

THE FUTURE IN CONTEXT

The Student Protest That Heralded the Chicano Movement

In 1968, thousands of Mexican American high school students in East Los Angeles walked out of classrooms to protest discriminatory and substandard education. Despite mixed results, their demonstration ignited a new civil rights movement.

Sept. 29, 2022 • Emma Newcombe



Four leaders of the Brown Berets (from left, Fred Lopez, David Sanchez, Carlos Montes, and Ralph Ramirez) in 1968. Previously known as Young Chicanos for Community Action, the group advocated for education reform and spearheaded the East L.A. walkouts. (UCLA/Chicano Studies Research Center)

Editor's Note: Sept. 15-Oct. 15 is National Hispanic Heritage Month. To celebrate the historical impact of Hispanic Americans on American culture and society, we explore a story of Hispanic political activism.

In the 1960s, Los Angeles County had the largest Latino community in the United States. But in East Los Angeles, where the majority of Mexican Americans in the city lived, Latino students endured a discriminatory and, in effect, segregated school system. Schools that had a majority-Latino student body had far lower graduation rates and lower test scores than their majority-white counterparts. In fact, with a dropout rate of nearly 60 percent, many schools had among the [worst dropout rates in the country](#). These schools were often run-down and overcrowded, with average class sizes of 40 students.

Most teachers and administrators (few of whom spoke Spanish) deemed their Mexican American students less intelligent than others, and therefore often placed Latino students in special education or vocational programs that funneled students into low-paying jobs. Largely because of the limited opportunities for college preparation courses in high school, Mexican American students also had a college graduation rate of only 0.1 percent.

By the late 1960s, amidst the growing social unrest of the decade, Mexican American youth decided to advocate for an improved public education. A student activist group, Young Chicanos for Community Action (also known as the [Brown Berets](#)), pushed for Chicano rights in California, with a focus on equal education. [Sal Castro](#), a high school social studies teacher, met with the group and supported their efforts. The Brown Berets collaborated with other student groups, including University of California, Los Angeles' United Mexican American Students (UMAS), to advocate for improved educational outcomes for Chicano students.

Under the leadership of Castro, these groups collaborated with local Mexican American high school students to plan a protest of mass proportions. Beginning on March 1, 1968, East L.A. students began to march out of their classrooms in protest of discriminatory and unequal education. Over the next five days, at least seven schools and over 15,000 students would participate in these walkouts (also known as "[blowouts](#)"). Students protested outside of their schools, holding signs that read: "Mexican American Liberation," "Walk Out Now or Drop Out Tomorrow" and "We Are Not 'Dirty Mexicans.'"

In late March, protesters formed the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC). At a meeting of the L.A. Board of Education, with 1,500 community members present, EICC presented the board with a list of 39 demands that included more bilingual teachers and administrators, an increase in Mexican American culture in school curricula, and bilingual education. While the board agreed to the idea of smaller classes and an increase in bilingual teachers and staff in theory, they [rejected the demands](#), saying they lacked the necessary budget.

Soon after, police arrested 13 of the protest organizers, including Castro, on felony conspiracy charges. Each of the “Eastside 13,” as they came to be known, faced a sentence of up to 66 years in prison. But after a wave of protests at the city’s Hall of Justice, along with the influence of their Mexican American defense attorney [Oscar Acosta](#), 12 of the 13 were acquitted. Only Castro remained in prison, during which time he was also fired from his teaching position (though he was later released and reinstated to his teaching post after a surge of support on his behalf).



Los Angeles police handcuff a Brown Beret and a photographer for the Free Press during the East L.A. walkouts in March 1968. Ultimately, 13 protesters were arrested and faced sentences of up to 66 years each. (Wikipedia.org)

Some criticized the protests (Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty claimed they were a Communist plot), while others honored the protesters. Political figures, including then-presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy, supported the activists. Kennedy even met with some of the protesters on his way to a meeting with Cesar Chavez.

While the school district did not immediately accept the protestors’ demands, incremental change occurred in the following years. The district began to hire Mexican American teachers and administrators and included more Latino cultural studies into their curricula. More Mexican Americans participated in school boards across the district. UCLA also saw an impressive increase in Mexican American student enrollment the year after the protest, from 100 to 1,900 students.

Today, over 50 years after the walkouts, Los Angeles schools have more Mexican American teachers and administrators, and schools provide both Latino studies courses and bilingual programs. L.A. schools with a majority Latino student body are seeing higher graduation and college attendance rates. But many of the protestors' demands remain to be fully addressed. Latino students [continue to fall behind](#) peers in academic achievement and college graduation rates.

While the walkouts did not achieve an equal education system for all students, they were also a seminal moment in the broader [Chicano Movement](#) of the 1960s and 1970s. The walkouts, along with future Mexican American activism, led to an upswell in advocacy for Mexican American rights in the United States. Ultimately, the walkouts — one of the largest student-led protests in U.S. history — served to both ignite a growing movement within the 1960s counterculture and to inspire education activists for decades to come.