power structure." Uranga noted that Mexican American communities often relied on these individuals to bridge the communication gap.[101] But depending on how community relations specialists were used and what political orientation they held, individuals in these positions were viewed as buffers, ombudspeople, revolutionaries, sellouts, or apologists for those holding power.[102] In most cases, community relations specialists became intermediaries with vaguely defined roles. Most struggled to keep "lines of communications open" between schools and minority communities. Despite the need to improve school and Mexican American community relations, said Uranga, "most school systems have not established this type of liaison with the barrio." She found that "84 percent of the surveyed districts did not use community relations specialists at all."[103] In 1968, California had more than 1,000 school districts, but only 84 community relations specialists were employed. More important was the fact that most eligible school systems waived the opportunity to employ them and, as a result, the "Mexican American community [was missing] the type of communication and involvement" that such professionals were able to provide.[104]

Mary Guerra, the new community advocate for the Brownfield school system, and several Mexican American parents began to prioritize the reforms they wanted implemented immediately. Although their children faced numerous problems at all grade levels, they chose to focus on the schooling of LEP children in the primary grades. As a result, Mexican American leaders began to rally around the establishment of a bilingual-bicultural elementary school because their children were failing to benefit from mainstream curriculum and pedagogy. As they presented the idea of a bilingual-bicultural school, two board members seemed receptive while the rest staunchly opposed it because, they said, the district lacked the funds to support the project.[105] The bilingual-bicultural school, however, evolved into a larger discourse around Mexican Americans wanting to

bilingual- bicultural schools

hold a stake in the education of their children, the desire to sustain a sense of cultural identity for their children, and, in the broadest sense, their inclusion in the decision-making structure.

Carrying out a petition drive to demonstrate to the school board that Mexican Americans supported the bilingual-bicultural school, COPE gathered 3,373 signatures in the community. When the issue came up for discussion, more than 300 people, mostly Mexican Americans, attended the school board meeting to support the proposed school. In their presentation to the school board, Mexican American leaders pushed for a bilingual-bicultural elementary community school that would serve preschool children, the limited English proficient, school dropouts, and the elderly. They also wanted to train parents so they could serve as classroom aides, to use older students to tutor younger children, to start an adult program (the idea was for members of the adult community to teach classes or share knowledge with others), to start a hot breakfast and lunch program, and to create parent council committees with the power to organize the school's curriculum and hire personnel.[106]

Although two board members were open to the bilingual school concept, the rest refused to consider it. One board member, Dr. Kim Barnes, said she needed more evidence to convince her that a bilingual-bicultural school would enhance learning opportunities for the limited English proficient. "After hearing tonight's presentation," she said, "being against the idea of a bilingual-bicultural school would be like being against motherhood." There were "many general concepts and very valid feelings," Barnes continued, "but little in terms of actual facts to convince me that this program would be better."[107] School board members resisted the bilingual-bicultural school concept because it went against the traditional curricular and pedagogical convention of the school district and community, they were unwilling to share power with Mexican American leaders, and they seemed to question Mexican American parents' sophistication in dealing with complex educational issues.[108]

But several Mexican American parents had successfully rallied support from the community and, more importantly, had contributed to the research and writing of a proposal to implement such a program. Though several members of the Mexican American community were instrumental in mobilizing the community, school officials saw Guerra, the community liaison, as a major influence.[109] Considering her a threat to the local educational power structure, school board members began to rethink her position as a paid employee in the district and began to talk about how to eliminate the position. Some Mexican Americans were perplexed as to why school officials were calling Guerra's role as a community advocate into question because, in their minds, she had been performing a com-

mendable job. One Mexican American parent said school officials wanted "to fire Ms. Guerra" because they were "displeased with her success in the program."[110]

Mexican Americans resented the school board's plan to eliminate the community advocate position. It was this mechanism that had finally given Mexican American parents a voice in school affairs. More than 150 Mexican Americans attended a board meeting. One parent, Lazaro Olivas, claimed that the real reason the school board wanted to eliminate the position was because Guerra was discovering their misdeeds. Board members, however, explained that their goal was to make better use of Title I funds. Mexican Americans maintained that the position not only fell within Title I guidelines, but also that it was difficult to establish a dialogue with school officials about the plight of the Mexican American without a community advocate. Guerra said Mexican Americans were "being given just lip service" by school officials who were plotting a course of conduct that purported to promote the success of Mexican American students but rarely followed through. For some time school officials had been saying that they were interested in what Mexican American parents had to say, said Guerra. But after listening to what Mexican American parents wanted, local policymakers usually "present something else."[111]

One board member said Guerra had "done a good job in the community with the parents" but that she "had strayed far from the guidelines [and caused] much friction throughout the community."[112] One of the paradoxes of this period was that the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights attempted to encourage Mexican American parents in their communities to participate in school affairs while local educational power structures fought hard to maintain the status quo. Seeking a Mexican American voice in educational policy and school reform stirred up defensive feelings from the local school district and also produced some anxiety within the white community. If Mexican American activists were going to reform the schools, it was indeed going to involve conflict, power politics, and ethnic struggle.

WHITE BACKLASH TO MEXICAN AMERICAN DEMANDS

It was strange that white residents had not challenged earlier allegations made by the local newspaper, individual Mexican American parents, and VISTA worker Nate Warran that the Brownfield schools were inadequately serving Mexican American youth. But as soon as Mexican American parents became organized, cohesive, and openly critical of the local educational power structure and demanded specific reforms, some white members of the community began to respond. One way to explain this initial silence was that most white parents saw the Mexican American commu-

nity as inert, a weak threat to the status quo of the schools, and that Mexican American parents lacked the capacity to muster local reform. The fact that Mexican American parents had united and made specific demands, however, made many white residents extremely nervous. The level of their anxiety was demonstrated by a letter written to the editor about the feelings of many people in the community concerning the Mexican American demand for educational reform. In this letter, Mr. and Mrs. Gus Gensen offered Mexican Americans three alternatives to their discontent: (1) "Finance and construct their own school(s)," (2) "Go back to Mexico and attend one of their choice," or (3) "Continue to attend one of our very fine, high-quality local schools and let the big, bad Anglos pick up the tab."[113]

The Gensens first attacked the bilingual-bicultural school Mexican American parents wanted to establish. Citing the program as un-American, they looked to the local Japanese American community to demonstrate that other American minorities were able to "make it" in school and society without bilingual-bicultural education. After World War II, the Gensens wrote, Japanese-American children "must have felt out of place and very uncomfortable" in school. They were denied opportunities to speak Japanese and "as for their culture and history, it would have been the last thing on earth that any school system would have considered teaching in class." The American public school, according to the Gensens, did not hinder Japanese American parents from doing a commendable job raising their children and, of "all races and cultures, they have the highest percent of people in the professions: Some of the most successful farmers and businessmen in the state." Rhetorically asking Mexican American leaders how the Japanese American community was able to succeed, the Gensens answered: "Consider—HARD WORK, MANY HOURS OF STUDY, GREAT FAMILY PRIDE AND A LARGE RESPECT FOR LAW AND ORDER." With a backhanded slap at the Mexican American leadership, they advised them to stop criticizing the schools and to assume more responsibility for the failure of their children. The Brownfield schools, they said, were doing "everything possible to keep ALL youngsters (including yours) in school so that they can some day get a better job and . . . become responsible citizens." For the Gensens, Mexican Americans were the ones who were being "prejudiced against the very country and people who have opened their doors to you." If Mexican American leaders were truly interested in improving their station in American life, the Gensens told them to stop complaining "and take a few lessons from the 'Japs'!"[114]

Although the Gensens' invective was explicitly addressed to Mexican American leaders, it was read as a character assault on the entire Mexican American community. Their letter suggested that Mexican American chil-

dren were unable to thrive in school because their parents were indifferent to education or hard work and lacked family pride or respect for law and order.[115] At this juncture, more people entered the debate, manifesting their differences in politics, values, and, within this context, notions of how the school ought to serve the Mexican American child. Local reporter Ben Quarny was the first to respond to the Gensen's letter, calling into question the remark about Anglos picking up the tab for the schooling of Mexican American children. The Gensens assumed that white residents were the only ones who were supporting the schools financially. Quarny reminded the Gensens that Mexican Americans, whether they were U. S. citizens, permanent residents, or migratory laborers, all contributed to the local economy in one capacity or another. Moreover, he continued, for Mexican Americans to construct their own schools was both unconstitutional and discriminatory.[116]

As Mexican American leaders demanded their fair share of educational resources, a structural-economic tension further divided the community along ethnic lines. Local residents Ramon and Maria Martinez noted that it was offensive for the Mexican American community to have to beg for educational opportunities that were rightfully theirs. Given their exclusion, they said, Chicanos no longer should ask; instead, "WE DEMAND. We take what's rightfully ours. Remember," they added, "this is 'Occupied Mexico.' " The Martinezes warned "[Gus and Doris Gensen] and all racists like them" to be more cautious about making such ludicrous remarks.[117]

Some teachers may have supported Mexican American activists, but they remained silent because they feared reprisals from the local school administration. One teacher, however, spoke out in defense of the Mexican American community. Joy Olin said she understood the frustration Mexican American parents felt. "As an experienced teacher," she said, "I feel that parent involvement is of vital importance if I am to be successful in teaching any child. Textbooks, learning aids, audiovisual equipment, and most recent teaching techniques are of little value if there is no positive relationship between the home and school." She urged teachers, school administrators, and the board to "truly listen to their suggestions, for until we do," she concluded, "we will continue to fail their children."[118] But school officials held strong assimilationist ideologies about academic success. In their view, other immigrants, the Slavs, Portuguese, Japanese, and Italians, had come to Brownfield and been transformed into full-fledged Americans without special educational programs. For many educators and the white community, the Mexican American people appeared difficult, uncooperative, and absolutely recalcitrant.

Educational professionals saw Mexican Americans as foreigners and reasoned that they ought to be satisfied with what they had because it was

superior to what they would have received in Mexico. For example, one teacher asked what the dropout rate was in Mexico and what percentage went on to college. American public schools have always dealt with linguistically and culturally diverse children, another teacher said, but Mexican American parents were expecting too much from the schools. Asserting a standard brand of meritocratic individualism, another resident said, "Yes, our school system needs improving. I agree with you." But not to the extent Mexican American activists were proposing. Others reminded Mexican Americans that they "chose to live in America" and that they needed to "meet the challenge with [some] integrity."[119]

Many white residents who had not experienced discrimination were disturbed by the Mexican Americans' reform agenda because conventional wisdom had led many of them to the comfortable belief that schools were doing a commendable job. They believed that if schools provided everyone with the same curriculum and pedagogy, schools were somehow equal. Mexican American parents, however, suggested that offering the same thing to all students was not necessarily a meaningful example of educational equality. As the debate continued, Mrs. Jeff Rolin warned the larger community that if COPE's reform demands were met, residents would probably never vote in favor of another bond election again. It was unfair, Mrs. Rolin said, to give special attention to one ethnic group over another. The desire to maintain one's culture was commendable, she noted, but not for it "to be transplanted here."[120]

While most Japanese Americans seemed reluctant to be drawn into the Gensens' debate, one prominent Japanese American community member, Ben Osaka, spoke out in defense of the Mexican American community. He resented the Gensens' politics of using the Japanese American model minority stereotype "to put down another." From Osaka's perspective, the comparison revealed Mr. and Mrs. Gensens' "racist attitude." They lacked understanding of the real issues involved in the schools, and they seemed unwilling to "understand the real reason why COPE is proposing such a necessary program." But Leonard Yamasaki, another Japanese American resident, disagreed with Osaka, arguing that it was wrong for Mexican Americans to ask for something they were able to obtain on their own.[121]

The message the Gensens and others like them were trying to convey to the community was that despite past discrimination, Japanese Americans were able to succeed because the American public school was the great equalizer. Within this context, American educators had a long history of insisting that public schools were meritocratic and that everyone was "given an equal chance to develop their abilities and rise in the social

hierarchy."[122] The notion that success was based on ability and effort rather than inherited privilege attached to race/ethnicity was presented as a definitive logic. As a case in point, Brownfield resident J. Tovic talked about how Dr. Ishimura was able to make it in the United States because of persistence and hard work. Ishimura had arrived as a total stranger in Brownfield, said Tovic, but he "did not rush for help, demand endless assistance from bilingual teachers, special counselors and all sorts of other privileges that seem to be in vogue and great demand today."[123] For many white residents, Dr. Ishimura (and other successful immigrants) were the exemplars of Horatio Alger's observation that if one works hard enough, he or she will be able to succeed.

Mexican American demands for educational reform unfolded into a broader discussion of social policy. Because the reform agenda included free breakfast and lunch for the children, many white residents became resentful because they thought many Mexican Americans were already indulged in government assistance. When Mexicans arrive in Brownfield, one resident said, "the very next day they are on welfare." The resident asked members in the community if anyone could "find a way for me and my family to relish in some of the luxuries Mexican Americans have, I would appreciate it." Mexican American parents seeking educational reform were portrayed as welfare recipients who were draining the local economy.[124]

Bolstered by the ideological projection that Mexican Americans were receiving too much government assistance, some white residents lashed out even harder. Turning his attention to a small federal housing project that rented to low-income families, Jeff Rolin complained that it "was a great injustice by allowing [Mexican] families with four, six and seven children to be grouped together" in government housing. Insinuating a need for population control, he proposed that "if you have four children when you rent, you have no more than four when you move." He said it was his "inalienable right as a heavily burdened taxpayer to protest" because his tax dollars were "going for welfare, subsidized housing and federal aid to education under Title I." He gave his "sympathy . . . to the school board and teachers, because certain interest [groups were] getting pushy."[125]

Although a widening national consciousness was finally acknowledging that many school systems were failing to provide Mexican American youth with equal educational opportunities, the school systems were unwilling to change.[126] The problem was that many educators and the lay public took it for granted that all immigrant groups, including Mexican Americans, wanted to assimilate into the mainstream. The local white community continued to frame the Mexican American schooling

experience in a way that ignored social, cultural, political, and economic power divisions that differentiated Mexican Americans among themselves.[127] That is, they refused to acknowledge that the Mexican American experience was different from those of the previous immigrant groups that had settled in Brownfield. Janet Holden, Karen Gibs, and Angela Swet argued that Mexican Americans ought to be treated like the rest of the people in Brownfield. Everyone in the community has Mexican friends, they said, but the ones who protested the loudest were the "lazy" ones who were unwilling to work and thought everyone owed them a living because of past injustices. If American life seemed harsh and unfair, these women said, Mexican American leaders should "go find a country that will let you speak the language of your choice, support you with welfare checks and provide housing for you and your children." They condescendingly told Mexican Americans that if they found such a place, "let the rest of us know . . . because by then you must have gone to heaven! God would be the only one who could possibly afford and put up with this." As they referred to the original letter that spurred the debate, they said, "[t]hree cheers to [Gus and Doris Gensen] . . . we're all behind you 100 percent so stick to your guns."[128]

As the newspaper debate came to a close, one resident, Harvey Gold, challenged those who were criticizing Mexican American leaders for demanding local school reform. Speaking directly to the subject of the bilingual-bicultural school, Gold asked what difference it made what language was used in school if the real purpose of education was to educate children. Given the burden of a language barrier and a school system that was unresponsive to the Mexican American community, Gold said it was easy for him to understand why so many Mexican American children were failing in school. He urged the white community to "withhold judgment about 'them' and about how [Mexican Americans] ought to take better advantage of the fine educational opportunities we provide." Mexican American students, "much to everybody's surprise, quickly get the idea that Anglos are not really interested in educating them. "What Mexican American students receive in school," he continued, was "his education thrown down at him like slop to the hog." Gold cautioned school authorities to stop wasting taxpayers' money "by perpetuating a course of conduct and policy which admittedly purports to educate, but does not actually educate a significant [number of Mexican American] students who go to school."[129] What was particularly important about Gold's letter was that he did speak for some white residents and teachers who saw the district as assimilationist, intolerant, and unwilling to share power with Mexican American parents.

CONCLUSION

As Mexican Americans began to challenge the Brownfield schools they realized they had to form a united front in order to bring about some reforms. The civil rights proequality climate, the local liberal newspaper, the Warran report, Mexican American parent complaints, and the high school student walkouts had some effect in the district. Moreover, federal and state funds (under Title VII) were becoming available for Mexican American children with linguistic needs. In a collaborative effort between COPE and school officials, for instance, a half-million dollar grant was awarded to the Brownfield district to create a pilot bilingual-bicultural elementary school. Although some school officials were lukewarm about the project and some white residents were hostile to the idea, federal funds were in place to begin the school.[130]

The grant became a symbolic act of victory for the Mexican American community because it forced the local administration to include them in the decision-making process; it gave them a greater sense of potency, self-worth, and control over some policy decisions that were bound to have an impact on their children's lives. Although Mexican Americans made some strides toward equality, they were mindful of their continued exclusion. For example, they lacked representation on the school board, and almost none were in positions of power. Tension with school officials and the white community made them realize that if they became cohesive as an ethnic group, if they rallied around a strong reform agenda, and if they found the financial means to support their ideas, they had the potential to bring about favorable changes.

COPE and other Mexican American organizations demonstrated that a small grassroots organization, with solid support from its ethnic minority constituency, was able to impact the way educational resources were distributed and educational policy was formulated. Contrary to determinist notions that viewed Mexican Americans as passive victims of dominant institutional and ideological structures, they demonstrated the capacity of a powerless minority group to organize and mount a serious campaign for educational justice. Even though change was slow, their united efforts eventually forced a reluctant white educational power structure to take seriously the needs of their children.