

## The History of the Chicano and Puerto Rican Struggle for Equality in Education

### Background Essay

The 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that ‘separate but equal’ schools for black and white children were unconstitutional, as they violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, “which guarantees all citizens equal protection of the laws” (*Brown Foundation*). Though that case was a landmark event in achieving racial equality in education and moving the civil rights movement forward, the struggle for equal rights in education did not end in 1954. Following *Brown v. Board of Education*, Chicano student activists in Los Angeles, California (LA) and Puerto Rican and African American parents in New York, NY (NYC) took up the fight for equal rights in the classroom and did much work toward equality in the 1960s.

### BETTER EDUCATION IN LOS ANGELES

In the 1960s, conditions for Mexican Americans in California and other South Western states were not good. Most Chicanos worked on farms doing manual labor and were paid poorly. They sustained injuries on the job and had poor working conditions. In Los Angeles, almost 100,000 Chicanos lived in the neighborhood of East LA (*Chicano!*). They were mostly poor and attended impoverished schools. Students were not allowed to use the rest rooms and were corporally punished for speaking Spanish at school. Chicano students were not encouraged to go to college and were instead pushed toward blue-collar careers. Only 25% of Chicano students graduated high school and only 2% of Chicano high school students ever made it to college. Additionally, there were very few Mexican American teachers and little to no Chicano content taught in schools.

The fight for Mexican American civil rights began with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. He and Dolores Huerta united the Latino farm workers and called for a strike to demand better working conditions. This nonviolent protest by other Chicanos, along with the similarly pacifist actions by Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr, inspired students at several East LA high schools to make a change.

After the school board rejected the results of their survey of other Chicano students, Paula Crisostomo and other high school leaders decided to take action (*Chicano!*). They met with Moctesuma Esparza, a college student at UCLA, as well as Carlos Moles, the co-founder of the Brown Berets, a paramilitary organization fighting for minority rights. They considered boycotting like their predecessors, but did not think that would have enough impact. Because schools in LA get money based on student attendance, the students thought they could garner more attention by costing the schools money. On March 1, 1968, students at Wilson High School walked out because the school cancelled the performance of a play (“Chronology”). Two thousand students at Garfield followed suit on March 5th. The walkouts continued through the end of the week, involving students at Wilson, Garfield, Roosevelt, Lincoln and Belmont high schools. Over the course of the week, more than 10,000 students walked out before attendance was taken, costing the LA Unified School District a lot of money (*Chicano!*).



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Unbeknownst to the students, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was following their activism and had actually infiltrated their ranks (*Chicano!*). Together with the LA Police Department, they placed informants within the student activists. After the walkouts, the informants helped build a case against several activist leaders. In June 1968, thirteen activists, including teacher Sal Castro, were arrested on charges of conspiring to disrupt education. Even though disrupting education was a misdemeanor, conspiring to do so was a felony punishable by up to 66 years in jail. After 2 years of legal battles where the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) supported the defendants, the charges were dropped because they violated the Bill of Rights.

The walkouts were a testament to the power of mass involvement and the change that students can make. However, they were not as effective as the students had hoped (Mendoza). Though the school board reinstated Sal Castro, who was fired after being arrested, nothing else in the East LA schools actually changed. However, the movement did have success in creating a buzz among Chicanos and in getting more of them to go to college. The number of Chicano students attending UCLA went from 40 to 1200 (*Walkout*). The East LA blowouts also inspired students in other states to stand up for their rights. Students in Crystal City, Texas walked out when Mexican Americans were only allowed to fill one position on the cheerleading squad (CCM OMG).

Despite all of these past struggles, the educational rights of Latinos and other minorities are still in jeopardy. The dropout rate of students in Los Angeles, whose high schools are predominantly filled with minority students, is still abysmal. According to the LA Unified School District, 66% of students graduate on time, but a Harvard/UCLA study claims the number is actually only 48% (Landsberg). Drop out rates are not the only concern, as some states are targeting curriculum programs that directly apply to minority populations. In 1998, California passed Proposition 227, which made bilingual education of minority students illegal (García, “Bilingualism in Education” 22). In January 2012, the Tucson Unified School District in Tucson, Arizona, banned its Mexican American Studies program, confiscating books out of the hands of students (Biggers). Tucson students took notice of their East LA predecessors and staged massive walkouts. Ahtziri Iñiguez, a high school student quoted by the Huffington Post, said it best: "We did this walk out to prove if you want something you should fight for what you believe in, because if you don't do anything, nothing will change" (Biggers).

## ‘EDUCATIONAL GENOCIDE’ IN NEW YORK CITY

While the fight for Chicano rights was happening in California, Puerto Ricans were facing a similar struggle in New York City schools. Puerto Rican migration was at its apex in the 1960s and by 1972, 85% of all NYC students were Puerto Rican (García, “Bilingualism in Education” 16; Del Valle). Nearly 40% of all Puerto Ricans were monolingual Spanish speakers. The statistics were worse than those of the Chicano students in LA at an 87% dropout rate (García, “Bilingualism in Education” 169). A study commissioned by the NYC Board of Education (NYCBOE) in the 1950s recommended Spanish instruction to combat the poor graduation rates, but the school district largely ignored their own advice. Monolingual Spanish speaking students received little to no native language support, leading to many giving up on school prematurely.

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In New York City, it was the Latino adults who took up the fight for equal education. *Aspira*, a group dedicated to promoting the education of Puerto Rican students, decided to push for bilingual education (García, “Bilingualism in Education” 16). The city schools were segregated and all minority parents could see the inequalities between the education their students received and that of the white students. In 1966, Black and Latino parents took over the Great Hall of the NYCBOE for three days, demanding a better education for their students.

Progress was slow, but did occur. In 1968, a bilingual elementary school (P.S. 25) and a bilingual community college (Hostos) opened in the South Bronx (García, “Bilingualism in Education” 17). Unsatisfied by the pace of progress toward a better education for their children, Black and Latino parents again staged a march in 1969, this time demanding an end to ‘educational genocide’. In 1974, after the passage of *Lau V. Nichols*, the NYCBOE agreed to provide bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) services to all students who were learning English.

Though dropout rates today in NYC are much less than they were, Black and Latino students still underperform their White and Asian peers (Fergus). Male students underperform at a higher rate than their female counterparts. Of the cohort of Black and Latino male students (BLMs) set to graduate New York City public high schools in 2007, only 46% graduated on time (Fergus).

The latest group to address these inequalities in NYC is not students or parents, but rather the district itself. To improve the college readiness of Black and Latino men in New York City, the Department of Education partnered with the Office of the Mayor’s Young Men’s Initiative and Open Society Foundation to create the Expanded Success Initiative. According to the NYC Public Schools Office of Postsecondary Readiness, “the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI) is a pioneering effort to close the achievement gap for Black and Latino young men by significantly increasing the percentage of this population who complete high school prepared to succeed in college and careers” (*New York City Public Schools*). As this is a new initiative that focuses on the Class of 2016, its effectiveness remains to be seen, but it is hopeful that intervention is coming on behalf of the district and no longer has to be prompted by student or parent protests.



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