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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Proposals Made by High School Students of East Los Angeles

by Anthony Vivian

Date: March 6, 1968

Author: East LA High School Students

Genre: petition

Summary Overview

In March 1968, Chicano students across East Los Angeles staged walkouts to protest inequalities and prejudice within the school system. The walkouts, dubbed by the participants as “Blowouts,” included an estimated 15,000 participants. Beginning on March 1, the walkouts increased in size and intensity until March 8. This document constitutes a draft of proposals written on March 6; the protesters presented the proposals to a Los Angeles Board of Education meeting on March 11. Among other things, the proposals asked for bilingual/bicultural education, more Mexican American administrators, and teacher accountability. The protestors again presented the proposals to the LA Board of Education at a March 28 meeting that was attended by 1,200 community members. The board of education agreed with the need for the vast majority of the changes proposed but cited lack of funding as their reason for not implementing them. Despite the failure of the proposals, the Blowouts shed light on the inequalities within the education system and helped unify the Chicano community of East Los Angeles.

Defining Moment

In the months and years leading up to March 1968, the deck was stacked against Mexican American students within the American education system. In 1967, the Mexican American high school dropout rate across the American Southwest was 60 percent; Mexican American students who did earn a high school diploma read, on average, at an eighth-grade level. These were the results of an Anglocentric education system that pushed Chicano students away from higher education and towards lower-paying vocational training.

Local activists planned the walkouts to draw attention to the prejudice within the education system. However, on March 1, 1968, the movement began prematurely when Woodrow Wilson High School principal Donald Skinner cancelled a student production of *Barefoot in the Park*, claiming that it was too risqué. Three hundred Wilson High School students walked out that day, triggering the start of the Blowouts. In the following days, students from Garfield, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Belmont, Venice, and Jefferson High Schools joined their peers from Wilson High. The students faced resistance from fellow students and police, which at times grew violent.

The Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), a group of students, parents, and local activists drafted the proposals and spoke for the movement as a whole. The proposals shed light on many shortcomings within the education system. Among other problems, the Anglocentric curriculum and lack of Chicano teachers and administrators were indicative of a system skewed against Mexican American students. The EICC first presented the proposals to the Los Angeles Board of Education on March 11. At that meeting, the EICC requested and received amnesty for all the students who participated in the walkouts, and the students returned to class. The proposals were again presented to the Board of Education at a March 28 meeting, attended by 1,200 people. The Board of Education agreed that the proposals were worthwhile, lending legitimacy to the movement; however, the board cited funding restrictions as their reason for not putting them into effect.

On March 31, thirteen of the local activists behind the movement were arrested under felony charges of disturbing the peace. The movement pivoted to defend the LA 13, as they later became known. Although charges were eventually dropped, the arrests took the attention away from educational reform, and the EICC disbanded soon thereafter. Nevertheless, the Blowouts brought the educational discrepancies to a national stage and helped to unite the Chicano community in East Los Angeles and across the country.

Author Biography

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An estimated 15,000 students walked out of high schools across East LA. Though only high schoolers, the protestors bravely withstood physical resistance from fellow students, school officials, and police. Many were arrested; police beatings were reported.

The Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), a group of students, parents, and activists became central in organizing the walkouts and drafting the proposals. Many of the organizers went on to successful careers in activism and other arenas. Among the many success stories, Moctesuma Esparza (1949–) became a successful film producer and entrepreneur, tirelessly advocating for Chicano advancement within the entertainment industry, and Sal Castro (1933–2013) lived a life of activism very much in line with his central role in the Blowouts. A middle school in Los Angeles now bears his name.

Historical Document

PROPOSALS MADE BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS OF EAST LOS ANGELES TO BOARD OF EDUCATION, March 6, 1968

ACADEMIC

I. No student or teacher will be reprimanded or suspended for participating in any efforts which are executed for the purpose of improving or furthering the educational quality in our schools.

II. Bilingual–Bi-cultural education will be compulsory for Mexican-Americans in the Los Angeles City School System where there is a majority of Mexican-American students. This program will be open to all other students on a voluntary basis. A) In service education programs will be instituted immediately for all staff in order to teach them the Spanish language and increase their understanding of the history, traditions, and contributions of the Mexican culture. B) All administrators in the elementary and secondary schools in these areas will become proficient in the Spanish language. Participants are to be compensated during the training period at not less than \$8.80 an hour and upon completion of the course will receive in addition to their salary not less than \$100.00 a month. The monies for these programs will come from local funds, state funds and matching federal funds.

III. Administrators and teachers who show any form of prejudice toward Mexican or Mexican-American students, including failure to recognize, understand, and appreciate Mexican culture and heritage, will be removed from East Los Angeles schools. This will be decided by a Citizens Review Board selected by the Educational Issues Committee.

IV. Textbooks and curriculum will be developed to show Mexican and Mexican-American contribution to the U.S. society and to show the injustices that Mexicans have suffered as a culture of that society. Textbooks should concentrate on Mexican folklore rather than English folklore.

V. All administrators where schools have majority of Mexican-American descent shall be of Mexican-American descent. If necessary, training programs should be instituted to provide a cadre of Mexican-American administrators.

VI. Every teacher's ratio of failure per students in his classroom shall be made available to community groups and students. Any teacher having a particularly high percentage of the total school dropouts in his classes shall be rated by the Citizens Review Board composed of the Educational Issues Committee.

ADMINISTRATIVE

I. Schools should have a manager to take care of paper work and maintenance supervision. Administrators will direct the Education standards of the School instead of being head janitors and office clerks as they are today.

II. School facilities should be made available for community activities under the supervision of Parents' Councils (not PTA). Recreation programs for children will be developed.

III. No teacher will be dismissed or transferred because of his political views and/or philosophical disagreements with administrators.

IV. Community parents will be engaged as teacher's aides. Orientation similar to in-service training, will be provided, and they will be given status as semi-professionals as in the new careers concept.

FACILITIES

I. The Industrial Arts program must be re-vitalized. Students need proper training to use the machinery of modern day industry. Up-to-date equipment and new operational techniques must replace the obsolescent machines and outmoded training methods currently being employed in this program. If this high standard cannot be met, the Industrial Arts program will be de-emphasized.

II. New high schools in the area must be immediately built. The new schools will be named by the community. At least two Senior High Schools and at least one Junior High School must be built. Marengo Street School must be reactivated to reduce the student-teacher load at Murchison Street School.

Glossary

Industrial Arts program: a Los Angeles vocational program that detractors claimed pushed Mexican American students towards lower paying jobs and away from higher education

Document Analysis

These proposals shed some light not only on the world that the students were trying to create but also on the world that the students lived that prompted the walkouts and proposals in the first place. The proposals are divided into three categories: academic, administrative, and facilities. This analysis will examine proposals from all three categories and focus on two vital issues. First, the students and their organizers were at risk of punishment for the walkouts, and the proposals address this directly. Next, this analysis will look at the issue of funding and its explicit and implicit appearances in the proposals.

The walkouts and the student's awareness that they might be punished for participating therein shines through from the very beginning of the document. The first proposal reads: "No student or teacher will be reprimanded or suspended for participating in any efforts which are executed for the purpose of improving or furthering the educational quality in our schools." Within this call for amnesty, the students express their strong belief in their cause and sense of purpose. Their efforts are for the sake of "improving or furthering the educational quality" in their schools. Although, the other proposals were not immediately implemented, the board of education did grant this request after the meeting on March 11, 1968, allowing the students to return to class without reprisal. A later proposal, number III under the administrative section states: "No teacher will be dismissed or transferred because of his political views and/or philosophical disagreements with administrators." This proposal aims to protect the teachers who stand up for a movement such as this. This protection for teachers proves all the more striking when compared to academic proposals III and VI, which want to hold teachers (and administrators) under greater scrutiny.

The Los Angeles Board of Education cited a lack of funding as their reason for not implementing the proposals. The issue of funding comes up explicitly and implicitly in the proposals themselves. The authors grant particular emphasis to the proposal outlining bilingual and bicultural education in a couple of clear ways. It is, by far, the longest proposal, and it is positioned second only to the brief call for amnesty cited above. See the Essential Themes section, for a more in depth look at the students' calls for fair representation through this and other proposals. What is relevant to the present analysis is the authors' plan to pay for the proposal. They outline the amount of compensation that school staff would be awarded for going through the additional training proposed. They then state: "The monies for these programs will come from local funds, state funds and matching federal funds." Nowhere else in the document, is money discussed so explicitly; however, the lack of funding that was so central in the board of education's response crops up in other sections of the document. The first administrative proposal calls for added staff, and both facilities proposals call for changes that would cost a considerable amount of money. These passages portray an underfunded school district.

Essential Themes

The students' call for fair representation crops up time and again in several different forms. In the second academic proposal, the authors remind their audience that Mexican American students constituted a majority of the Los Angeles School System. They call for bilingual and bicultural education that would be compulsory for Mexican American students and voluntary for others. This attempts to curb the Anglocentric nature of their curriculum. This proposal also includes mandatory Spanish language and Mexican culture training for school staff and administration. The authors include this within the same proposal as an extension on the same theme. Just as the students call for representation in their curriculum, they seek respect and understanding from those employed by the school. Along similar lines, the fifth academic proposal states: "All administrators where schools have majority of Mexican American descent shall be of Mexican American descent." The authors suggest a program to train potential administrators if necessary. This proposal reveals and attempts to curb a discrepancy between the makeup of the student population and backgrounds of the administrators in charge. The students recognize these areas in which they are underrepresented and employ civil

disobedience through the walkouts to fight for their right to fair representation. Despite the board of education's reluctance to pay for these changes, the students assumed agency for themselves and their community in staging the walkouts, drafting these proposals, and bringing national attention to these injustices.

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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