CHAPTER 2

Providing for the Schooling of Mexican Children

During the twentieth century Mexican children in Houston received instruction from different types of educational institutions, including Catholic schools, private secular instruction, and public education.[1] Although diverse forms of schooling existed, by the late 1920s public education became the dominant means of formal instruction in the community as local authorities established an increasing number of segregated "Mexican" schools throughout the barrios.

Despite their location in the barrios, the schools were alien to the community and did not serve its specific needs. School board members, administrators, and teaching staff, for the most part, were non-Mexican, did not speak Spanish, and were indifferent or, at times, hostile to these children. Most educators viewed Mexican children as racially or culturally inferior. They also demeaned and denigrated their linguistic and cultural heritage. Generally speaking, school authorities took positions that clashed with the community's academic and cultural interests.

The community, for example, desired educational facilities for all children, but local officials denied Mexican children full access to the existing resources or failed to establish sufficient schools for them. The Mexican community also supported additive Americanization, i.e., the learning of American ways and the preservation of Mexican traditions. School officials, however, advocated subtractive Americanization—that is, they supported the learning of American cultural forms and the "subtraction" of

the Spanish language and Mexican cultural heritage from the schools. Through these actions public school officials sought to legitimize and affirm the dominance of Anglo-only cultural and religious values.

The Mexican-origin community, likewise, sought to use the schools as instruments of upward mobility, structural integration, and civic involvement. But local school officials had other purposes in mind for them and sought to use the schools for reproductive ends. For public officials, the schools became instruments of social control aimed at reproducing the existing social class structure and the dominant-subordinate relations found between Anglos and Mexicans in the larger society. This dynamic interaction between two cultural groups occupying varying positions in the society and with quite distinct views and needs is reflected in the history of Mexican-origin education in Houston during the twentieth century.

ORIGINS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR MEXICAN CHILDREN, 1900–30

Public schooling for Mexican children in Houston originated during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Because of class bias, racial prejudice, inadequate resources, and their subordinate status in the larger society the nature of the education provided for this group of children was substandard and inadequate to meet their diverse needs. Mexican-origin individuals obtained increased but inequitable access to segregated and unequal schools. They also received an inferior quality education and a subtractive curriculum. The ultimate result was the establishment of a historic pattern of uneven academic performance characterized by a tradition of poor school achievement and minimal school success. Because of discrimination and high withdrawal rates from the public schools in the early decades of the twentieth century, segregation was confined to the elementary grades. Politics, prejudice, and population shifts were key in the establishment of segregated facilities during these years.[2]

Public school officials in Houston began to provide segregated schooling for Mexican-origin children in the early part of the twentieth century.[3] The earliest evidence of schooling for Mexican children is in 1900. In this year a handful of Mexican children enrolled in the old Rusk Elementary School located in the heart of El Segundo barrio.[4] This school originally was constructed to serve white children residing in the community, but once Mexican children began enrolling, the groups were segregated. Segregation initially began in the drinking-fountain area and in the cafeteria

but soon spread throughout the school. As Anglo families found alternative schools for their children, local officials did little to discourage white flight and soon began to neglect the school's physical needs. By the latter part of the decade the deteriorating school building became a segregated school for Mexican children.[5]

The number of Mexican schools increased over time largely as a result of the growing presence of Mexican children in the various barrios. In 1920, for instance, public school officials in the Magnolia Park barrio built Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary largely in response to the growing number of Mexican children in the two predominantly white elementary schools in that community. At least one hundred Mexican children were attending Magnolia Elementary and Central Parks Elementary in this residential area. Most of these children, regardless of their citizenship status, spoke Spanish, had parents who worked in unskilled or semiskilled labor, and resided in overcrowded and substandard housing. Anglo parents expressed concerns over their presence in the schools and asked the school board to take appropriate action. The school was unable to deal effectively with these children since none of the teachers spoke Spanish. In order to accommodate parental concerns and overcome instructional difficulties the local school board members decided to build a two-room school made of white stucco for the Mexican children.[6] They named the school after a Mexican patriot of the Texas revolution and ad interim vice president of the Texas Republic in 1836—Lorenzo de Zavala.[7]

Unaware of the reason for the establishment of the De Zavala school and anxious to provide their children with learning opportunities, the majority of the Mexican population heartily supported this school. Soon after its establishment most of the approximately 100 Spanish-speaking children in the barrio enrolled in De Zavala. In the mid-1920s enrollment jumped to several hundred. Much of this increase was due to immigration and higher birth rates among Mexican-origin women. In order to accommodate the expanding student body, local officials in the latter part of the decade added more classroom and playground space to the school. By 1927 there were 576 children enrolled in De Zavala.[8]

Local school officials also accommodated the increasing number of Mexican children present in other parts of the city. They either established separate rooms in Anglo schools or built separate school facilities. Occasionally they designated existing schools for them. Mexican children in the Northside barrio, for instance, attended the old Elysian Street School or Anson Jones Elementary School. Mexican children residing in the Fifth

Ward attended Dow Elementary. Those in the Sixth Ward enrolled in Hawthorne Elementary.[9]

The Mexican school phenomenon was not limited to Houston. Data from other parts of Texas and the Southwest, although incomplete, show that local officials constructed or established segregated facilities for Mexican children whenever there were significant numbers of them in the school district. Parental fears of racial intermingling and Anglo prejudice as well as linguistic and educational concerns were given as reasons for establishing these schools.[10] In Corpus Christi, for instance, public officials built a school for Mexican children as early as 1896. Other smaller communities such as Seguin and Kingsville began to establish separate and unequal schools for Mexican children in the early decades of the twentieth century. The number of Mexican schools increased significantly during the 1920s. By the beginning of the Depression in 1930 over forty independent school districts had established separate school facilities for Mexican children.[11] The growth of separate and unequal schools for Mexican children occurred in most areas of the Southwest and the Midwest.[12]

In addition to establishing segregated schools, local officials also developed a variety of administrative practices that served exclusionary and discriminatory purposes. Some of the most common practices included the failure by local officials to hire Mexican Americans as administrators, teachers, and counselors or the efforts to eliminate the use of Spanish in the schools and to neglect the needs of the schools in the barrios.

Generally speaking, local officials could ignore or dismiss the Mexican community's needs because of the lack of Mexican Americans in school decision-making positions such as the local school board. Their absence was related to a variety of factors, including the relatively small size of the Mexican voting-age population, the large number of noncitizens, the high rates of poverty, and discriminatory voting requirements. These same factors also discouraged the community from electing individuals from the barrios who could represent them on the board.[13]

The lack of Mexican American school board members and of members sensitive to this community led to the failure to recruit and hire Mexican American administrators or teachers. During the first three decades of the twentieth century only two Mexican-origin individuals were hired as public school teachers: Mrs. E. M. Tafolla and J. J. Mercado. Both of them became teachers of Spanish in the secondary grades of the Houston public schools during the 1910s and 1920s.[14] No Mexican Americans, however, were hired as administrators in the schools during this time period. Teach-

ers and administrators, as one scholar noted, were usually "outsiders," i.e., Anglos, who preferred to be in non-Mexican schools.[15]

The pattern of institutional discrimination was also reflected in administrative efforts to eliminate the use of Spanish in the schools and in the school board's neglect of the Mexican facilities. The first evidence of neglect was in 1924 when local district officials failed to appoint a school attendance officer to the Segundo barrio area where Rusk Elementary was located. By the 1920s Rusk was a predominantly Mexican school, although many additional Mexican-origin children were not enrolled. A local civic club urged the local school trustees to employ an attendance officer to encourage their enrollment. The school district refused this offer, and as a result a "tremendously high non-attendance rate" was recorded at the school.[16]

Local administrators and staff also sought to suppress the Spanish-language abilities of Mexican children. Several administrators at Rusk and De Zavala, for instance, developed "No-Spanish-speaking rules" in the 1920s. These rules discouraged the use of Spanish on school grounds and encouraged the use of English only. Those caught speaking Spanish were punished or expelled. These rules provided a negative and humiliating experience for those students attending the elementary grades during these years.[17] They also contributed to high dropout rates in general.

The prohibition of Spanish in the schools was in keeping with the state and national efforts to eliminate cultural diversity in American life that emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The subtraction of Spanish from the emerging public schools, in other words, was not an isolated development; it was a general phenomenon that affected all non-English languages.[18] The campaign to remove Spanish from the public schools in the Southwest was merely the regional expression of a national campaign.

The subtraction of Spanish from public education in Texas was accomplished through the enactment of progressively stronger English-only policies over the decades.[19] These policies not only prescribed English as the medium of instruction in the schools, but they also discouraged, inhibited, or prohibited the use of Spanish and other languages. In some cases language designation was accompanied by discriminatory legislation and practices against those who spoke the minority language.[20]

Efforts to eliminate the use of Spanish in the public schools increased after World War I. This campaign eventually led to the formulation, enactment, and eventual implementation of an English-only language law for

the schools. This language law, passed in 1918 by the Texas legislature, prohibited the use of Spanish and all non-English languages for instructional purposes and mandated the sole use of English in the public school curriculum. The English-only bill was different in several respects from earlier versions enacted in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, it applied not only to teachers but to principals, superintendents, board members, and all other public school personnel. Second, in order to ensure its implementation, the state legislature made it a criminal offense to teach in a language other than English.[21] In 1923 this policy was expanded to include all the private schools in the state.[22] The development of "No-Spanish" rules in the Houston public schools attended by Mexican-origin children was the logical outcome of the "subtractive" statewide policy mandating English only in education.

Not limited to administrative practices, discrimination was also found in the curriculum. The curriculum provided for Mexican-origin children during the early decades of the twentieth century was culturally subtractive—that is, it devalued the children's Mexican cultural heritage and sought to remove or "subtract" it from the content of the schools.[23] The subtraction of the Mexican cultural heritage from the state's public school curriculum occurred between 1850 and 1890. Public school officials were able to remove courses containing Mexican history and culture from the schools because of the small size of the Mexican population, its increasing social subordination, and the dominating influence of Anglo leaders.[24]

The curriculum in the Houston public schools reflected these historical influences and was subtractive by the time Mexican-origin children began to enroll in the early twentieth century. Houston's curricular policy, in general, was based on an idealized notion of the American national cultural identity that evaluated the religious, cultural, and community heritage of Mexican-origin people and rejected it from the schools. More specifically, this identity was comprised of Pan-Protestantism, Republican values, and core Anglo-American values, especially the ability to speak English.[25] Alternative forms of cultural identity, especially those based on Catholicism, non-English languages, and Mexican cultural traditions, in turn, were either devalued or viewed as being incompatible with American ideals and traditions and had to be replaced.

The subtractive character of public education in Houston was reflected in the English-language policy discussed earlier and in the textbooks used in the schools. These textbooks were distinctly partial toward Protestant Anglo culture. They, in other words, were "Anglo-centric" and provided

the perspectives, events, and cultures of the dominant Anglo population group while excluding or demeaning those of the Mexican group.[26]

Texas history books illustrate the subtractive nature of the public school curriculum in the Houston Independent School District. History books, which began to appear a decade after the Mexican American War of 1848, contained only disparaging comments about the Mexican presence in the Southwest. These books, noted the historian Carlos E. Castañeda, consistently denounced the character of the Mexican people and stressed the nobility of the Texans and their cause.[27] Most of them also had a narrow scope of Texas history and omitted or minimized the cultural contributions of Spain and Mexico to the development of Texas. According to the authors of these history textbooks, little or nothing transpired in Texas worthy of record before the coming of the first Anglo settlers from the United States. The trivialization of Spanish and Mexican contributions to Texas in the history books existed into the 1930s. The following quotes from a popular state-adopted textbook illustrate the continuity of this narrow scope of Texas history. The widely used history text entitled *Lone Star State* was written by Clarence Wharton and published in 1932. The author's view of early Texas history is reflected in the following comment on Anglo-American colonization: "We are now at the real beginning of Texas history. All that happened in 300 years after Piñeda sailed along our shores and Cabeza de Vaca tramped from Galveston Island to the Rio Grande was of little importance."[28]

The Anglo-centric perspective can be observed in another popular history textbook used in the public schools throughout the state and most likely in Houston. This textbook was written by G. P. Quackenbow. Although published in the late 1800s, it was still used in most of the public schools until the 1940s. In the struggle for Texas independence this popular history painted a picture of a battle between "jealous" Mexicans and "prosperous" Anglo settlers. Quackenbow's description of the events leading to the Texas Revolution of 1836 further illustrates the predominance of the Anglo-centric view of Texas history. He summed up this history as follows: "In 1835, the Revolution began with the battle of González in which 1,000 Mexicans were defeated by 500 Texans. Goliad, and the strong citadel of Bexar known as the Alamo were soon after taken and the whole Mexican army was dispersed. On the 6th of March, 1836, however, Santa Anna, having raised a new force of 8,000 men, attacked the Alamo, which had been left in charge of a small but gallant garrison. All night they fought but superior numbers triumphed. Every man fell at his post but several, and

these were killed while asking quarter."[29] Another popular history book used in the schools described the Battle of Mier that the Mexican troops won in the following manner: "at this point, where Mexican valor failed, Mexican trickery succeeded. . . . They indicated that a reinforcement of eight hundred fresh men were expected every moment; that the general admired the bravery of the Texans and wished to save them from the certain destruction . . . it seems strange that the Texans had not learned by this time never to trust the Mexicans, promises or no promises."[30] In the textbooks quoted above Mexicans have few positive attributes. Anglos, on the other hand, are portrayed in glowing terms with few negative characteristics.

Despite the exclusivity and Anglo character of schools, some Mexican students succeeded in school and utilized it for improving their economic opportunities and for becoming productive citizens in their barrios. A few, in other words, managed to succeed despite the structural barriers of inequality and the subtractive curriculum. Edna Luna, for instance, managed to graduate from Jefferson Davis High School in 1928. Estella Gómez followed in her footsteps and graduated from Sam Houston High School in 1929.[31] A handful of other students attended Rice Institute, including P. L. Niño and Francisco Chairez, who earned degrees as engineers in 1928. These individuals and their educational achievements were touted by the Mexican community as examples for the youth to emulate.[32]

The presence of a small group of individuals who succeeded in school raises questions about the popular and historical interpretation of the Mexican experience in education. This general interpretation posits the view that all Mexican-origin children were nonachievers and that their performances in the schools were solely part of a history of underachievement as reflected in low scores on tests of reading, math, and general knowledge, as well as in enrollment, attendance, and attainment rates. Historically, this is an inaccurate portrayal of this community's performance in the schools. The existence of successful individuals suggests a more diverse pattern of school performance. This history, I would argue, is actually one of skewed performance that is characterized by a dominant tradition of underachievement and a minor one of school success, as is supported by the above evidence.

Most Mexican-origin individuals, however, did not succeed. They experienced much failure in the schools. Poverty, ignorance of American laws, the need for child labor, and severe overcrowding and inadequate attention to the cultural and linguistic needs of these children encouraged

most of them to drop out of school after several years.[33] The school experience in many cases reinforced their subordinate status by reaffirming their lack of success in the larger society.

EXPANDING PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, 1930–60

The pattern of increasing albeit unequal educational opportunities was strengthened in the years from 1930 to 1960, when school segregation expanded to the higher grades, and when institutional discrimination became more pervasive and scholastic performance more skewed. The pattern of separate and unequal schooling gradually expanded and increased into the secondary grades after the 1930s as a result of Mexican student enrollment. In the Magnolia Park area Mexican-origin children began to enroll in larger numbers at Edison Junior High and at Deady Junior High during the years from 1930 to 1960. Those who finished these grades continued into Milby High School. Mexican-origin children residing closer to what is now the Gulf Freeway attended Jackson Junior High and the Stephen F. Austin High School. The Mexican children in El Segundo barrio at times enrolled at Sam Houston High School, which used to be located around the downtown area. In the Northside, Mexican children attended Marshall Junior High and then Davis High School.[34] Although data is lacking, it is possible that Mexican-origin children attended secondary schools in parts of the city that were outside their barrios.[35]

As in the case of the elementary schools, some of these secondary schools eventually became segregated as a result of various forces, including population shifts. But public prejudice was an important influence in ensuring that the schools remained segregated. One example illustrates the role of community prejudice in strengthening the pattern of segregation. In the mid-1930s the Settlement Association of Houston established an educational and social facility in the 5500 block of Canal Street. This was a cooperative project between local school officials and the Houston Settlement Association. Its purpose was to provide English, citizenship, pottery, and other types of classes for Mexican adults and children. The facility was at the edge of the Mexican district in Magnolia Park and was opposed by many homeowners in the predominantly Anglo residential section. On opening night many of these individuals "swarmed in the streets, calling the Mexicans insulting names and trying to drive them away." The president and director of the association, a Miss Bailey (no first name avail-

able), called the police, who quieted things down by midnight. The police promised increased protection, but association officers, scared by the anti-Mexican sentiment of the community, decided to leave the area and relocate in another part of the neighborhood. The president of the association thought that it would be unfair to the Mexican youth and adults to subject them to the "possibility of a recurrence." An educational and social facility was later founded in the heart of the Mexican community.[36]

Public prejudice also encouraged the principal of Hawthorne Elementary to promote segregation within this predominantly Anglo school. In the early 1930s the principal of Hawthorne approached the Houston Settlement Association for assistance in establishing programs and activities for its students. These children, however, had to meet in separate groups so as not to disturb the existing patterns of social relations based on segregation.[37]

Another incident illustrates the role of bias in the maintenance of school segregation. In the mid-1940s De Zavala Elementary School was condemned as a fire hazard. School board members began to discuss the construction of a new school to replace it and where to send the existing children. Because of bias in the community, they decided to send them, not to the neighborhood school closest to them, a predominantly Anglo school, but rather to the Mexican school closest to De Zavala. Bias in school official actions thus contributed to the maintenance and strengthening of the Mexican school phenomenon in Houston.[38]

The earlier pattern of institutional discrimination continued and became more pervasive during the decades from 1930 to 1960, but there were some slight changes. For example, during the late 1940s the school district began to hire some Mexican American teachers. This action served to modify the pattern of structural exclusion at this level. By 1958 approximately twenty-five persons of Mexican origin were employed as public school teachers.[39] No clear reason has been found to indicate why public school officials began to hire Mexican American teachers. It is possible that the increasing number of Spanish-speaking children in the schools created the conditions for their hiring, but more research needs to be conducted in this area.

Despite these positive steps, local officials failed to hire Mexican-origin administrators for the elementary and secondary grades. Structural exclusion of Mexican Americans thus continued to be the pattern at this level. The first Mexican American principal was not hired until the mid-1960s.[40]

The first district-level administrator was not hired until 1971 and as a result of political pressure from the Mexican-origin community.[41]

Other exclusionary practices continued during this period. Local officials continued to mount a campaign against the use of Spanish in the schools and to neglect the needs of barrio schools. They also failed to encourage or support the election of Mexican-origin individuals to the school board. By 1960 the pattern of exclusion, although modified, was still intact.[42]

In addition to continued institutional exclusion, there was also a pattern of discrimination reflected in local school decisions about the Mexican schools and the Mexican population. For example, during the 1930s local school board members, in response to Depression woes, used the schools to encourage repatriation of the Mexican population.[43] While a few members of the Mexican-origin community supported this effort in the early decades of the Depression, repatriation became a symbol of America's mistreatment of this population group.

The campaign to systematically deport Mexican immigrants was part of a larger movement aimed at blaming them for unemployment and for high relief rates caused by the Great Depression. The official purpose of this campaign was to improve occupational opportunities for Anglos and to remove Mexican-origin individuals from the welfare and relief rolls by either deporting or repatriating them. But it quickly became part of a general campaign of fear and intimidation of unwanted Mexican immigrants and also led to widespread denials of basic constitutional and human rights.[44]

The 1940s brought an end to these types of discriminatory actions but not to the pattern of discrimination. The Mexican schools such as Lubbock, Jones, Rusk, and De Zavala Elementaries, continued to be inadequate, substandard, and in need of repairs. In 1945 De Zavala was overcrowded and, as noted earlier, condemned as a fire hazard. Despite the objections of Anglo parents residing in the community surrounding the school, the local board decided to expand the school by providing a new wing. A decade later Rusk Elementary, located on Maple Street, was condemned by the school district due to overcrowdedness and inadequacy of the facility. This old school was razed and a new one constructed at the corner of Garrow and Page, near Settegast Park, but it took the district four years to build it. The new Rusk Elementary relieved overcrowded conditions at Lubbock and Jones and served the children of Clayton Homes, a

new housing project located several blocks from the school.[45] In the meantime other schools failed to obtain adequate resources to instruct the increasing numbers of Mexican-origin children enrolled in them.

The pattern of discrimination also became more pervasive during these decades largely as a result of the emergence of new assessment methods, placement practices, and curricular changes during the early decades of the twentieth century.[46] Many of these school reforms were developed as part of a national movement to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public education in the United States.[47] Houston school officials joined this national movement in the 1920s as it expanded educational opportunities for most children from ages five to twenty, reorganized elementary and secondary education, and revised curricula. In an effort to meet the needs of students with varying abilities they assessed their abilities, established a special curriculum—e.g., trade, vocational, and industrial courses—and then placed them in these classes.[48]

These "progressive" reforms, once implemented in the schools, had a negative impact on the education of Mexican-origin children since it led to their misdiagnosis and to their classification as intellectually inferior, culturally backward, or linguistically deprived. Once classified as inferior, these children were systematically placed in "developmentally appropriate" instruction groups, classes, or curricular tracks. In the elementary grades the "developmentally appropriate" classes were slow-learning or special-education classes, and in the secondary grades they tended to be either vocational or general education classes.[49]

This process of labeling and placement at the elementary grade level occurred as early as 1908 when local school officials classified Mexican children as "subnormal" and provided them with a special class at Rusk Elementary. An ungraded class was also established at Dow Elementary for students with special needs, including a delinquent child, a bright child who disliked school, a blind child, and a non-English-speaking child. These types of classes were expanded during the next three decades.[50]

At the secondary level the process of labeling and tracking began by the third decade of the twentieth century and expanded in the post–World War II period. Generally speaking, administrators assigned Mexican-origin children to vocational or general education courses or tracks and discouraged them from taking academic classes. This vocationalization of the curriculum began as early as the 1930s when some of the schools in the Mexican community developed vocational training for boys and domestic science for girls.[51] Some historians have argued that vocational education

was a negative experience for the Mexican-origin population because it did not promote mobility or advancement. Vocational education, according to most historians, reinforced the existing subordinate position of the Mexican-origin population by limiting rather than broadening employment opportunities. More specifically, it trained Mexicans to be docile workers employed in semiskilled or unskilled labor.[52] Because of the dearth of studies dealing with the placement of Mexican children in vocational education, it is not possible to determine whether vocational education actually trained these students to be docile workers or provided them with work skills necessary for advancement.[53] Evidence, however, suggests that vocational education was used by educators to limit the educational opportunities of Mexican-origin students by placing an inordinate amount of emphasis on the vocational aspect of instruction in the barrio schools at the expense of academic subjects. The greater emphasis on vocational education in the predominantly Mexican American schools led to an imbalance in the curriculum and foreclosed most possibilities for increased academic instruction among members of this minority group.[54]

The discriminatory treatment of Mexican-origin children was also apparent in their interactions with instructional staff. Generally speaking, local educators provided these children with schools that were staffed by insensitive instructors who were oblivious to the cultural and special educational needs of these children. Although some of these teachers cared, most had low expectations of the children's learning abilities and discouraged, at times unwittingly, Mexican children from achieving. They also ridiculed them for their culturally distinctive traits. Many a Mexican child was punished simply for speaking Spanish at school or in the classroom.[55] Teachers also interacted with Anglo students more and had less praise for Mexican children.[56]

The policies, procedures, and practices utilized by school administrators to assess and classify students, place them in classes, and promote them through the grades served to stratify the student population according to various categories and to reproduce the existing relations of social and economic domination in the classroom.[57] The major educational consequence of inferior schooling as well as unfavorable socioeconomic circumstances was the strengthening of the pattern of skewed academic performance developed in the early part of the twentieth century.

A dominant tradition of underachievement and a minor one of success, as mentioned earlier, characterized this pattern. Although no concrete data exists on the number of Mexican-origin children who scored poorly

in school, scattered evidence suggests that this was the case. In the early 1950s, for instance, the Houston Settlement Association conducted a study of the Mexican school in El Segundo barrio and found that large numbers of children were not even enrolled. A study of Hawthorne Elementary indicated the magnitude of the problem of underachievement. In this study investigators found that out of 238 Mexican children in the elementary grades 90, or approximately 38 percent, were one year below grade level and 57, or about 24 percent, were two years below grade level. Thus, out of 238 children 147, or 62 percent, were below grade level in their academic work.[58]

Poor attendance record and low achievement usually led to high dropout rates. The pattern of poor school achievement is reflected in the low median number of years of schooling completed by Mexican-origin individuals twenty-five years old and older. As of 1950 the median number of years of schooling completed by the Mexican-origin population in Houston was 5.2. For Anglos and African Americans the rate stood at 11.4 and 7.6, respectively. Some change occurred by the following decennial, as indicated by the increase in the median number of years of schooling completed by this population group. In 1960 Mexicans had 6.4 median years of school completed. The median years of schooling also increased for the other two groups but at varying rates. In general the gap between the Mexican-origin population and Anglos decreased, whereas that between Mexicans and African Americans remained constant.[59]

Despite the gloomy picture of underachievement there was an unnoticed increase in academic excellence. This was reflected in the number of Mexican-origin children who were advancing to the senior grades, completing high school, and enrolling in college. High school enrollment and completion slowly increased between 1930 and 1960. At Austin High, for instance, only one Mexican American made it to the senior grade in 1938. The number remained unchanged in 1945. By 1955 the number had increased slightly to ten. Five years later there were forty-four Mexican-origin pupils attending Austin.[60] The figures for Davis High were also low, but they showed a slight increase. Mexican students comprised less than 4 percent of the total student population in 1945 and 1949. By 1951 approximately 9 percent of the Davis student population was Mexican American.[61] A similar development occurred at Milby and at Reagan High. In the former, Mexican-origin pupils comprised about 6 percent in 1951 but approximately 11 percent in 1960. In the latter, Mexican Americans comprised less than 1 percent in 1951, but their numbers increased five years

later so that slightly over 6 percent of the total student population was Mexican American.[62] Enforcement of school attendance laws, new curricular programs, declining economic opportunities for youth, and increased desire for learning by the community led to the enrollment of larger numbers of Mexican-origin children in the secondary grades.

Census data for 1950 and 1960 indicate that a small proportion of Mexican-origin individuals were completing high school and attending college. According to the 1950 census 16 percent of the Mexican-origin population had completed between one to four years of high school and close to 4 percent had completed one to four years of college. These percentages increased ten years later when 21 percent had completed one to four years of high school and slightly over 7 percent had completed one to four years of college.[63] This group formed part of the emerging middle class that was to play an important part in the community's struggle to achieve equality, justice, and equal opportunity in Houston.

CONCLUSION

Public education for Mexican-origin children, then, was a twentieth-century phenomenon. In the century's early decades they were provided increasing albeit inequitable access to the public schools. This public schooling, however, was of inferior quality, as evidenced by school segregation and administrative mistreatment. Segregation originally was found only in the elementary grades, but over time it expanded to the secondary level. Administrators consistently diagnosed Mexican children as being intellectually inferior, channeled them into low-track classes, and deprived them of opportunities for success. Discrimination in educational administration eventually led to the tracking and channeling of these children into slow-learning classes at the elementary level in the early part of the century and into general education and vocational classes by the post–World War II era.

Mexican children in Houston likewise received English-only instruction, were punished for speaking Spanish, were discouraged from maintaining their cultural heritage, were coerced into speaking English, and were discriminated against by school board members, administrators, and teachers. In other words, they were provided with demeaning educational experiences and a subtractive curriculum. Although public education experienced significant innovations during the first half of the century, little change occurred in the subtractive curriculum, in the treatment of Mexi-

can children, or in the structural exclusion of the Mexican-origin community during these decades.

The major educational consequence of inferior schooling was a pattern of skewed academic performance, characterized by a major tradition of underachievement and a minuscule one of school success. Over the years an increased number of Mexican Americans managed to advance through the grades and succeed, but the vast majority continued to be low achievers because of structural inequalities and inadequate schooling opportunities. Throughout this entire period members of the Mexican-origin community in Houston adapted as best they could to these school policies and practices. Occasionally they took actions against institutional discrimination.[64] In most cases, however, they creatively adapted to the limited opportunities provided by local school officials.