

CHAPTER 9

CONTINUING THE STRUGGLE

For the next several months, from March through June, 1971, MAEC as well as groups of Mexican American parents, students, and community members continued to struggle on behalf of school reforms. Setbacks in the courts and inequitable treatment in the schools fueled the growing disenchantment within the district. During this period MAEC responded to the challenges raised by the courts and the schools in diverse ways. It pursued litigation, engaged in the politics of protest and group pressure, and took steps to increase its organizational stability. More significantly, MAEC underwent a transformation from an activist group to a quasi-social service organization. This chapter discusses these developments and its impact on MAEC's school reform efforts.

LITIGATION

Although MAEC had filed a lawsuit to intervene as defendant in the local desegregation case in September, 1970, by May of 1971 the court had failed to rule on the case. On May 20, 1971, Abraham Ramírez, MAEC's legal representative, asked the district court judge for a hearing on its request for intervention since the Supreme Court had refused both the school board's stay of the pairing order and its request to intervene in the case.¹

The court held this hearing and issued its decision on the May 24, but it was not a favorable ruling for MAEC. In his ruling Judge Connally castigated Mexican Americans for trying to intervene in the desegregation case at this late stage. He argued that HISD had always treated "Latin Amer-

icans as of the Anglo or white race.” For all purposes, Mexicans were considered as whites or regarded as a race apart. There never was a “separate but equal” policy applied to them in the schools, as was the case with African Americans. “Never in the fifteen years since the initiation of this action have they [Mexican Americans] complained of this treatment [being claimed as white],” he said. That is, Mexican Americans did not complain until the court of appeals ordered the pairing of certain predominantly Mexican American schools with predominantly African American ones. The motion to intervene, he argued, was filed September 11, 1970. The pairing order of the court of appeals was dated August 25, 1970. “Content to be white for these many years,” he added, “now, when the shoe begins to pinch, the would-be-intervenors wish to be treated not as whites but as an ‘identifiable ethnic group.’” “In short,” he concluded, “they wish to be ‘integrated’ with Whites, not Blacks.”²

Even if Mexican Americans were considered an identifiable minority group, Connally noted, it did not follow that they were entitled to the relief sought. The courts, especially the *Swann* case, emphasized that it was the effects of “state-imposed segregation” that the courts were obligated to eliminate. Connally continued, “Neither *Swann* [*sic*] nor any other authority with which I am familiar suggests that every identifiable minority group—as Italian-American, German American, Polish American—who have been treated by the law only as white-Americans, are now entitled to escape the effects of school integration.”³ The motion to intervene was denied.

MAEC’s response to Connally’s ruling was predictable.⁴ Leonel Castillo, chairperson of MAEC, described the decision as “disappointing” and said that he was sorry Judge Connally could not understand “the problems of Mexican Americans today.” MAEC, for instance, was not trying to “escape integrating with any group,” as Connally had stated; rather MAEC was calling for a triethnic desegregation plan, i.e., one that would involve all groups, not simply Mexican Americans and African Americans. Castillo charged that Connally was “simply unaware” of the history of Mexican Americans in Houston. “Fifteen years ago we were a small, almost insignificant percentage of the school population,” he said. “Since then the number of Mexican Americans in the school district has almost doubled.”⁵ Mexican Americans had indeed become a significant part of the total population since 1950. In 1950 they comprised less than 1 percent of the total population in Houston, a mere forty thousand out of six hundred thou-

sand residents. Their numbers increased significantly over the next two decades so that by 1970 they comprised 12 percent of the total population.⁶

As for the right to be considered an identifiable minority group, Castillo said that the judge was “distinctly at odds” with other federal agencies such as the Census Bureau; the Justice Department; the Office of Health, Education, and Welfare; and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Within the previous three years each of these agencies had issued policies recognizing the minority group status of Mexican Americans. For instance, in 1967 congress enacted the first bilingual education act in this country’s history. This bill recognized the special needs of Mexican American school-age children and provided financial assistance to local education agencies to develop and carry out new and imaginative elementary and secondary school programs designed to meet these special education needs.⁷ In 1970 the Office of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) issued a statement recognizing the “national origin” minority status of Mexican Americans. Known as the “May 25 Memorandum,” it identified four major areas of concern relating to district compliance with title 6 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁸ In the areas of curriculum, placement practices, ability grouping or tracking, and informing parents about school activities, the memo forbade discrimination on the basis of national origin background.⁹ Even the Census Bureau, the federal courts, and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recognized Mexican Americans as an identifiable minority group.¹⁰ Castillo commented: “It’s especially ironic that his [Connally’s] ruling follows a monumental report by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights which clearly documents a high degree of ethnic isolation of Mexican Americans in Texas.”¹¹

Abraham Ramírez, Jr., agreed with Castillo that Judge Connally had a wrong impression of Mexican Americans. “Mexican Americans don’t oppose integration with Blacks,” he noted; “they oppose failure to include [the] entire community, especially Anglos, in the decision.”¹² Eduardo N. Lopez, writing in *Papel Chicano*, was more caustic in opposing Connally’s ruling. He accused Connally of demonstrating “an extraordinary ignorance concerning the problems, character, and culture of la Raza.” He further noted that the Mexican American community would not tolerate “more injustices nor their deformed opinions and interpretations over integration laws.” “Forward and onwards with the struggle for a comprehensive and impartial integration,” he added.¹³

Felix Ramírez, another *Papel Chicano* writer, also commented on

the decision. He criticized Connally's decision that Mexican Americans wanted to be integrated with whites and not blacks, writing, "I wish to remind this ignorant human being [Judge Connally] that it was the Supreme Court of the United States of America who ordered the schools integrated[,] not the Mexican American people." "His decision," he added, "proves his and a lot of other racist people's point that the Supreme Court's decisions hold no water and that they are a farce." If Judge Connally did not want integration of races, Ramírez further noted, then he should go to some "all white" country, "because he has not noticed [that] the U.S. is a composition of many races, including the Mexican American and the Negro." Ramírez concluded, "The decision this man made is not progressive; it definitely proves his lack of respect for law, for the Constitution, and the rights of people whom he swore to serve."¹⁴

On May 26, MAEC filed an appeal of U.S. district judge Ben C. Connally's decision against Mexican American intervention.¹⁵ Despite disillusionment with the decision, MAEC was not discouraged from continuing the struggle. The decision, many of its members believed, was unjust but not unalterable.

PRESSURE

MAEC's involvement was not limited to the politics of litigation during the second half of the 1970–71 academic year. The group also sought to influence school policy and practice at the school-board level. MAEC's emphasis on policy involvement was apparent in at least three types of activities.

First, MAEC inquired into the distribution of federal funds. On April 2, Castillo wrote a letter to Beatrice M. Smith, director of the Title I/Model Cities Planning and Coordination Department in HISD. He wanted to know how the district was spending its federal funds. The district had been allocated more than \$1 million for a massive urban rehabilitation project entitled the "Model Cities Program." By late March approximately \$180,000 had been spent to improve secondary schools in the "lower economic areas of the district." The district used these funds to establish a variety of programs in eight junior and senior high schools. These programs provided recreational and educational centers for students and adults, encouraged active participation by the community, and provided employment for some residents of the area. "Everything from table tennis to English for Mexican American adults is included in the program, which has

already provided forty-six jobs for adults,” noted a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*.¹⁶

MAEC members, however, were not involved in this program or in distributing its funds. Castillo wrote to Director Smith in order to find out “how much of the funds are being used to increase educational benefits for Chicano students and teachers.” He then requested a meeting with her and suggested that three agenda items be discussed: Chicano participation in the program, budget allocations for Chicanos, and concerns about quality. “Based on our limited information,” he argued, “there is no Chicano participation in the decision-making or priority-setting processes.” With respect to budget allocations Castillo asked how much money had gone for Chicano programs and who designed and administered the programs. “How effective were these programs and who evaluated them?” he further inquired.¹⁷

A second major area of concern for MAEC was the Bi-Racial Committee appointed by the court to monitor desegregation of the HISD schools. Judge Connally selected the ten-member committee from nominations made by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Houston School Board. The committee, formed in the fall of 1970, had two Mexican American members, but neither was known to the east-side community or supported by them.¹⁸ MAEC raised questions about the types of Mexican Americans serving on the Bi-Racial Committee. Abraham Ramírez, Jr., in a letter written on May 20, told Leonel Castillo that he had heard through the grapevine that “safe” Mexican Americans had been recommended to the committee, which probably meant individuals who were not MAEC members or who were uncritical of school district actions. He also told Castillo that one of the MAEC members, Manuel Velasco, had conferred with Gonzalo Garza, the first Mexican American area superintendent of public schools, about this issue.¹⁹ Garza, in turn, requested from Ramírez a list of individuals whom MAEC would like to have appointed. “Gonzalo,” he noted, “wants to push for Mexican Americans with guts on the bi-racial committee.” Ramírez sent Garza a list of persons whom he felt “would do the Mexican American justice in the bi-racial committee.”²⁰

PROTEST

MAEC’s strategy during the spring of 1971 also included protest and pickets, but much of this was localized—that is, it was concentrated in a few

barrios and directed at specific schools. The organization's members participated in several protest actions between March and June. On Wednesday, April 17, 1971, Mexican American parents at Franklin Elementary confronted the principal and teachers about school conditions and discrimination. Franklin had been vandalized several times, and food had been thrown on the cafeteria floor, chairs, and tables. Because HISD would not send anyone to clean up the mess—it was against the “rules and regulations,” noted the staff at the school—the Mexican American children were being asked to do it. Some of the teachers contended that a few parents had given permission for their children to clean. Parents responded that they were not told that the children would be responsible for cleaning the huge mess caused by vandals. Some were under the impression that the children would clean up their own messes.²¹

Parents were also upset over remarks of a substitute teacher who called the children names such as “ugly Mexicans” and “niggers.” One girl was told “to go ahead and shit in her pants” when she asked permission to go to the bathroom. Parents demanded to know what disciplinary action was going to be taken to make sure that this treatment did not reoccur. The principal responded that the substitute had been reported to the administration but that she did not know what had happened to that report. She was not sure if the substitute had been permanently removed from the list of those qualified to teach.²²

Another confrontation between parents and school officials occurred at a teacher in-service training session. Parents attended this session to raise a variety of questions about school conditions and the treatment of Mexican American children. Although some of their questions were answered, the principal complained of the inappropriateness of the occasion for hearing complaints. The teachers responded that they resented parental “interference” at their training session.²³

Maggie Landron, one of the MAYO members and staff at *Papel Chicano*, commented on the incident. She suggested that the central issue involved was “ownership,” i.e., “to whom do the schools belong?” The parents, she argued, were not wanted as problem-solvers but only as “money-makers for certain projects.” Parent-teacher organizations, she argued, were boring, “gossipy,” and elitist. Furthermore, the teachers in these schools were not committed to teaching. For them teaching was a job and an unsatisfying one at that. Teachers, noted Landron, “hate to go to class as much as the students and feel alienated as much as the parents.” In this climate the students felt unwanted. “From about the third grade up, students begin to

hate school and express their dislike by vandalism, false sickness, extreme messiness, [and] disciplinary problems,” Landron commented. Franklin as well as all other schools, she argued, were no longer symbols of learning since they had become “cold, dark, dirty, and inhuman.” They did not belong to anyone and had become impersonal “monsters” that aggravated and frustrated everyone stepping through their doors. For Chicanos and blacks the schools were society’s effort to keep them in their place. “As long as minorities are taught from an early age how dumb and inferior they are, the less trouble society will have teaching them inferiority as adults,” Landron concluded.²⁴

A second set of incidents inspired by MAEC members, especially Mexican American parents and students, occurred in May, 1971. First, over fifty Chicano students, both male and female, walked out of Edison Junior High to support Cinco de Mayo activities.²⁵ Second, Mexican American parents filed complaints against the principal and teachers at Burnet Elementary for mishandling parents and pushing students. During the incident, which occurred in mid-May, a teacher commented that Mexican American parents did not care about their children’s education. An activist questioned this comment and stated in a newspaper article that if any parent cared about his/her children, “it is the Mexican American.” The article said that the entire Mexican American culture was built around children but that “La Raza parents know that the schools mistreat their children and try to destroy their culture so they allow the children to drop out to PREVENT their children from being harmed.”²⁶ Third, MAEC members on May 20, 1971, organized a community protest of an award given to HISD for an exemplary community involvement program designed to put a desegregation plan into effect. The award, which included a trophy and a one-thousand-dollar prize, was given to HISD by the Association of Classroom Teachers of the National Education Association (NEA). The Houston Teacher Association, a group of local teachers, nominated the district for this award. The HISD school board was judged as having made greater educational achievements during 1970 than any district in the nation with seventy thousand or more students. It was especially cited for the Volunteers in Public Schools (VIPS) program of preschool screening as well as for the appointment of a citizens’ advisory committee to define educational goals, expansion of vocational education programs, and the addition of more than fifty special education classes. Emphasis was placed on the district’s efforts to achieve a smooth desegregation of schools under a plan set down by the federal courts.²⁷

MAEC members did not believe that HISD deserved this award. While Houston Teacher Association officials formally presented the HISD board with the NEA award, about fifty MAEC members picketed outside. A spokesperson for MAEC told the board at its Wednesday afternoon meeting that the members of the organization were protesting the award for a good reason. “I think it is unusual that this district, with so many problems and trouble, should receive such a national award,” said Leonel Castillo. He criticized the board’s attitude toward Mexican Americans and cautioned that if the board did not act to improve the Chicanos’ plight, “more trouble will occur next year.” Castillo noted that the district’s court-ordered Bi-Racial Committee had no Mexican American members and neither did the school board. He urged the board to form a committee with which Mexican Americans could more easily communicate to get answers.²⁸

The third set of protests occurred in mid-June and in July. During the middle part of June, Mexican American students presented several demands to the school board aimed at resolving the inequalities that existed between Chicano and Anglo schools. This set of demands emerged out of an exchange program between Jefferson Davis and Westbury High Schools that HISD arranged in the spring of 1971. Davis was a predominantly minority school, while Westbury was predominantly Anglo. Chicanos noticed the vast differences between these schools. The curriculum, physical maintenance, and equipment were all vastly inferior at Davis (see table 5).

Moved by their discovery, they drafted a list of demands, which they presented to the school board on June 14, 1971. Louis Tellez, father of one of the students and an MAEC officer, presented the list and asked for a meeting to discuss a new principal and “hopefully some new teachers.” The board made no comment on the demands or on the request for a meeting to discuss the principalship.²⁹

One final protest action occurred in midsummer and was aimed at criticizing one of HISD’s summer tutorial programs seeking to improve language and reading achievement. The new summer program, called the Project to Assist Mexican Americans (PAMA), was based at Sidney Sherman Elementary. Its purpose was to help Mexican American students enrolled in grades one through six who had language “disabilities” and other academic weaknesses. Forty-five students were enrolled in this program taught by three Mexican American tutors from Jefferson Davis High. Although the program was beneficial to Chicanos, one activist argued that it was a “band-aid” program.³⁰

Table 5. Result of Student Exchange between Jefferson Davis and Westbury High Schools, May, 1971

<i>Jefferson Davis (Mexican American)</i>	<i>Westbury (Anglo)</i>
1. One of oldest buildings in HISD	One of newest buildings in HISD
2. Almost all minority	All Anglo
3. Poor economic community	Economically well-off
4. Many dropouts	98 percent graduate
5. Curriculum: get students out	Curriculum: college-bound
6. Inferior facilities, halls not clean, "toilet odor," PTA has to buy visual aids and P.E. equipment	Excellent facilities, "no toilet odor," science, laboratory, and P.E. equipment
7. One art class for 1,600 students, little encouragement to attend college, few advanced courses	Advanced math course
8. Poor library	Excellent library

Source: "Students Protest Conditions in Jeff Davis," *Papel Chicano* 1, no. 18 (July, 1971): 5.

Chicano and Chicana activists not only protested existing policies, they also sought to develop innovative proposals for improving the schools. In one particular case they sought the creation of an independent school district in the East End barrio. Mario Quiñones, owner of Houston Tile Sales, importers of building tile, originated this idea and organized a steering committee of fifteen businesspersons to create the new district.³¹ The group proposed to carve a new twenty-square-mile school district out of the western section of the HISD and a portion of the Spring Branch Independent School District. The area would include twelve thousand students from nine schools. The proposed school district would be comprised primarily of Mexican American students, but black students would make up approximately 10 percent of the student body.³²

The reasons for creating a predominantly Chicano school district were stated by Quiñones: "The Houston School Board has always neglected the East End. . . . our schools are always the worst and no attempt is made to

improve them.” The creation of a new school district in the East End would pump in much-needed resources to improve the schools since the biggest taxpayers were industries along the Ship Channel. “We have to put up with their pollution and noises and the majority of the [Mexican American] people employed by them live in the East End,” Quiñones said, adding, “It’s time that we see some improvements in our area from [industries’] tax dollars. We want the best for our children and believe we can get it by forming our own school district.”³³

Quiñones’s steering committee was supposed to meet later in the week to define the boundaries of the proposed school district and then hold a press conference. No further evidence has been found on this group, so it is likely that the committee’s efforts were unsuccessful.³⁴ Despite this failure, here was another indicator of the increased sense of political efficacy that guided the Mexican American community during these years.

ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

While MAEC continued to struggle against discrimination and for changes in the schools, the group also took steps to ensure its survival as an organization. From the beginning MAEC was a volunteer organization with limited financial resources. Its program of school change was based on community fund-raising efforts, and its staff was based on the labor and time of volunteers who came from existing organizations or from the community. Between October, 1970, and January, 1971, for instance, MAEC “through its own sweat” raised over nine thousand dollars through tamale sales, dances, raffles, and other fund-raising projects.³⁵ This money was used to operate a variety of educational services that MAEC developed after the fall boycott.³⁶ However, MAEC leaders felt that in order to sustain protest and social activism they had to create a more enduring organizational structure. The organization, in other words, had to raise funds from a variety of sources outside the community. In order to apply for these types of funds, MAEC had to become a legally chartered nonprofit corporation.³⁷ It did so on January 22, 1971.³⁸ Afterward MAEC began to apply for and receive federal and state funds.³⁹ Between November and February of the 1970–71 academic year MAEC submitted several proposals to the federal and local governments. In March, 1971, the organization was awarded a grant of \$65,000 dollars from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare for the establishment of programs geared toward facilitating desegregation in Houston. The MAEC proposal requested

\$165,000 and was submitted to the Emergency School Assistance Program (ESAP), a federal desegregation program. The funds were to hire tutors and counselors to inform students about scholarships and to assist them in career planning.⁴⁰

Once word of these funds was received, Leonel Castillo called a meeting of MAEC officers to “assure that the money is spent in the best possible way.” The group named an advisory board to administer this project and then began to hire personnel, establish office procedures, and set up a budget. Castillo noted that the grant helped to reduce the financial strain on MAEC by enabling the organization to pay for rent, office equipment, supplies, telephones, bonding, accounting services, travel, and salaries. “However,” he noted, “this grant cannot by itself relieve us of all our fund-raising. Much of what we do cannot be paid for with ESAP funds. This is simply the start.”⁴¹

The acceptance of federal funds and the trend toward social services led to increasing criticism from the more militant and generally younger activists within MAEC. They questioned MAEC’s commitment to *la causa* because of the group’s acceptance of federal funds and called MAEC’s grant “hush money” or “tokenism” to keep the community organization busy. They asked if MAEC was “selling out.” If MAEC got too militant, would HEW withdraw the grant? According to Enrique Pérez, a MAYO member, withdrawal of federal funds could well “dampen the spirit of active organizations to the point that they become just another service group but not bring about any changes in the institutions.” MAEC leaders assured him that this would not happen to them.⁴² The possibility for co-optation, however, was implanted in some MAEC members even as the organization began to strengthen its capability for providing increased services to the Mexican American community.

CONCLUSION

The continuing protest and lobbying activities of MAEC members as well as the increasing frustration of the more militant factions within the organization worried MAEC’s leaders, who believed that the situation was becoming “much worse.” “What can be done to avert a massive disruption?” Leonel Castillo asked a federal agency. His solution to this potentially explosive situation was the development of an action-research project aimed at “marshalling proof, statistical and narrative, regarding the educational plight of Mexican Americans in the District.” This type of research, Cas-

tillo argued, might thwart possible “militant activities” by Mexican Americans.⁴³ However, no funds or additional studies were forthcoming. The school board’s response to the court’s pairing order in the summer of 1971 ensured that the only option available for the organization and its supporters was another round of boycotts of the public schools. The feared “massive disruption” was being realized.