CHAPTER 4

The Community Is Beginning to Rumble

"The Mexican-American community is beginning to rumble," noted Ben Canales, an official with United Organizations Information Center, a community-based group located in the Northside barrio of Houston. This comment was made before a Houston Board of Education committee meeting in October, 1969. It aptly reflected the community's increased dissatisfaction with the local district's unwillingness to improve the conditions under which Mexican American children were educated in particular and the growing restlessness among middle- and working-class Chicanos over the neglect of their interests and needs by political leaders at all levels of government in general. Since 1960 Chicanos in Texas, especially the older and more established middle-class individuals who were members of existing organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the American G.I. Forum, and the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASSO), had worked to elect liberal politicians, to enact federal legislation aimed at meeting the educational and vocational needs of Mexican American children, and to ensure the passage of important civil rights measures. Despite their involvement in the political process, Mexican Americans continued to be neglected by authorities and agencies at all levels of government.[1]

Failure to impact significantly the dominant society's view of Mexican Americans laid the groundwork for the further radicalization and increased political mobilization of the community. The 1966 farmworkers'

strike in the Rio Grande and its brutal suppression by the Texas Rangers and state police as well as the Minimum March of that summer accelerated this process. They radicalized existing organizations and unleashed a series of new ones with notions of ethnic identity, political culture, and social change different from those of the Mexican American Generation. These energized groups mobilized an increasing number of community people and mounted a vigorous campaign against all forms of discrimination in American institutional life, especially public education.[2] Canales's statement refers to the complex process of ideological fermentation, organizational development, and political mobilization occurring in the Chicano community in Houston and throughout the state.

EARLY ACTIVISM AND SCHOOL REFORM, 1960–66

Although Mexican Americans had a rich legacy of activism in the schools in the early 1960s, it was subdued and narrowly focused. Activism in the schools focused on four areas of activities. First, sporadic efforts were made to improve the treatment of the Mexican American children in the schools and the quality of their education. For instance, in the summer of 1961 parents from the Clayton Home area in the Second Ward met to discuss conditions in their local schools. They also set up committees to improve the quality of the school facilities provided for their children. Although no information is available on what happened to these recommendations or what further actions the Clayton Home tenants took, their efforts indicated a deep concern for quality education.[3]

At times specific incidents of discrimination were challenged or contested. One such incident occurred in early 1960 when the school board engaged in a debate over the need for free lunches. One school board member remarked that "Mexican American children did not need free lunches because they would rather eat 'pinto beans.'"[4] This comment incensed the community and led to the study of and support for a free-lunch program in the Houston Independent School District. LULAC, the American G.I. Forum, and the Civic Action Committee sponsored this study.[5]

The second major focus of Mexican American activism during this early period occurred at the University of Houston. In 1963 Mexican American students at the University of Houston founded a PASSO chapter on campus to promote awareness of the community's diverse interests and to endorse candidates who best represented them. Under the leadership of Samuel S. Calderón and Manuel Crespo, the UH-PASO conducted

voter registration drives, informational workshops on the community's needs, get-the-vote-out campaigns, and analyses of political campaigns. For several years this organization was an important instrument of political awareness and social change on campus.[6]

Third, and probably most important of all, was LULAC's Little School of the 400, a specific educational experiment aimed at improving the scholastic achievement of Mexican Americans. This concept was the brainchild of Félix Tijerina, a local member of LULAC. In 1960 Tijerina, who had just stepped down as national LULAC president, feverishly promoted the Little School of the 400 program in that city and throughout the state, and during the legislative session in 1959 he and LULAC lobbied on behalf of state support for the concept. This project was Tijerina's way of improving the education of Mexican American school-age children and reflected his personal philosophy toward underachievement. Tijerina believed that the lack of facility with English in the early years of child development was at the heart of the high failure rates of Mexican Americans in the schools. He felt that the solution to this problem of underachievement was English-language instruction at the preschool level. His strategy thus was to change the child, not the school. In 1957 he established the Little School of the 400 with this objective in mind. The program's primary objective was to teach Mexican American preschool children four hundred essential English words that would provide them with a better opportunity for completing the first grade of school and for advancing through the grades.[7]

The state legislature agreed to fund this project in 1959 and implement it in the summer of 1960. Tijerina and LULAC promoted, publicized, and helped implement this educational innovation. The success of this promotional campaign was apparent when on June 1, 1960, the first 614 schools opened their doors to 15,805 Spanish-speaking children. By 1967 over 150,000 Spanish-speaking children had taken part in the program.[8]

The program was relatively successful in increasing school achievement among Mexican American school-age children entering the first grade.[9] Despite its apparent success, prominent scholars such as George I. Sánchez, Herschel T. Manuel, and others heavily criticized the Little School of the 400. This program, they noted, ignored the positive role that the children's native language played in their intellectual and psychological development. They also felt that it was based on unsound educational assumptions about language teaching and learning.[10] This criticism, coupled with the development of similar and new federal programs such as Title I and

the Head Start project in the mid-1960s, contributed to its diminished importance in the community and its expiration by 1967.[11]

In addition to supporting the Little School of the 400 Tijerina also ran for the school board in 1960. He ran on an independent platform and promised to represent all his constituents "fairly and honestly." He said nothing about his ethnicity and, despite his promotion of the preschool English program for Mexican Americans, promised no significant changes in education if elected to the school board.[12] He failed to be elected.

Fourth, existing organizations such as LULAC and the American G.I. Forum (AGIF) took advantage of the new federal legislation and developed innovative educational and work-training programs for the community's benefit. One such program was Jobs for Progress, sponsored jointly by LULAC and AGIF. The idea of a job-placement referral service originated in the LULAC organization during the spring of 1964 and in the context of a national war-on-poverty program. The National LULAC office endorsed this idea in February, 1965. Two months later, in April, LULAC Council 60, one of Houston's most active chapters, opened the first Jobs for Progress placement office in the nation. In June, 1966, Jobs for Progress received federal funding.[13] It provided education to adults and helped place them in meaningful jobs.[14]

These educational efforts by LULAC and AGIF, however, did not go far enough in bringing about change in the schools or in society. They were based on changing the individual rather than the society and its discriminatory practices.

THE RISE OF THE CHICANO MOVEMENT, 1965–69

During the middle and late 1960s the character and pace of Mexican American activism in Houston changed, largely as a result of the impact of the emerging national Chicano movement. Some historians argue that the Chicano movement was primarily comprised of youth in search of an identity and power; others argue that it was a diverse movement of mostly working-class men and women aimed at improving the social, economic, and political status of Mexican-origin individuals.[15] The Chicano movement, in my view, was a complex set of increased political and cultural activity on the part of diverse sectors within the Mexican-origin community.[16] Professionals, campesinos, students, barrio youth, women, and many other middle- and working-class groups participated in the Chicano movement. Although each of these groups had distinct ideas about how to

challenge Anglo hegemony and improve Mexican American life, the majority believed that the political methods of moderation and the cultural identity of the Mexican American Generation were ineffective and no longer viable.

The Chicano movement produced what the historian Ignacio M. García calls a militant ethos—that is, "that body of ideas, strategies, tactics, and rationalizations" that the activists utilized in dealing with the problems plaguing Mexican Americans and the solutions proposed to deal with those problems. This militant ethos, he argues, encouraged Mexican American activists to accept Chicanismo, a complex set of ideas that included cultural nationalism, self-determination, militancy, and the politics of opposition.[17]

During the Chicano movement era two distinct patterns of political activism emerged. First, established middle-class leaders became more militant in their criticism of governmental policies and practices and in their tactics. A few even abandoned the politics of accommodation and embraced direct action strategies utilized by civil rights activists. In 1966, for instance, a group of middle-class leaders expressed their frustration and anger at the federal government by conducting a walkout at a national hearing on employment being held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The following year, in October, another group of individuals walked out on a federal hearing conducted by cabinet members of the Johnson administration. These actions resulted from the frustrations felt by established middle-class leaders when federal officials continued to ignore their political and cultural interests and exclude them from federal policies and programs that called for "maximum citizen participation."[18]

The increasing dissatisfaction of established middle-class leaders led to the development of a new style of politics that emphasized a more militant approach to governmental neglect. This new militancy was clearly expressed in 1966 by Dr. Hector P. García, founder of the American G.I. Forum, when he warned the White House that "Mexicans were prepared to march in the streets if that were necessary to reach their goals."[19]

The second major pattern of activism was the emergence of a new type of national leadership that went beyond the politics of opposition already used by the disenchanted middle class. These new leaders encouraged the organization and mobilization of previously uninvolved sectors of the Mexican-origin community and directly or indirectly rejected the cultural identity of the Mexican American Generation. They also contested the integrationist and reformist goals of this earlier generation of activists.

The first, and probably most important, leader was César Chávez, a union organizer for the California farmworkers. He used both traditional union methods and civil rights tactics to publicize his struggle in the fields. In 1965 Chávez, for instance, conducted a boycott of grape growers in California. The following year he engaged in a protest march to Sacramento, the state capital, and took steps to organize an international boycott of table grapes. Chávez effectively used Mexican cultural and religious symbols, especially La Virgen de Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, in this effort. Through his use of cultural symbolism—i.e., *Mexicanidad* (nationalism)—a Catholic religious orientation, and a philosophy of nonviolence, Chávez provided inspiration to thousands of Mexican Americans throughout the country interested in social justice and equality.[20]

The second important leader to emerge during the mid-1960s was Reis Tijerina. He formed the Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres in New Mexico to fight for land grant rights and used violence and confrontation to achieve his goal. In 1966, for instance, he "occupied" the Echo Amphitheater, a campground in the Kit Carson National Forest, to illustrate the rights of grant heirs. As part of this strategy a forest ranger was "tried" and a Forest Service truck impounded. The following year, on June 5, 1967, his group engaged in a shoot-out with Tierra Amarilla county authorities after several members attempted a citizen's arrest of the local county attorney for interfering in the organization's affairs. Through these and other acts Tijerina became a symbol of direct and revolutionary action.[21]

The third major leader to emerge in this period was Rodolfo "Corky" González. Corky, as the historian Ignacio García notes, provided a comprehensive ideology against urban ills. In 1963 he formed a community group to fight police brutality. This group eventually became the "Crusade for Justice" in the latter part of the 1960s. Through this group Corky provided the ideals of cultural nationalism and an action plan for achieving "Chicano" liberation in this country.[22]

The fourth major leader of this period was José Angel Gutiérrez. He provided pragmatism and the politics of confrontation.[23] Gutiérrez was one of the founders of the Mexican American Youth Organization and La Raza Unida Party in Texas. These two organizations mobilized thousands of youths and adults and promoted social, education, and political change in the state and the Southwest.[24]

These leaders and the organizations they established led many of the struggles against discrimination, exclusion, and assimilation in the Southwest and other parts of the country during the 1960s and early 1970s. Col-

lectively and individually they mobilized different sectors of the Mexican-origin population such as professionals, students, youths, women, and both middle- and working-class individuals in the barrios.

The most powerful sector of the Chicano movement, however, was comprised of the young people, who expanded its base and contributed to its radicalization.[25] The Chicano youth movement was comprised of both male and female organizations from the barrios and the universities. The members of barrio organizations were basically lower-class individuals who coalesced around different community issues, one of them being education. The student organizations' memberships were primarily middle-class, and their major issues revolved around education. The National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, held in Denver, Colorado, in March, 1969, brought both of these youth groups together. The manifesto emanating from that conference, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," provided the youths with an ideology of cultural nationalism and a specific plan of comprehensive action for achieving "Chicano" liberation. This new "Chicano" identity, or at least distinct elements of it, was soon adopted by thousands of barrio residents throughout the country.

MIDDLE-CLASS ACTIVISM IN HOUSTON

The pattern of increasing middle-class militancy and the emergence of a new type of leadership were reflected in Houston school politics by the late 1960s. Established middle-class leaders in Houston, for instance, increased their criticism of the Houston Independent School District and more vigorously challenged discriminatory policies, programs, and practices.

An example of the renewed assertiveness on the part of middle-class activists in the community occurred in the fall of the 1969–70 school year when a few of these leaders went before the local school board and leveled charges of inferior education and discrimination against HISD. On Wednesday, October 1, 1969, Leonel Castillo, local director of Services, Employment, and Redevelopment, a federally funded training agency, went before the school board's compensatory education committee. This committee was established in the fall of the 1968–69 school year to recognize officially some of the problems facing the district in educating Mexican Americans and to take corrective action.[26] Although the committee had taken some steps to improve the schools, these did not deal directly with the problem of discrimination and unequal education.[27]

Castillo charged that Mexican American students were getting an infe-

rior education in Houston. These comments were based on his experiences with some students who participated in a college-bound summer school program. These youths, who came from several junior high schools including Hogg, Marshall, Edison, and George Washington, had been identified by several educators involved in the summer school program as potential college material and selected to participate in this summer program. Upon their arrival, however, the organizers of the program found that the reading levels of these students were so low that the curriculum had to be revised downward. A majority of the approximately 120 male participants were reading at either a second- or third-grade level. These students, noted Castillo, "had received their education, since the first grade, in the Houston public schools." He also charged that the administrators had a bad attitude toward the Mexican American students and no desire to improve educational programs and that they did not want to motivate those students to learn.[28]

Ben Canales, an official with United Organizations Information Center (UOIC), charged that in some schools, such as Jeff Davis and San Jacinto High, Mexican American students were constantly harassed by teachers.[29] He added that the community was fed up with the local officials' neglect of these students' needs and stated, "We know that principals and teachers in schools with predominantly Mexican American enrollments are inferior to their counter parts in Anglo schools and they wouldn't make it in Anglo schools."[30]

As part of their presentations, community leaders made specific recommendations for school reform.[31] Antonio Criado, vice president of UOIC, made three specific recommendations for change. These recommendations reflected a mixture of new and old ideologies pertaining to language and culture in the schools: a compensatory view of language as a "handicap"; an emerging pluralist notion of language as asset; and a civil rights perspective of language as an instrument of discrimination. Specifically, Criado proposed that school officials (l) recognize a language barrier as a handicap, "just as deafness and blindness are handicaps," and take steps to help students with this; (2) alter history and other courses that make Mexican American students feel inferior and ashamed of their heritage; and (3) recognize that Mexican Americans cannot be treated like Anglo-Americans in measuring ability by testing. The latter recommendation was most likely based on the emerging view among activist educators that there were inherent cultural and language biases in standardized evaluation instruments.[32]

Ben Canales also added that the district should hire Mexican American principals, counselors, and teachers in those schools with large numbers of Mexican American students. Additionally, he stated that the professional staffs of these schools should be sensitized to the needs of these students through in-service programs.[33]

Probably because of the seriousness of the charges, the general superintendent of HISD, Glenn Fletcher, agreed to call a meeting of principals, assistant principals, and counselors of some schools with large numbers of Mexican American students so that they could discuss these problems with community representatives. "We recognize that problems exist and we are working on them," he added.[34]

On October 13, 1969, the meeting between top personnel from twenty-five Houston public schools and a panel of Mexican American adults was held. Although intended to be a meeting, there was no discussion of the issues. The group of educators merely heard a panel of Mexican American leaders level charges against HISD. José Rojo, an attorney with the Houston Legal Foundation, presented a position paper prepared by UOIC. He argued that there was a pattern of discrimination and harassment against Mexican Americans in the school district. More specifically, he argued that the general feeling by students was that Mexican Americans were fair game for mistreatment or different treatment by teachers and administrators "without fear of retribution." Corporal punishment, for example, was administered too frequently against Mexican Americans and without sufficient reason. Some teachers had a negative or hostile attitude toward Mexican American students and called them names. One junior-high coach, for instance, called Mexican American students "hoods" and "punks." Also teachers, principals, and counselors were insensitive to Mexican American problems.[35]

In addition to evidence of discrimination Rojo provided data indicating the low median years of schooling for the Mexican American population and especially the high rates of student dropouts. According to him 89 percent of the Mexican American pupils in Houston dropped out without finishing high school. This, he said, proved that the district's educators were not doing an adequate job.[36] He recommended the establishment of a task force of educators, parents, student leaders, and others to investigate these charges.[37]

The HISD administration did not immediately respond to these charges at the meeting, but one of its token Mexican American representatives did. Rosemary Saucello, a Houston school district graduate who earned a law

degree, disagreed with Rojo's charges and blamed the parents of Mexican American pupils, not the school administration, for the problems of underachievement and high dropout rates. She said heavier penalties should be dealt parents who permitted their children to be absent from school. "Let's do something about the dropout rate even if we have to put the parents in jail," she said. A good number of the HISD-appointed parents, staff, and administrators at the meeting heartily applauded her remarks.[38]

Several days later the HISD administration responded to the charges of discrimination and harassment. The staff vehemently denied the charges of inferior teachers. J. Paul Rodgers, principal at Jeff Davis, stated that teachers at his school had to have the same requirements and qualifications as teachers in other schools. Ken Mueller, principal at San Jacinto, said, "If anyone can cite one instance of discrimination I will personally apologize to the students." "It's too bad the critics don't see what we are doing here before complaining," noted Rodgers.[39]

A select group of Mexican American student leaders at several of the mentioned schools also denied the charges leveled against HISD by middle-class community leaders. Ramiro Marin, age seventeen, senior class president at Jeff Davis, for instance, said he had never been discriminated against in the Houston public schools. Robert Casares, sixteen, junior class president at Jeff Davis, said no junior had ever complained to him about discrimination and harassment. "I feel I'm getting a good education. I respect the school," he noted. Christina Uride, eighteen, a senior and president of the Future Teachers Association at San Jacinto, said she knew of no harassment or discrimination. "I think I'm getting a good education here," she said. José Garza, seventeen, president of the Spanish Club at San Jacinto, stated, "I think the teachers here are good and would teach anywhere." Gracie Solíz, seventeen, a National Honor Society member at San Jacinto, said that she had received encouragement from the teachers. Finally, Delia Salas, seventeen, secretary of the Spanish Club at San Jacinto and student council representative for two years, felt that Mexican Americans got a good education at the school.[40]

Principals Mueller and Rodgers noted how they had tried to institute special courses aimed at Mexican American students. San Jacinto had a Texas history course that emphasized the contributions of "Spanish-speaking citizens" and recently had tried to start a Spanish-language business education course but could not locate a bilingual teacher. Jeff Davis had bilingual courses in Latin American and Mexican history.[41]

School administrators noted that during the current school year they

had begun a pilot program in bilingual education in six elementary schools. Both Ben Canales and Antonio Criado, members of UOIC, maintained that these efforts were not enough. "They are trying pilot programs when they should be trying mass programs," Criado said; he added, "The dropout rate for Mexican American students is a crisis and the school administration doesn't recognize it." [42]

Despite the seriousness of these charges, no specific measures were taken to address them by either the board of education or the superintendent. The specific request made by Rojo on October 16, 1969, for the establishment of a task force of educators, parents, student leaders, and others to investigate these charges likewise was ignored. Community leaders found out that local officials were not genuinely interested in addressing the issues of underachievement and discrimination in the schools.

The increased militancy and participation of middle-class leaders were also reflected in the school board elections of November, 1969. Prior to this year only one Mexican American activist, Félix Tijerina, had run for a position; in 1960 he had been an unsuccessful candidate for the school board. His ideological orientation was representative of the Mexican American Generation's thoughts. He said nothing about ethnicity and was opposed to militancy, mass-based mobilization, and radical reform.[43] In November, 1969, when four Chicanos ran for the school board, the election reflected the diverse changes occurring in the Mexican American community and the impact of the emerging Chicano ideology on cultural identity.[44] All of these individuals, for instance, ran as "ethnics," i.e., as Mexican Americans, interested in serving the community. At least three of them believed in the need for more rapid change and in the use of direct action.[45]

Despite these shared sentiments there were also many differences between them and in their personalities. Abraham Ramírez, an activist lawyer and certified public accountant, ran for position one. Also running for the same position was Raul Gutiérrez, a newcomer to Houston who had just retired from the armed forces. He had recently been elected as a representative of the poor to the Harris County Community Action Association Board and was a ROTC teacher at Wheatley High School. He was one of the founders of a grassroots organization that encouraged the use of aggressive tactics in promoting school reforms. Rev. James L. Novarro, a social, civic, and religious leader and founder of *El Sol,* a community newspaper in Houston, was a candidate for position two. Although a political conservative, he supported mass actions, as indicated by his leadership role

in the minimum-wage walk conducted on behalf of the south Texas farmworkers in the summer of 1966.[46] The final candidate was Juan Coronado. He originally filed for position three on the ballot but for some unknown reason switched to position four. In the former position he had no significant minority opposition, while in position four he competed with another minority candidate who had a great deal of public support, Rev. Leon Everett.[47]

The desire to influence school policy in general and to address the concerns of discrimination and neglect were the major reasons for running for the school board positions.[48] However, the central issues of discrimination and institutional neglect were immediately forgotten in the battle for votes. The key conflict was between Abe Ramírez and Raul Gutiérrez. The middle-class members of the United Organization Information Center backed Ramírez. This group in turn was part of the political machine of Lauro Cruz, the first Chicano to get elected to the state legislature in 1966. Business and professional organizations and individuals living in the suburban areas of the city thus supported Ramírez. Raul Gutiérrez, on the other hand, was supported by a variety of barrio organizations from the Northside, Second Ward, and Magnolia Park; the Harris County Democrats also supported him. The Ramírez candidacy supported by professionals and businesspeople confronted the Gutiérrez organization supported by the masses of working-class individuals from the barrios. It was a "knocked down, dragged out confrontation" between both individuals and groups who were vying for political hegemony in the community.[49]

Coronado's candidacy was drowned out by Rev. Leon Everett's popular support. Reverend Novarro, in an editorial in *El Sol,* commented on the impact of this conflict on the Mexican American quest for power: "We are seeing a war of fratricide that is splitting the Mexican-American community and creating wounds that will be hard to heal. . . . The turmoil, the conflict and the confusion created by the various personality cults developed and later clash of petty interest is most tragic and indicative of a political infantilism of those that are responsible for this tragedy." *"El Sol,"* Novarro added, "cannot condone nor justify the undermining, character assassinations, fratricidal methods, maneuvers and schemes being carried out expediently and unscrupulously by petty individuals, under the cloak of given organizations."[50]

None of the four individuals who ran for school board positions won. Although all made a "fine showing," the reality indicated that "no one came even close to winning," according to Novarro. In addition to the in-

fighting this loss was the result of other more important factors, especially the lack of registered voters. According to most sources, there were from 125,000 to 150,000 Mexican Americans in the metropolitan area. Yet out of that total number only slightly more than 14,000 of them were registered to vote. In addition, all indications were that less than 50 percent actually voted in any one election. According to Novarro, "this reduces the political power of the Mexican-American group as such, to a very small percentage of the total vote that any candidate needs to win a city wide election." "This in itself," he added, "should be a tremendous eye-opener to all self appointed leaders of the Mexican-American destiny in Houston."[51]

THE NEW VOICES OF PROTEST IN HOUSTON

New leaders and new organizations also were founded in Houston during the late 1960s. The new activists began to organize and speak out against discrimination in education in 1967. The initial emphasis of this new type of leadership was evident at the University of Houston campus when several students formed the League of Mexican American Students (LOMAS).[52] LOMAS sought to increase awareness of Chicano issues among students and worked to formulate an intellectual foundation for the emerging activism by students. It brought Chicano leaders such as Corky González to campus and established an intellectual ethos critical of mainstream scholarship concerning Mexican Americans.[53] For several years in the late 1960s LOMAS was an important instrument of consciousness raising and political organizing on the University of Houston campus.[54]

In 1968 militant activism expanded to the nonuniversity community as a result of a Raza Unida Conference held in Houston in April of that year. This was one of a series of conferences organized by the statewide Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) to promote awareness and encourage activism in different parts of the state.[55]

MAYO, according to Navarro, was the most effective youth organization in Texas because it brought together barrio youth and students and made them significant forces of change. Its primary purpose was to foster social change in the barrio and to challenge the political, economic, and cultural hegemony of the Anglo ruling elite.[56] MAYO transformed itself into La Raza Unida Party in 1972 and focused entirely on electoral efforts. In the late 1960s, however, MAYO was a significant source of youth and student mobilization and of social and political change.

The MAYO conference in Houston was hosted and planned by Joseph Rojo and George Rivera. Its specific purpose was to bring together leading activists from across the city and to agree on goals and tactics for increasing social change. One of the major outcomes of this highly publicized meeting was the collective call for a "peaceful revolution" for Mexican Americans in Houston and for aggressive action on behalf of *la causa* (the cause).[57]

Although details on who attended, what specific workshops were held, and who spoke are lacking, this conference was successful in directly or indirectly encouraging the founding of Advocating Rights for Mexican American Students (ARMAS) and Las Familias Unidas de Segundo Barrio. The former, probably established in the fall of the 1968–69 school year, was an organization of junior and senior high school students. Its purpose was to bring about school changes that would increase the achievement of Mexican American students.[58] Las Familias Unidas (LFU) de Segundo Barrio, a grassroots organization, was founded soon after the Raza Unida Conference. In the summer of 1968 LFU took up the "revolutionary" cause by protesting the poor city services that plagued that area.[59] The era of radical protest by a new type of grassroots leadership had begun in Houston.

In public education the era of militant protest in Houston began during the 1968–69 school year. Protest activity was initiated by ARMAS, but the context for its actions was shaped by militant developments in other parts of the state. Of particular importance was the walkout by students in south Texas. In the fall of 1968, 192 Chicano students walked out of Edcouch Elsa High School in Hidalgo County because the school board refused to listen to a list of fifteen demands. Sixty-two of the students were expelled, and the newly formed Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) filed suit charging that the expulsion was unconstitutional and violated the students' rights to protest. MALDEF and the students won the suit in December of the same year.[60] In that same month the United States Commission on Civil Rights held several days of hearings in San Antonio, Texas. These hearings focused national attention on the invidious discriminatory practices utilized by most social institutions against Chicanos and Chicanas. A multitude of school policies and practices, especially no-Spanish-speaking rules and tracking, came under sharp criticism at these hearings.[61]

Youth activists supported and publicized these events through several community newspapers, including *El Yaqui, The Compass,* and *Papel Chicano.*[62] In December, for instance, Raul Gutiérrez wrote in support of the

Edcouch Elsa boycott in the first community newspaper established by young people in this period—*The Compass.* Gutiérrez complained that although conditions such as those at Marshall Junior High were bad, "nada [nothing] is being done in Houston." According to him, at Marshall the principals failed to meet on time with parents, there was an intimidating presence of "police protection" at parent meetings with the principal, and the school ignored parental demands, especially one directed at a teacher who was molesting young women. There was neither a Parent-Teacher Association nor a student council. He urged that militant action be taken to correct these injustices. The recent walkout in Edcouch Elsa, he noted, was a reminder for youths in Houston to "do our share."[63]

Several months later ARMAS did take action, marking the students' entry into the local Chicano movement of that era and reflecting an increasing militancy among young people. This moved student activism beyond the politics of accommodation and integration that had been shaped by the Mexican American Generation and the community's middle-class leadership.

ARMAS's first action occurred in March, 1969, after the school board forced cuts in the free lunch program that affected four thousand Mexican children. Mexican American parents protested this action and demonstrated in front of the school administration.[64] ARMAS supported the parents and passed out leaflets in some of the schools. These leaflets asked everyone—"Mothers, high school students, office workers, laborers"—for their support.[65] Although additional funds were eventually provided, local officials did not address the issues of discrimination in the schools and inferior education. This prompted ARMAS to take more radical action.

Sometime during early September, 1969, ARMAS drafted a list of demands for presentation to the HISD administration. This list reflected the new consciousness of cultural nationalism, especially increased racial and cultural pride. It specifically demanded fair treatment for Mexican Americans, the inclusion of Mexican American history and culture in the schools, and the hiring of Chicano counselors "who understand the special problems of Chicanos in high school."[66] In order to gain support and publicity for their demands ARMAS planned a demonstration and a general walkout of the schools.[67] A decision was made to initiate these actions on September 16, a traditional holiday celebrating the anniversary of Mexico's independence from Spain. On this day Chicano students, symbolically speaking, would celebrate their independence from Anglo America.[68]

On Tuesday, September 16, 1969, ARMAS demonstrated in front of Jef-

ferson Davis Senior High School. The principal at Davis, J. Paul Rodgers, requested that they not trespass on school property. The group complied with this request but only after they had read their list of grievances and demands. The demands made by ARMAS were as follows:

1. Initiation of courses on Chicano history and culture, taught by Chicanos, into the regular school curriculum.
2. Stopping the practice of "push-outs"—that is, when counselors whose main concern is to keep order in the school advise students who are disciplinary problems to drop out of school.
3. Hiring of more Chicano counselors, who understand the special problems of Chicanos in high schools and who understand why only 2 percent of the students at the University of Houston are Chicanos while Chicanos comprise over 14 percent of the city's population.
4. Elimination of the "pregnancy list" at Davis High School, a publicly posted list of all girls who have left school because of pregnancy—a vicious form of personal degradation.
5. Lengthening the twenty-minute lunch break allowed at Marshall, since all other schools get at least thirty minutes.[69]

ARMAS members then encouraged students from Davis to join them as they moved their demonstration off school property. Approximately one hundred students walked out of Davis.

Students in support of the ARMAS demands walked out of other schools. At Marshall Junior High approximately seventy-five students walked out, forty students left Hogg Junior High, twenty walked out of San Jacinto Senior High, and twenty left Booker T. Washington Junior-Senior High. A few brave souls from Reagan High also walked out.[70] They all met at Moody Park for a rally to discuss the success of the walkout and to plan for the future.

The principals and faculty at these schools reacted in various ways, most of them negatively. Some principals threatened all the students participating in the walkout with expulsion. A few teachers threatened to use physical force to keep the students in class and viewed the students' demands unworthy of consideration. At San Jacinto Senior High uniformed and plainclothes cops "were everywhere, shouting insults at the students and spoiling for a fight," noted one observer.[71] Some of the teachers grabbed students and shoved them back into classrooms, while others tried to intimidate them by taking down the names of those who were walking

out. Other schools, namely Reagan High and Marshall Junior High, were locked up completely and nobody was allowed to go outside.[72] "The students who did escape, however, marched around the high schools encouraging those in sympathy to join them," reported one journalist. Although most students were intimidated by the faculty threats as well as by teachers, many of them expressed verbal support for the walkout.[73]

The walkouts, according to one source, were well planned and executed.[74] They helped ARMAS attain one of its primary goals: to gain support from other students for its demands. According to one source, for instance, more than five hundred students walked out in all and many others showed their support by staying home that day.[75]

But the walkouts failed to have any significant impact on the schools or on the community as did others in different parts of the state or the Southwest. In Los Angeles, for instance, the student strikes of March, 1968, resulted in significant political developments beyond the issues of school reform and contributed to the further enhancement of community organizations. They also acted as the catalyst for the formation of a Chicano student movement as well as the larger Chicano movement of which it became the most important sector.[76] In Crystal City the walkout led to significant reforms in the governance, administration, and content of the public schools as well as to the formation of La Raza Unida Party and the political control by Chicanos of the city and county governments.[77]

Several possible reasons account for this lack of impact on the local community. First, the Houston walkout failed to disrupt the educational process significantly. Few students, in other words, participated in this action. Second, there was no significant leadership or guidance from university students or from seasoned activists in the community. Third, there was little, if any, support from parents and community members in general. A few parents supported the students, but the vast majority of individuals in the community were not even aware of this action taking place. One of the more prominent and active members of MAYO, Poncho Ruíz, for instance, expressed mild surprise years later that ARMAS had conducted a boycott of the Houston public schools in 1969. He did not know that this action had taken place.[78]

Although the boycott was not a catalyst to significant school and social reforms in Houston, it did have some limited impact on community awareness and political mobilization. The greatest impact of the boycott, however, was confined largely to the junior and senior high school students themselves. One observer felt that the students learned an important

lesson from these actions: they learned that "if they act together, they can force the administration to acknowledge their demands and respect their Mexican American heritage."[79] But this is misleading, for the school board essentially ignored the issues raised by the students' boycott. Punitive actions were taken against the leaders and followers by expelling or suspending some of them, but nothing was done to acknowledge or address their demands.[80]

Several months after the student boycott a new community group committed to mobilizing against discrimination in the schools was formed. This group, under the leadership of Raul Gutiérrez and Daniel Reséndez, was called Barrios Unidos.[81] On February 13, 1970, this group charged HISD with discrimination, inferior education, and insensitivity toward Chicanos. Barrios Unidos presented the local board with thirteen demands for improving the education of Mexican Americans. Unlike the one drawn up by ARMAS, this list was more comprehensive in proposing changes. It included taking punitive actions against school staff having "negative attitudes toward Mexican American students" (numbers 1 and 2), eliminating the no-Spanish-speaking practices (number 11), and opposing the integration of schools with students who are Mexican American and African American (number 9).[82] Barrios Unidos's list of demands was submitted by Raul Gutiérrez, president, and Daniel Resendez, spokesman, and included the following:

1. Be it understood, where individual negative attitudes toward Mexican American students may prevail among teachers, principals, and counselors [*sic*], those offenders should not be assigned to a teaching environment where they may directly or indirectly react from such attitudinal conditioning.
2. Appropriate personnel action . . . reprimand, probation, dismissal . . . should be initiated against those persons committing acts of mistreatment and abuse of civil rights of Mexican-American students.
3. Community voice and control of parents' school groups should not be watchdogged by principals and teachers nor should principals have the ultimate power over the parent groups' decisions.
4. Schools should be utilized for community use. Either a junior or senior high school should remain open in each barrio after normal school activities. Barrios Unidos is prepared to sponsor community activities at Marshall and George Washington Junior High Schools.

5. Immediate implementation of a method and schedule by which successful Mexican-Americans and representatives of LOMAS (League of Mexican-American Students) from the University of Houston may address junior and senior high school assemblies in predominantly Mexican-American schools. Identification of students with these persons would serve to improve their aspirations.
6. Curriculum and textbooks should reflect the contributions of Mexican Americans in the Southwest and the country as a whole. We want courses in Mexican-American history, cultural development, and art studies. Works of Mexican-Americans should be placed in the libraries.
7. Accelerate the implementation of bilingual education. Advertise and conduct a sincere recruitment campaign for qualified bilingual teachers, counselors, and principals to be assigned to predominantly Mexican-American schools. Such a recruitment campaign should not be limited to presently employed bilingual teachers of whom many are not assigned to predominantly Mexican-American schools.
8. Begin an immediate replacement of all teachers and principals who have reached retirement age or have served the required number of years toward retirement; and who are now employed at predominantly Mexican-American schools; younger qualified teachers are needed instead of older and mediocre teachers and principals.
9. A school should not be considered integrated where the majority of students are Mexican-American and Negro. The statistical practice of labeling Mexican-American students white is misleading and serves as a technique to disguise minimum efforts in meeting federal integration guidelines. It also serves to isolate two minorities. By practicing ethnic isolation, the school district is creating and ignoring a problem of racial conflict between the two groups. This problem is promulgated by the principals' and teachers' attitude of fear of what the black students might do and indifference towards what the white students do. The result is a manifestation of abuses against Mexican-American students.
10. Senior students unable to financially meet all the unnecessary graduation expenses should not be threatened by the principal with suspension and no diploma. They should be allowed to graduate without all unnecessary expenses.
11. The present practice of punishing and suspending Mexican-American students for speaking Spanish or, as commonly referred to by teaching personnel, "a foreign language," should cease immediately. No school

principal should prohibit Mexican-American students from speaking Spanish on school campus.

12. Eliminate as much as possible at the Junior and Senior High School level, South American, Spain's and Mexican history, replacing it with MEXICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY. . . . CHICANO HISTORY. WE HAVE MUCH TO OFFER.[83]

The demands for school reforms were not presented for the purpose of gaining publicity, noted *El Yaqui,* the newsletter for Barrios Unidos, but "because our children are recipients of very poor quality education, and are the subject of the worst discriminatory practices in [*sic*] the part of teachers, principals, and other students." "Barrios Unidos," it continued, "fully intends to pursue this issue until a balanced educational attitude and program has been developed that will enable the Chicano student to receive quality education, and the treatment and dignity to which he is entitled."[84] As in prior cases, the local board refused to acknowledge these demands and to address them. Once again the Mexican American community was ignored.

CONCLUSION

In Houston, then, school activism in the early 1960s was ad hoc in nature and limited to mostly middle-class organizations. By the end of the decade school activists, especially those from middle- or lower-middle-class organizations, became more militant in their approach. New groups of activists such as barrio youths, students, and grassroots individuals joined the struggle for improved education. Unlike activists from the early 1960s, those in the latter part of the decade criticized established school practices and policies and sought to promote reforms aimed at changing the institution of schooling rather than the child. They condemned discriminatory practices and promoted a variety of reforms aimed at making the schools more humane and more diverse in their curricular offerings, personnel, and governance.

Much of this change resulted from the impact of the Chicano movement. This *movimiento* encouraged increased militancy among established middle-class groups, the formation of new voices of protest, and the promotion of systemic school reform. Despite the increased militant ethos and participation of existing and new groups of activists, local school officials remained indifferent to Mexican American concerns. One of the rea-

sons for this indifference was the lack of unity among activist groups. Each group acted independently of the others and failed to form coordinated actions against school discrimination. The school board's refusal to recognize and tackle the problem of institutional discrimination raised by these activists only increased their disillusionment with public school officials and laid the groundwork for their further radicalization and mobilization. All that was needed was a catalyst to unify them.

Federal court decisions regarding integration during the summer of 1970 provided this catalyst. These federal decisions set the stage for a vigorous response by a united Mexican American community in Houston that would last for the next two years. Local school district intransigence and insensitivity ironically served to sustain the new activism motivated by these unjust federal court rulings. The rumblings of the Mexican American community during the 1960s, then, were a prelude to the coming explosion of political activism of the following decade that quickly developed into a movement of catastrophic proportions.