

Walkouts at Johnston High: Student Activism Revived

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Abstract:

This paper describes a student protest at one high school in Austin, Texas, and briefly compares the outcomes and the impulses that lead to the protest with student strikes in East Los Angeles, California in 1968.

After several decades of relative quiet, Mexican American student activism made a brief revival in one fine day in Spring, 2000. The cry for better education has rallied Mexican Americans for the past 50 years or more in the United States, in part leading to reforms in bilingual education, increased community participation in schools, and greater opportunities for minority students. Some critics have dismissed the importance of such protests and demands however, demonstrating how grass roots movements are often co-opted by existing power structures, such as school boards, to diminish actual results and maintain the status quo.¹

School setting

Johnston High School was rated as a low-performing high school in 1999-2000 by the Texas Education Agency, primarily because of relatively high drop out rates and low passing rates on state mandated tests and college entrance exams. Student enrollment at the school is approximately 83% Mexican American and African American, and 46% economically disadvantaged.² Of the 99 Mexican American graduates in 2000, only 26 took college entrance exams. Only three of those passed the standard criterion for college admission. The school also houses a magnet program in liberal arts which attracts about 300 students from around the city. Although separate statistics for those students are not available, such students tend to score well on measures of academic achievement.

Austin Independent School District has about 72,000 student enrollment. Because of the state school financing plan which requires property-rich districts to share tax funds with property-poor districts, the district faced a \$28 million shortfall for the 2000-2001 academic year. Without consulting the school board or local parents, the superintendent announced a plan in late March 2000, to save \$8 million by eliminating block scheduling, or 90-minute class periods, and returning to a seven-period school day in all high schools and middle schools.

Schedule change flames protest

Consequences of this schedule change involve more than just time. Students who might have taken a total of 32 high school courses on block scheduling over four years, would lose the opportunity to take four courses. Some parents objected saying the lost options would typically be advanced, college preparatory courses. Teachers would teach six 50-minute classes per day, with one period off for planning. On the block schedule, teachers generally taught three classes per day, with one 90-minute period off. Some teachers who taught six courses per day in 1999-2000 would lose a 20 percent

stipend for what would no longer be overtime work in addition to seeing their student load double.

About 200 parents, teachers and students held a rally in front of the Austin school district's headquarters to protest the superintendent's decision.³ The same day about 100 students at another high school in the city walked out of school briefly to show their displeasure with the proposed schedule change. "Teachers won't be able to give us the time we demand," one student said, "[our] education will be diminished."

Just before noon on April 5, 2000, more than 300 of the 1,833 students at Johnston High School left classes and assembled in the school parking lot. After some initial confusion, the majority of the group decided to march almost five miles to the district headquarters to demand a face-to-face meeting with the superintendent. Mexican American students took the lead in organizing the march and motivating students for the long walk.

The teenagers soon ran into difficulty, however, when city police confronted them for violating the city's juvenile curfew law, which demands that school-age youngsters be in school and not on the streets from 9:00am to 2:30 pm Monday through Friday. Over 70 students were given tickets carrying a fine of up to \$500 each. Some students were stopped and searched for illegal substances and some encounters turned into shouting matches between students and police as officials tried to keep students out of traffic.⁴

The Johnston principal, Al Mindiz-Melton, brought the students bottled water during their march, and gave some students a ride back to school. "We've got a strong American tradition of civil disobedience," he said. "If they are willing to take the consequences of their actions, then that is enough for me." He added that students would not receive any further disciplinary action from the school for the protest.

A strong police presence and hot temperatures thinned the marchers to a core group of about 40 students by the time they arrived at the district's headquarters building. "This is a peaceful protest," said student Kim Garcia. "We just want to be heard." After a short wait, the superintendent came out to speak directly with the students.

Superintendent Forgione said, "this is painful. I don't have any strategies in happy land. But you will graduate and you will get a good education." The superintendent answered questions about the district's budgetary crisis as the hot, tired students listened patiently. Many failed to understand why a campus like Johnston,

with almost 47% of the students from low-income families, should lose money to other schools through the state finance scheme.

Students left the headquarters building mollified that the superintendent had actually met with them, but unconvinced that he would agree to return to block scheduling the following year. Indeed, all secondary schools in the Austin Independent School District returned to traditional 50-minute class periods in the school year 2000-2001. The student walkouts brought considerable attention to the matter of schedule changes, but had no effect on school policy.

Many of the students also faced the possibility of steep fines for their afternoon of civil disobedience. According to the City of Austin Code of Ordinances one of the defenses for curfew violation is the exercise of First Amendment rights to free speech and assembly. "We will have to review each one on a case-by-case basis," said Sedora Jefferson, deputy city attorney. "It will be up to the individuals to raise the defense." "There was a small core group that was positive and had a purpose, but most of them had no reason to be there other than skipping school. That's not freedom of expression," added police Sgt. J.J. Schmidt. Police did not issue tickets for disorderly conduct or offenses other than curfew violations.

"The whole irony is that school is supposed to teach you to be a responsible member of democracy," said Jim Harrington, director of the Texas Civil Rights Project. "This teaches you that you have no rights."⁵ A year after the walkout, however, the charges against the students have quietly disappeared.

School protest in East L.A.

In the great era of reform during the 1960s and 1970s, minority students led various protests for better educational opportunities. The school walkouts in East Los Angeles in March 1968 were unlike anything ever seen before in Mexican American communities in the U.S.⁶ The student walkouts represented the first massive urban demonstration in the history of the Chicano movement and became a catalyst for further mobilization and protest.

Student walkouts occurred at 10 high schools and junior high schools in L.A., ultimately affecting about 15,000 minority and white students. Students made various demands to the school board, including better food, requests for Mexican menus in the cafeteria, more flexible dress standards, and curriculum modifications to include Chicano history and culture.⁷ Students and teachers at mostly black Jefferson High School also demanded that a black administrator be named to that school.⁸

The student strikes lasted about 10 days, and culminated two months later in the occupation of the school board meeting chamber for almost a week. Student protests had been partly organized by the Brown Berets and other Chicano reform groups. Los Angeles Police Chief Tom Reddin commented that students were "becoming pawns of professional agitators" and that the schools should seek "injunctive relief against those [non-

students] roaming from school to school stirring up trouble."⁹

A number of students and others were arrested for unlawful assembly during the period of the walkouts, other students were suspended from schools for "insubordination and defiance." In at least one high school, police with riot sticks ordered students who had previously left class back into classrooms. A week after the walkouts began, the school board indicated it would give amnesty to the thousands of students who had boycotted classes, but would not remove police from schools or release students who had been arrested..¹⁰

Students, parents and school administrators met at various times during the walkouts to discuss conditions and demands. At one point, some of the students marched to the school district's area offices to meet with the East Los Angeles area superintendents for secondary and elementary education.¹¹

The school board successfully stonewalled most serious demands for some time, however, as they simply refused to meet with student demonstrators. Several months after the protests began, the school board bowed to publicity and finally met with protestors, whose ranks had swelled to include parents, some teachers, and other community leaders.

Thirteen people, including one Mexican American teacher, were arrested for their activities three months after the student walkouts, and two days prior to the June primary election. The thirteen were allegedly all "leader's" of subversive organizations who had purposely organized the demonstrations to "willfully disturb the peace and quiet" of East Los Angeles and disrupt the educational process of the City of Los Angeles.¹² "The East L.A. 13" never came to public trial, however, as the indictments were ruled unconstitutional based on First Amendment rights.

East Los Angeles had the largest Mexican American population in the United States at the time with many students from low-income, Spanish-speaking families. There is evidence that many normally conservative Mexican American parents felt anxiety towards the militant actions of the students. Grebler, Moore and Guzman showed that Mexican American parents with little educational attainment generally had little contact but considerable respect for schools.¹³ However, even some of the most conservative members of the community were outraged by the arrest and imprisonment of the 13 activists.¹⁴

Co-optation remains the same

Even though the two case studies of Mexican American student walkouts described here have many differences, the tactics used by the school authorities to quell the demonstrations remain much the same. Lipsky described five tactics commonly used by authorities to co-opt protests of the status quo: dispensing symbolic satisfaction; dispensing token material satisfaction; claiming a lack of resources, discrediting "subversives",

and delaying commitment until some unspecified future.¹⁵

In both Austin and Los Angeles, school authorities and others made certain symbolic gestures that gave some immediate satisfaction to protestors. For example, both cases generated much attention in the press, so that students felt their voices were being heard widely across the community. School superintendents also met with student groups, parents and others at various times during both protests to listen to grievances and try to address the issues. In addition, school administrators took no long-lasting disciplinary actions in either case against students who boycotted classes.

Token material satisfaction in the Los Angeles case included the addition of Mexican foods to cafeteria menus and the hiring of a black principal for Jefferson High School, however no material concessions were made in Austin. Instead, Austin school leaders claimed a lack of resources to provide more classes. Young people were arrested and suspended from school for their actions in both cities. The press portrayed students as disorderly and disobeying the law in both school walkouts, rather than praising them for taking a stand for better education. Civil disobedience among youth generally remains cause for alarm among authority figures, no matter the situation. American youth are often chided for apathy, but punished for displaying conviction. After 33 years, however, public rhetoric against such acts is considerably less inflammatory in newspaper accounts.

Finally, commitments to major changes were delayed by school administrations in both cases, even though student demands would clearly benefit the education of young Americans. In Los Angeles, the school board refused to meet with protestors seriously for several months after the walkouts. In Austin, the superintendent cited lack of funds to delay commitment towards greater opportunities for college preparatory classes indefinitely. California State Board of Education member Dr. Miguel Montes urged consideration of the L.A. student demands in 1968, saying, "these walkouts can't be ignored." Nonetheless, substantial movement towards school integration was delayed in Los Angeles as long as possible, along with improvements to school facilities in East L.A. In the spring of 2000, Hispanic and black students in Austin faced similar disappointment as they failed to gain consideration of additional college prep classes.¹⁶ In both cases, the school administrations fought hard to maintain the status quo, even to the detriment of young people.

In both cities, many parents were not satisfied with the outcome of the protests "Those kids really spoke for all of us," said Austin parent David Guarino. "It was unfair the way they were treated... we ought to help them out." Virtually the same tactics are used by school authorities today to squash student demands for improved education as were used almost 35 years ago. The relationships between money, power, schools and minorities have been explored by many researchers and acknowledged by educators, but still the question of

providing quality educational experiences for all American children remains.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Carlos Munoz, Jr "The politics of protest and Chicano liberation A case study of repression and cooptation," in *Aztlan* 5:1 and 2 (1974)119-141.

² Texas Education Agency, 1998-1999.

³ Tara A. Trower and Michele Kurtz, "Groups protest school schedule plan: Hundreds ask Austin board to overrule superintendent," *Austin American-Statesman* (April 5, 2000) B1.

⁴ Tara A Trower and Michele Kurtz, "Student walk out over schedule changes After march, protesters air concerns; on their way to a meeting with Forgione, some are restrained by police, cited for violating curfew," *Austin American-Statesman* (April 6, 2000) A1

⁵ Tara A. Trower, "Laws could void students' curfew fines: Midday march from Johnston High may be protected by First Amendment—or a loophole," *Austin American-Statesman* (April 7, 2000) B1.

⁶ Joan Moore and Armida Martinez, "The grass roots challenge to educational professionalism in East Los Angeles," in *Mexican Americans and Educational Change* edited by Alfredo Castaneda et al (1974, New York: Arno Press): 140-188.

⁷ Munoz, *ibid*.

⁸ Richard West and David Larsen. "Education board halts meeting in climax to school disorders," *Los Angeles Times* (March 8, 1968) Part 1, page 1.

⁹ West and Larsen, *ibid*.

¹⁰ See *Los Angeles Times*, John Kendall, "Venice High principal suspends 40 students" (March 15, 1968) Part 1, page 3, Jack McCurdy, "School board yields on some student points" (March 12, 1968) Part 1, page 1; Jack McCurdy, "1000 at Venice High clash with police, 8 seized" (March 13, 1968): Part 1, page 1; West and Larsen, *ibid*, Part 1, page 3.

¹¹ Jack McCurdy, "Student disorders erupt at four high schools, Policeman hurt," *Los Angeles Times* (March 7, 1968) Part 1, page 3.

¹² Munoz, *ibid*.

¹³ Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, and R C. Guzman, *The Mexican-American people: The nation's second largest minority* (1970, New York, The Free Press).

¹⁴ Carlos Munoz, Jr. "The politics of educational change in East Los Angeles," in Castaneda et al, eds. 83-104.

¹⁵ Michael Lipsky, "Protest as apolitical resource," *American Political Science Review* LXII (December, 1968) 1144-58.

¹⁶ Paul Houston, "Three Negro officials take over at Jefferson High," *Los Angeles Times* (March 14, 1968): Part 1, page 3. "Rafferty calls on state board to punish students in walkouts," *Los Angeles Times* (March 15, 1968): Part 1, page 3.

