

## CHAPTER 5

# PAWNS, PUPPETS, AND SCAPEGOATS

Despite the increased involvement of some barrio youth and grassroots activists and the militant rhetoric of the established middle-class groups, in the late 1960s activism in the politics of education was characterized by a lack of unity and limited community involvement. During the summer of 1970 both of these conditions were dramatically transformed as activists focused on the issue of school integration and as significant political unity and mobilization occurred within the Mexican-origin barrios of Houston. Integration not only brought unity to the ideologically diverse activist community, it encouraged all those involved to accept a new ethnic identity and new forms of struggle.

### COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO LOCAL DESEGREGATION POLICIES

The decisions by the federal judiciary and local school board members in a local school integration case, *Ross v Eckels*, were catalysts for the unity of the diverse Mexican American activist community as well as its rapid acceptance of a new racial and political identity. On May 30, 1970, U.S. federal district judge Ben Connally ordered the implementation of an integration plan for Houston that allowed students to attend the schools nearest their homes. This plan, officially known as the equidistant zoning plan, called for the shifting of attendance zones to facilitate integration. The students affected, approximately 40,000 of the district's 245,000 school-age

children, would be required to attend schools within the new attendance zone for the 1970–71 school year.<sup>1</sup>

Blacks initiated the Houston integration case in response to the *Brown v Board of Education* decision of 1954. The Ross case, as it was known locally, had been in court for approximately fourteen years. During that entire period the court approached the problem of integration as a black-white issue. For desegregation purposes Mexican American school-age children were officially considered by the court to be “white.”<sup>2</sup> The May, 1970, ruling continued this practice despite a growing recognition by various branches of the federal government that these children were an identifiable minority group.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with legal tradition Judge Connally viewed Mexican Americans as white and ruled that they, not Anglos, would have to be integrated with African Americans in the north and east sides of town.

In the initial weeks after the ruling the majority of activists and community members ignored its significance. Unlike in other cities of the Southwest, in Houston school integration and the politics associated with this reform were not important issues in the Mexican American community. As events during the months prior to the May 30 ruling indicated, Mexican American activism in education was focused on obtaining equitable and quality instruction in the schools.<sup>4</sup> The court ruling was viewed as primarily affecting African Americans and Anglos, not Mexican Americans.

By the latter part of June a few activist members of the Mexican American community became aware of the meaning of integration on the east side of town. These activists responded in two major ways to this ruling: one group pursued a legal route; and another group of activists, comprised of grassroots individuals, conducted an intensive educational campaign in the community, informing the parents about the injustice of the court’s decision and the need to have it changed. Regardless of the approach taken, it took several weeks for many in the community to realize the unjust nature of this integration plan. Ironically, barrio youths and students were either unaware of the importance of this decision to the Mexican American community or decided not to take any action against it. Barrio-MAYO (Mexican American Youth Organization), between February and April, 1970, was heavily involved in a series of dramatic episodes in the community that took most of its time. In February, for instance, Barrio-MAYO took over the Juan Marcos Presbyterian Church for thirteen days, com-

plaining that the church's program for the barrio was too spiritual and did not address its members' full needs. The following month the organization demonstrated in front of the First Presbyterian Church and disrupted its church services to protest the church's failure to develop programs to meet the social needs of the barrio. During April the group interrupted a LULAC political rally at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, jeered Gov. Preston Smith at the annual San Jacinto ceremony honoring the victory of Texan troops over Mexican troops in 1836, and disrupted a University of Houston law school conference on Mexican American affairs.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, members of University of Houston–MAYO (UH-MAYO) and probably of ARMAS as well had just begun their summer vacation and were not enrolled in any classes at the university or in the public schools. For these and probably other unknown reasons the most militant members of the Mexican American activist community did not immediately respond to this court decision.

Community awareness of injustice in education increased toward the latter part of July and early August. This awareness was influenced by a multitude of actions on the part of a few community activists, local school officials, and the federal courts. Abraham Ramírez, Jr., was particularly important in increasing community awareness of the unjust nature of integration. Ramírez was a well-known activist lawyer in the Mexican American community and had run for the school board in November, 1969. He upheld the ideals and politics of the Mexican American Generation but was willing to use more assertive strategies and tactics in school reform.<sup>6</sup>

The *Cisneros v Corpus Christi Independent School District* case particularly influenced Ramírez. Mexican American and African American labor activists from the Corpus Christi area filed this case in 1968.<sup>7</sup> These minority parents complained that the local district was discriminating against both groups by maintaining a segregated school system and by integrating blacks with Mexican Americans. With respect to the latter charge the parents complained that “the district violated court orders by mixing their children in classrooms, but not Anglo children.”<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the activists of the past, the lawyers in the *Cisneros* case sought to take advantage of the legal principles developed since *Brown* was decided in 1954 and to apply them to Mexican Americans. They abandoned the “white” legal strategy used by LULAC and the American G.I. Forum during the 1940s and 1950s to eliminate segregation and substituted the equal protection argument used in black desegregation cases. Most federal, state, and local policies before 1954 mandated or sanctioned the separation

of blacks and whites but said nothing about same-race segregation. Mexican Americans thus sought acceptance of their own group as Caucasian or white in order to prove that in the absence of a statute allowing segregation of Mexican Americans, any attempt by local school officials to separate them would be a violation of law.<sup>9</sup>

In order for Mexican Americans to apply the *Brown* findings of Fourteenth Amendment violations to themselves, they had to win judicial recognition as a separate class or as an identifiable minority—that is, a group classified as having unalterable congenital traits, political impotence, and the attachment of a stigma of inferiority. Despite overwhelming evidence that they constituted a separate class of whites throughout the Southwest, the Supreme Court had not made significant rulings to that effect.<sup>10</sup> The lawyers for the Mexican American community thus had to gain court recognition of this status. Once they established this classification, they could proceed to establish a *prima facie* case of discrimination based upon direct evidence of segregative state action and statistical evidence of an unconstitutional degree of segregation.<sup>11</sup>

Mexican American plaintiffs in *Cisneros* effectively argued these issues and laid the basis for changing the legal framework under which future desegregation cases would be decided. In early June, 1970, Judge Woodrow Seals found that on the basis of their physical characteristics, Spanish language, Catholic religion, distinct culture, and Spanish surnames, Mexican Americans were an identifiable ethnic minority group for desegregation purposes and that *Brown* applied to them. Judge Seals also ruled that Mexican Americans and blacks were unconstitutionally segregated “in all three levels of the school system” and that state action was responsible for this.<sup>12</sup> In direct reference to the issue of integrating Mexican and African American children, but not Anglos, the court ruled: “The court is of the opinion that by placing Negroes and Mexican-Americans in the same school does not achieve a unitary system as contemplated by law. A unitary school district can be achieved here only by substantial integration of the Negroes and Mexican American with the remaining student population of the district.”<sup>13</sup> He then ruled that an appropriate desegregation plan that included Anglos, Mexican Americans, and blacks be submitted to him as soon as possible.<sup>14</sup>

This finding was a significant one for educational equality since it introduced a new group into the national desegregation process. Federal courts now had to consider Mexican American students in determining whether a unitary school system was in operation.

Abraham Ramírez, Jr., saw the implications of this finding on the local desegregation case. A week after the *Cisneros* decision he wrote to Mario Obledo, general counsel of MALDEF in San Antonio, Texas, that the local federal court in the *Ross* case had failed to “recognize the Mexican American as a minority.” Failure to consider this group a minority led to the development of a desegregation remedy that was discriminatory since it paired “white” Mexican Americans with African Americans. “I feel that your office should immediately study the court’s opinion and file an appeal, if necessary, without delay,” he added.<sup>15</sup>

Three days later Obledo responded that a lawyer would be assigned to study the opinion. In late July, Alan Exelrod, the lawyer assigned by MALDEF to investigate this issue, wrote to Ramírez requesting materials for making a presentation to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. He acknowledged that the equidistant plan of the school district made no differentiation between the Anglo and the Mexican American “in the white category.” “In order to show the effect of the equi-distant zoning plan [*sic*] on Mexican Americans,” he noted, “we need the absolute numbers and percentage of Mexican Americans in the white category for each school in the district.” He further added: “If the school does not have this information, then try to determine whether they have a list of students which will be attending each school. Should this list exist, the Spanish surnames can be counted and a relatively accurate figure for Mexican-American concentration of students can be determined.” Exelrod realized that he was asking a lot of Ramírez, “but it is the only way we can help the Court of Appeals understand the situation.”<sup>16</sup>

In response to his request Ramírez compiled a report on the numbers and percentages of Mexican Americans in the schools.<sup>17</sup> In this report Ramírez provided enrollment data for the elementary, junior high, and senior high schools on the basis of race and ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> He also made some observations on emerging Mexican American complaints, on the dilemma of Mexican American parents who could not get transfers out of their minority schools due to the particular provisions of the integration plan, and on the advice he had been giving to Mexican Americans who called him on these issues.<sup>19</sup> He paid close attention to the possible impact integration might have on the predominantly Mexican schools and on the predominantly African American schools.

According to Ramírez, there were forty-eight elementary schools in which the fall, 1969, enrollment was predominantly Mexican American, but in only ten of these was there an increase in black enrollment. At the

**Table 2. Actual and Proposed Black Enrollment in Predominantly Mexican American Schools for Fall, 1969, and Fall, 1970**

<i>School</i>	<i>% Mexican American</i>	<i>No. of blacks enrolled fall, 1969</i>	<i>No. of blacks enrolled fall, 1970*</i>	<i>Increase in black enrollment</i>
1. Bowie	n/a	696	809	+113
2. Milam	n/a	77	213	+136
3. Rusk	98	0	53	+ 53
4. Crockett	91	13	68	+ 55
5. Lee	91	7	49	+ 42
6. Dow	85	51	334	+283
7. Sherman	82	132	153	+ 21
8. Eliot	78	80	892	+812
9. Pugh	72	11	86	+ 75
10. Port Houston	65	27	66	+ 39
Subtotals:		1,094	2,723	1,629
11. Edison Junior High	n/a	45	129	+ 84
12. Davis High	n/a	298	544	+246
Subtotals:		343	673	330
Totals:		1,437	3,396	1,959

\*Numbers in this category are estimates.

Source: Abe Ramírez, letter to A. Exelrod, Aug., 1970, Abe Ramírez Collection, Box 1, No. 22, HMRC.

junior high level there were three schools that were predominantly Mexican American—Edison, Marshall, and McReynolds Junior High Schools. Only Edison had an increase in the number of blacks enrolled as a result of the equidistant plan. At the high school level only Davis High School would get an increase of blacks.<sup>20</sup> These schools and their increases in black enrollment are shown in table 2.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, Ramírez found that the numbers of black students in some of the predominantly Mexican American schools were projected to increase with the implementation of the equidistant plan. Because of the imprecise nature of his data, he had less success in determining how many Mexican American students would be enrolled in predominantly black schools. “Sometimes it is impossible to guess what the Mexican American enrollment is going to be under the Equidistant Plan [*sic*],” he noted. In the case of Harper Elementary School, for instance, the principal reported a black



enrollment of 361 African Americans in the fall of 1969 and no Mexican American or other white students. The equidistant plan, however, projected an enrollment of 296 black students and 245 whites. Were the latter Mexican Americans or Anglos? “Definitely, the HEW report gives us no basis to even guess or estimate a working figure,” noted Ramírez.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the inaccuracy of the figures, Ramírez argued that in his view “white” was synonymous with Mexican American. Although he had “nothing to back my statement,” Ramírez did indicate that the housing patterns of the last decade in Houston were such that they “would give some credence to the integration of Mexican Americans and blacks in the schools.”<sup>23</sup>

Once MALDEF received this report the decision was made to get involved in the Houston case. The data as well as the arguments and conclusions reached by Ramírez were eventually incorporated into a formal appeal that was then filed on August 11, 1970. On this date MALDEF filed an *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) brief with the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court asking that the disputed Houston school desegregation plan take into account Mexican American students. Upon filing the legal brief Ramírez said, “We want to know where we stand.” “For instance,” he continued, “if a school is to have 555 Negroes and 395 whites, we want to know—whites or Mexican Americans?”<sup>24</sup>

The suit contended that Mexican Americans comprised over 13 percent of the student population. However, there was no attempt to develop for the Houston Independent School District (HISD) any information concerning where the Mexican American children attended school; whether school zone lines were drawn, intentionally or unintentionally, to segregate Mexican Americans and blacks; or whether segregated housing patterns “inhibited the Mexican American’s exodus from the barrio.”<sup>25</sup> More specifically, the suit argued that Mexican Americans comprised a distinct, identifiable minority group; that this group had suffered discrimination in the schools throughout the Southwest; that the conditions existing in other parts of Texas also existed in HISD; and that there were philosophical and psychological reasons for including Mexican Americans in the desegregation of schools. The suit offered no specific desegregation plan but asked that the present plan before the Fifth Circuit Court be remanded for additional hearings.<sup>26</sup>

Community awareness of injustice in the integration plan emerged gradually. It began after the school board reprinted, “as a public service,”

thousands of copies of the court's implementing decree on June 30, 1970. This decree provided the school district with instructions on how to implement the desegregation order. It delineated the roles and responsibilities of local officials and stipulated what needed to be done in several areas, including faculty and staff, transportation, school construction and site selection, attendance outside of established school zones, extracurricular activities, student assignment, and transfer policies. The decree also ordered the establishment of a court-appointed Bi-Racial Committee to oversee this implementation. Under the decree each student, with some exceptions, was to attend a school nearest his or her residence but a different one from the year before. Most important for the Mexican American community, the decree discontinued transfers from the schools in the new zones to any other schools within the district.<sup>27</sup>

The elimination of these transfers had a significant impact on a few select parents and students. Prior to this plan an undetermined number of Mexican American parents sent their children away from the neighborhood schools to attend schools with more resources in the Anglo community. Under the desegregation mandate a student was allowed to transfer voluntarily "from a school in which his race is in the majority to the nearest school in which his race is in the minority."<sup>28</sup> In practice this meant that Mexican Americans, who were legally defined as "white," could only transfer to "black" schools in which their race was in the minority. They were forbidden to transfer from a predominantly Mexican American school to an Anglo school. These new restrictions meant, then, that Mexican American students, for the most part, now had to attend schools within the zones defined by the local board, even if those schools were inferior ones in the ghetto.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the parents affected by this decree began to complain privately. A few took their complaints to Abraham Ramírez, Jr., as he was collecting data for MALDEF's appeal to the Fifth Circuit Court.<sup>30</sup> Most of the other parents and students in the community became aware of the unjust nature of desegregation in early July when local officials redrew the new attendance zones to reflect the court's mandate and listed the new schools that students were supposed to attend during the 1970–71 school year. With these actions minority parents and students realized that in their neighborhoods black-white integration meant the placement of Mexican American students with African American students. Mexican American parents opposed this type of integration in their community and began to com-



plain. Probably because of his role in the collection of data for MALDEF, Ramírez received many of these individuals' complaints.<sup>31</sup> In a letter to MALDEF on August 2, 1970, he noted that Mexican American parents were claiming that "they are being forced to send their children to Black schools." These schools, he added, had "inadequate facilities, supplies, [and] equipment."<sup>32</sup>

In addition to their concern that their children would be attending substandard schools, the parents were also worried that their children had to go into the black ghettos. "While this is not bad on the surface, the situation is horrible taking in consideration the Black militant confrontation with the Houston police," noted Ramírez. "There have been killings and fights already in the Black community, and the situation promises to get worse," he added.<sup>33</sup>

While some parents complained, others organized and raised questions about the content of the integration plan. They reached the conclusion that local school officials were using Mexican Americans for political reasons. Their growing consciousness was in all probability influenced by Ramírez's research and arguments as well as by their own meanings and reflections.

Representative of the community's interpretation of the desegregation plan were the comments made by Lorenzo P. Díaz. Díaz was a community activist from the Northside, one of the barrios most affected by the court's plan. Davis Senior High and Marshall Junior High, both located in the Northside, for instance, were two of the schools receiving significant numbers of African American students under the district's desegregation plan.<sup>34</sup> Díaz was incensed by this ruling and accused the local school board of using Mexican Americans as "pawns, puppets, and scapegoats" just to make it appear as if HISD were abiding by the Supreme Court mandate to integrate the schools. "All HISD is doing in the Northside is integrating two minority races, Mexican Americans and negroes, while in other areas it still left some schools almost all anglo or all black," Díaz stated.<sup>35</sup>

In many respects Díaz's perspective was similar to MALDEF's, but his was more poignant. He articulated a clear and coherent interpretation of the district's political uses of Mexican Americans embodied in the integration plan. White political leaders, especially the "liberal" slate of school board members, were publicly committed to complying with integration but did not want to inconvenience Anglo parents and students. A partial solution to this dilemma was found if they used the "white" status of Mexican Americans to integrate the public schools. Labeling Mexican Ameri-

cans white and integrating them with blacks eased the burden of involving greater numbers of Anglo children in the desegregation remedy. The other white population thus would not be greatly inconvenienced in the process.<sup>36</sup>

Mexican American groups and individuals, such as MALDEF, Díaz, and others in the community, were not fooled by the school board's strategy. They realized how they were being used and urged the community to mobilize against this treatment. However, not all individuals responded vocally and publicly to the injustice of the integration plan. Some responded in highly personal ways. David Ybarra, a student who lived in El Segundo barrio and attended Jackson Junior High, for instance, was disappointed with the decision. Under the integration plan he was supposed to attend E. O. Smith or Lyons, both predominantly black schools. "But I'm not," he noted; "I'm going to try to move into the Jackson area." He further noted that if he could not move into this area he would "stop going" to school. Mario Torres, who attended one of the predominantly Mexican schools in the Denver Harbor area, noted that he was supposed to attend Wheatley under the integration plan. "Too many Blacks," he argued, stating that if the Mexicans enrolled in that school, "there's going to be trouble. Fights."<sup>37</sup>

The editorial staff of *Papel Chicano*, a newly founded community newspaper that expressed the sentiments of barrio youth activists, quickly challenged sentiments of defeatism and withdrawal.<sup>38</sup> The publication specifically urged all students and parents to speak up about the injustice of this integration plan and to oppose its implementation. "This issue cannot be faced by dropping out," students and parents were reminded. "Go back to school and fight for our rights to a decent education and not be used as the flunkies of the school system."<sup>39</sup>

One group of individuals took this advice seriously and founded a new organization to channel their frustrations and to challenge the integration plan. In early August, Mexican American parents and students from the Looscan Elementary School area in the Northside barrio organized the Northside Mexican American Civic Organization (NMACO). This group, according to the chairperson, was organized in order "to use every legal way to fight the injustices committed by the plan against the Mexican American." The chair added, "We will work with any group that will help our cause." In its efforts to fight the integration plan the organization set out to unite community groups from other parts of town, including Magnolia Park, Denver Harbor, Bonita Gardens, and Manchester.<sup>40</sup>

During the month of August the Northside group engaged in a variety of educational and protest activities. On August 12, 1970, for instance, a meeting was held to inform the community about the pros and cons of the desegregation plan and the options available. At that meeting Abraham Ramírez, Jr., encouraged a variety of organized actions against the integration plan, including a legal strategy aimed at recognizing Mexican Americans as an identifiable minority group for desegregation purposes.<sup>41</sup> Five days later, on Monday, August 17, NMACO took to the streets. With the support of about one hundred Mexican American parents and students the group picketed Looscan Elementary School to protest the equidistant zoning plan.<sup>42</sup> On August 24 NMACO held another informational meeting at Saint Patrick's Church hall. At that meeting Ramírez informed the group that Chicanos from the Sixth Ward and Denver Harbor would boycott HISD. "What followed," noted one of the participants, "was una cosa de unidad [a thing of unity]." Lorenzo Díaz, chair of NMACO, voiced support for the boycott and the willingness of the group he represented to engage in oppositional actions in order to protest the integration plan. "It's time for us to dissent in a proper manner," he noted; "moving and running away is not the solution to the problem." Díaz concluded that if a boycott occurred it would be against the equidistant plan, not against equal integration.<sup>43</sup>

The conditions for assuming a new identity and for utilizing more radical means to fight injustice in the integration plan were present. What was needed was an additional catalyst to enhance this process. This occurred in late August with the ruling by the Fifth Circuit Court on MALDEF's petition.

#### THE FIFTH CIRCUIT COURT AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

After August 25, 1970, the dynamics of community involvement changed rapidly. On this date the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court denied MALDEF's petition for intervenor status and ignored its arguments for considering Mexican Americans as an identifiable minority group for desegregation purposes.<sup>44</sup> That court also modified the lower court's ruling and ordered the pairing of twenty-five elementary schools.<sup>45</sup> The ruling ironically exposed, in starker terms, the unjust nature of the Houston integration plan, since it specifically identified the schools to be paired. As community members quickly found out, they were mostly minority schools, fourteen of which

Table 3. List of Schools to Be Paired, August 25, 1970

<i>Predominantly Black Schools</i>		<i>Predominantly Mexican American Schools</i>
Ryan and Ross	pair with	Looscan
Bruce	pair with	Anson Jones
Atherton	pair with	Eliot *, Scroggins *
Burrus	pair with	Roosevelt +
Crawford	pair with	Sherman *
Dodson	pair with	Lantrip
J. W. Jones	pair with	Fannin
Henderson	pair with	Pugh *
Pleasantville	pair with	Port Houston *
Rhodes	pair with	Frost
Sanderson	pair with	Easter and/or Chatham
Poe ++	pair with	MacGregor ++

\* a school most affected by boycotts in September, 1970

+ a predominantly Anglo school

++ a predominantly black school

Source: *Ross v Eckels*, 434 F.2d 1140 (Fifth Cir., August 25, 1970).

were predominantly black while nine were predominantly Mexican American (see table 3). One of these schools, Roosevelt, was predominantly Anglo, although it did enroll some Mexican American students.

This pairing decision incensed most sectors of the Mexican American activist community as no other single event had done and served to unite them around the issue of integration. Moderate middle-class activists, militant youths, and grassroots individuals as well as many members of the Mexican-origin community not actively involved opposed this decision. Martin G. Castillo, chair of the president’s Cabinet Committee on Opportunity for the Spanish Speaking (CCOSS) and a moderate middle-class activist, best expressed the community’s sentiment when he criticized the Houston integration plan as “indefensible from an educational and legal point of view.”<sup>46</sup> He noted, “There can be no enrichment or equality of opportunity in a situation which requires consolidating two disadvantaged groups” and further added: “The Spanish-speaking child has suffered too many years from linguistic isolation and unrealistic educational techniques. The Black child has suffered too many years of segregation and

educational deprivation. To expect that anything resembling education can result from joining these tragic consequences under the guise of desegregation is asking too much.”<sup>47</sup>

Other moderate and militant activists in the community criticized the integration plan and argued that the pairing plan was unjust in two major respects. First, it integrated blacks with Chicanos—two relatively powerless groups attending similarly inferior schools. Second, it excluded Anglos from the integration plan in the east side of town. For instance, “In the Looscan pairing,” noted one of the activists writing for the community newspaper, “an all Anglo school close by was completely left out while Looscan was paired with two black elementaries.”<sup>48</sup>

MAYO responded by arguing that while the district simply declared Mexican Americans white for the purpose of integration, Chicanos knew that they were not white. He said, “They can tell by looking in a mirror.” Chicanos, however, were intelligent and knew what the district was doing to them. “They also have pride in themselves and enough courage not to let this great whitewash game be run on them,” MAYO stated.<sup>49</sup>

Students and parents from the community also were angry over the integration order. Some high school students from Denver Harbor and Magnolia Park were upset that large numbers of them were being forced to attend Wheatley High, a predominantly black school. Other students complained that “Manchester and Looscan [Elementary] communities were chopped down the middle for integration purposes.” In many cases, one of them said, “parents were very upset about difficult transportation problems because of railroad tracks, freeways, busy streets, and general problems of inconvenience for their children.”<sup>50</sup> Lorenzo Díaz complained that the integration plan “just disturbs the educational life of the people and serves no purpose at all.”<sup>51</sup>

Community responses to the court ruling suggest a coalescing of the various strains of activist thought and action in the Mexican-origin community. All those involved in the community—students, barrio youths, middle-class leaders, and working-class individuals—as well as those not previously involved in social change came together on this issue. Their actions also suggest another trend: the rejection of the community’s white racial identity and the acceptance of a new one. The content of this new identity, however, was in doubt and varied between groups and individuals. Lawyers argued for an identity based on legal principles. Castillo aptly expressed this sentiment when he stated that the courts should recognize that, for educational purposes, Mexican American and African American

children were part of two distinct minorities. "We need the highest courts of the land to put all speculation on this point to rest," he further noted.<sup>52</sup> MAYO members such as Gregory Salazar and Poncho Ruíz, however, argued that Mexican Americans were of indigenous origin; they were "brown," not white. Other individuals, especially those who had not been active before, simply argued that they were "Chicanos" or Mejicanos.<sup>53</sup> Although disagreement existed on the contents of the new identity, most if not all of the activists agreed that the label "white" was not accurate anymore.

In addition to rejecting their white status, many activists also abandoned the politics of accommodation utilized by members of the Mexican American Generation. The vast majority of the activists involved in integration came to accept the legitimacy of direct action tactics such as demonstrations, protest, and pickets. The formation of the Mexican American Education Council (MAEC), a community organization of individuals from many of the barrios impacted by the desegregation plan, became important in the acceptance of this new identity and in the rejection of the politics of accommodation. Once formed it became the mechanism for expanding and diffusing the new racial and political identity of the Mexican-origin community in the barrios of Houston. More specifically, MAEC provided collective definitions of conditions as unjust and mutable and strengthened collective perceptions of efficacy by creating awareness of the large number of actual and potential supporters. MAEC not only identified the institutional wrong, it also developed effective and assertive cultural and political strategies for correcting that wrong.

#### MAEC AND THE PROMOTION OF A NEW IDENTITY

A variety of individuals incensed by the Fifth Circuit Court's pairing order called for a citywide community meeting on Thursday, August 27, 1970, to decide what action they might take. A large number of individuals representing a variety of barrios and both moderate and militant organizations attended the meeting. Out of twenty known members, eleven of them were women.<sup>54</sup>

Several key decisions impacting the education struggle were made at this meeting. First, those assembled decided to form a new organization comprised of all the community groups affected by the integration plan. The name chosen for this group was Mexican American Education Council, or MAEC.<sup>55</sup> Five barrios or neighborhoods were represented in the or-



ganization: El Dorado, Manchester, Denver Harbor, Northside, and Clayton Homes. In the coming days additional barrios would be added to the group. Also represented were the militant groups within the city, including two chapters of MAYO and Barrios Unidos. Membership of MAEC was listed as follows:

1. El Dorado barrio: Juanita Hernandez, Isidro Meze
2. Manchester barrio: G. Guzman, Mario Quinones, Elvia Quinones, Mrs. Margaret Guzman
3. Denver Harbor barrio: Martha Gonzalez, Virginia Pena, Ben Reyes, Tony Reyes, Eva Gonzalez, Ernest O. Garcia (?)
4. Northside barrio: Maria Resendez, Carmen Beltran, Marcelina Diaz, Lorenzo P. Diaz
5. Clayton Homes barrio: Josephine Rodriguez (?)
6. Unknown: Bill Gutierrez, Mr. and Mrs. Abe Ramirez
7. Barrio-MAYO: Gregory Salazar and Yolanda Garza Birdwell
8. UH-MAYO: Jaime De La Isla
9. Barrios Unidos: Abel Alvarez.<sup>56</sup>

Besides the MAYO chapters and Barrios Unidos, no other organizations participated in an official capacity in MAEC. While middle-class organizations such as LULAC, the American G.I. Forum, and PASSO were not officially represented, individual members from these organizations were actively involved in MAEC.<sup>57</sup> A major reason for their lack of formal participation was MAEC's structure, which was organized on the basis of barrios and individuals representing those residential areas. If middle-class individuals such as Abe Ramírez, president of LULAC Council 60, participated in MAEC, it was as a barrio representative rather than as a member of an established community organization.<sup>58</sup>

The purpose of MAEC was to promote education in the community, but in actuality it served to develop a united and organized response to the desegregation decision. MAEC also served as a basis for articulating issues and for formulating and implementing varied strategies for ensuring educational justice. MAEC soon came to dominate the struggle against unjust desegregation. Those at the meeting also decided to support the legal challenge to the *Ross* case, and Abe Ramírez would be in charge of the lawsuit.

Finally, the group agreed to meet with the board and to negotiate members' concerns. A list of demands was drawn up to be presented to the

board for resolution. Although this list included twenty demands, the key demand was recognition of the Mexican-origin population as a distinct minority group. MAEC also drew up a press release announcing the formation of the organization and its effort to seek “active participation in the integration plans in the School District.”<sup>59</sup>

The following day MAEC met with several school officials to present its concerns and list of demands. Between two hundred and three hundred Mexican American parents and children demonstrated in front of the school district central administration building, and several members of the council met with school board members.<sup>60</sup> The picketers, many of them mothers, carried signs demanding “justice” for their children and declaring themselves to be “Brown, not white.” While in the picket lines they chanted “We’re a minority too” and “We want justice or we won’t go to school.”<sup>61</sup>

Inside the administration building several MAEC members, including Abe Ramírez, Leonel Castillo, Mrs. Marcelina Díaz, Mrs. Elvia Quiñones, Bill Gutiérrez, and Gregory Salazar, met with three school officials.<sup>62</sup> The majority of these individuals were moderates or novice activists; Salazar was the only militant voice in the group. They met with Dr. Leonard Robbins, president of the school board; George Oser, chair of the board’s desegregation committee; and Dr. George G. Garver, general superintendent of HISD.

During the meeting community members voiced their complaints to the board. Mrs. Díaz from the Northside focused on the problem of transportation. According to the integration plan, most Mexican American children paired would not be provided free transportation. They either had to walk to their new schools or the parents had to provide them with transportation. She explained the danger to the children when they had to cross railroad tracks, busy streets, and other dangerous crossings. She also tried to explain how difficult it would be to provide transportation to the children in communities where cars were often unavailable. Mrs. Elvia Quiñones emphasized again the difficulties of transportation and the separation of families with several children in the elementary schools. Bill Gutiérrez asked questions about the legal aspects of the integration order and referred them to the *Corpus Christi* decision in which the courts ruled that Mexican Americans were identified as a legal minority with the rights of a minority. Gregory Salazar spoke about the cultural differences and how few teachers were available who understood the problems and culture of

the Chicanos. He also pointed out the difficulties in establishing special programs such as bilingual education at the new schools.<sup>63</sup>

After the community members spoke Abe Ramírez presented a list of MAEC's four major demands: (1) increase Mexican American representation on the court-appointed Bi-Racial Committee that had five Anglos and five blacks; (2) increase Mexican American representation on the HISD integration committee; (3) file a legal appeal of the pairing plan; and (4) declare Mexican Americans a legal minority "with the rights that accompany a minority."<sup>64</sup>

Responses by the school board members and the superintendent were, in the words of two community members, "negative and uncooperative."<sup>65</sup> The school board members, for instance, "hemmed and hawed" about the first three demands.<sup>66</sup> All three stated that they would not consider helping with transportation problems despite the difficulties faced by poor families. Oser said that considerations were being given to the nominations of Mexican Americans to the court-appointed Bi-Racial Committee but not as many as MAEC requested. Abe Ramírez said that MAEC wanted three or four of the white members of this committee to be Mexican American, but Oser disagreed with this recommendation. He also noted that two Mexican American representatives were members of the board-appointed desegregation committee. MAEC apparently did not feel that this was an adequate number or that these Mexican Americans represented the community's interests.<sup>67</sup>

The superintendent argued against the appeal. He said that the school administration could not change the directive of the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals to pair twenty-five elementary schools nor did the district have unlimited discretion to change zone boundaries. Of the twenty-five schools to be paired under the higher court directive, fifteen of them were predominantly black, nine were predominantly Mexican American, and one of them, Roosevelt, was predominantly Anglo. The total number of students to be involved in the pairing decision was unavailable, but most understood that while large numbers of minority students would be affected, only a few Anglos would be. According to one estimate, at least 5,657 Mexican American students would be affected by the pairing order.<sup>68</sup> Despite the large number of blacks and Chicanos affected, the administration was unwilling to consider modifying the ruling or appealing it.<sup>69</sup>

Oser likewise flatly rejected the fourth demand to declare Mexican Americans a distinct minority. His answer to this demand was, as reported

in *Papel Chicano*, “a flat no.” Board president Leonard Robbins for the most part opposed these demands and during the discussion walked out of the meeting.<sup>70</sup>

After the official meeting was over about twenty-five MAEC members caucused at the administration building. Angered by the school board’s unwillingness to meet their demands, they unanimously decided that the only alternative available to them, other than to file a legal suit in the courts, was to engage in radical action. After much heated debate the group unanimously decided to “advise Mexican American parents to keep their children home from school on opening day Monday to protest pairing of 25 elementary schools.” Ramírez added, “The Mexican American children would stay home as long as necessary to see if the administration will respond with the proper solution.”<sup>71</sup>

Those present agreed to announce the boycott at a press conference the following morning and to call for a mass meeting of Mexican Americans at 4 P.M. Sunday in the El Dorado section of northeast Houston to explain their decision to the community.<sup>72</sup> The most militant members of MAEC—two members from MAYO and two from PASO—agreed to conduct the press conference. After some objections from Lucy Moreno about the lack of females on the roster, she was asked to be there.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the unanimity of the decision, some MAEC members did not want to boycott the schools. They told Castillo and Ramírez, who were acting as spokespersons for the group, that this was not a good idea after all. “The worst thing to do,” one person noted, “was to take kids out of school.” The group should reconsider their decision, another person said. None of these comments, however, was said in front of the militants for fear of being reprimanded by them.<sup>74</sup> Rather, they were “whispered” to Castillo and Ramírez after the meeting ended. After listening to these concerns Abe Ramírez and Leonel Castillo began to have doubts about the boycott and thought that maybe they should reconsider this decision. Ramírez also voiced his concerns to Leonel Castillo about what the militants might say at the press conference on Saturday morning. He convinced Castillo to dissuade them from holding the press conference on Saturday. However, Castillo arrived at the event late because of a prior commitment, and by the time he got to the press conference it had begun. Unable to encourage its cancellation, Castillo joined in and became a part of the event. There was no backing down now; MAEC was committed to boycotting the public schools.<sup>75</sup> Toward the end of the press conference the participants

announced the rally to be held on Sunday, August 30, 1970, at El Dorado Park where further information would be provided to the Mexican American community.

Under cloudy skies on Sunday afternoon between one thousand and four thousand Chicanos showed up at Saint Philip of Jesus Catholic Church grounds for a rally in support of the boycott.<sup>76</sup> Its purpose was to protest the pairing plan to equalize the racial balance in the schools. Rally speakers included Leonel Castillo, Gregory Salazar, Lorenzo Díaz, Abe Ramírez, Tina Reyes, and a spokesperson from the University of Houston MAYO.<sup>77</sup> Before the rally began those in charge argued that MAEC needed a chairperson. The only person who had time to lead such a group was Leonel Castillo. He worked with the Catholic Diocese and had some “free” time. Although he had plans of going to law school that fall, Castillo was chosen temporary spokesperson of MAEC until the group could meet to choose a permanent one. Once this decision was made, the rally continued.<sup>78</sup>

Bill Gutiérrez served as master of ceremonies and conducted the rally “with poise and dignity as people climbed on and off the stage and speakers came and went.” Those present at the rally knew the seriousness of the decision to boycott the schools. “Most were committed and determined,” noted one of the observers, “but each had their [*sic*] own fears and hesitations, and each hoped that the Raza that was not affected directly, would stand behind their own children in the struggle for recognition.”<sup>79</sup>

Leonel Castillo began the event by explaining the school board’s refusal to recognize Chicanos as a separate ethnic group and the reasons behind the boycott. “This is a very serious thing—we understand that—and we are committed to go ahead with it,” he said to “thunders of applause.” “How many of those paired schools (in the integration order) are Anglo?” he asked the crowd. “Zero,” the audience responded. He pointed out that out of the twenty-five schools paired, nine of them were predominantly Mexican American and fourteen were predominantly black. “So who’s being integrated?” he asked.<sup>80</sup>

Abe Ramírez followed Castillo and discussed the legal aspects of the boycott. He told the crowd that parents could not be arrested for keeping their children out of school. State law required that children attend school for 165 days a year, but according to him, it did not say which days or which schools. Private school attendance was an acceptable option.

Tina Reyes, newly appointed chair of the huelga school committee,

then explained the program of private schools, called *huelga escuelas*, that MAEC would establish. *Huelga* schools were community learning institutions whose purpose would be to continue the children's education during the duration of the boycott.<sup>81</sup> Reyes noted that many volunteer teachers had already been contacted. She urged the parents, especially mothers, to take their children to libraries and to educate them at home, "especially during the first part of this week while the MAEC schools are being organized." A spokesperson for University of Houston MAYO informed the cheering crowd that college students would be available as tutors.<sup>82</sup>

Others briefly expressed their thoughts on the boycott and explained what their own communities were doing. Lorenzo Díaz, speaking on behalf of the Northside Mexican American residents, charged HISD with a history of discrimination and spoke of the new integration plan as "the last straw." "We can take no more—we're going to do something about it," he declared at the rally. Gregory Salazar also drew cheers when he charged that the school administration was classifying Mexican American children as white to effect integration with blacks without inconveniencing Anglos. "Now, because it is convenient to them," he argued, "we're white." "But what about when you apply for a job?" he asked; "what color are you then?"<sup>83</sup>

At the rally approximately \$571 was collected for operating the *huelga* schools. Names and addresses of volunteer boycott workers were also gathered. MAEC informed the crowd of the planned activities for the following day. The first day of the boycott would include picketing of the school administration building and several Mexican American schools, morning and evening outdoor rallies, and an attempt to pack the Monday night school board meeting. All were encouraged to participate, and the rally ended on an exuberant note.<sup>84</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The first major action in the contemporary struggle against unjust integration had been taken. The seeds of disillusionment of the past two years now burst forth and rapidly grew to become a united but tension-riddled movement of mass protest against educational inequality. During the next several weeks the community's level of participation in this major event exploded as MAEC brought together moderate, militant, and novice activists to lead one of the largest mass actions against educational inequality.



ity in the city's history. The challenge in the weeks to come was keeping all these diverse strains of activism united and focused on winning the struggle for recognition. The boycott and its associated activities provided the first great challenge to MAEC and its leadership. The following chapter discusses the initial actions taken during the first three weeks of the boycott and how MAEC's leadership balanced the diversity of activist thought in the struggle for recognition in the schools.



Pairing for whom? Men, women, and youth picketing HISD on behalf of MAEC's demand for recognition, Friday, August 28, 1970. Courtesy *Houston Chronicle*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



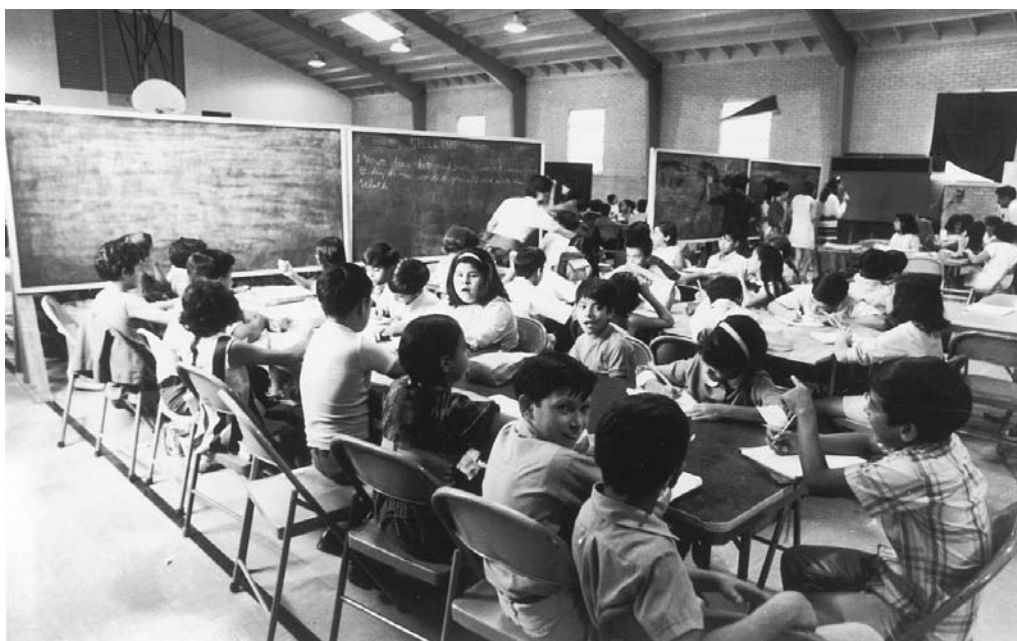
MAEC press conference calling for boycott of public schools, Saturday, August 29, 1970. (left to right: Raymond Rodríguez, David Ortiz, Leonel Castillo, Gregory Salazar, Jaime de la Isla, Lucia R. Moreno.) Courtesy *Houston Chronicle*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



Viva La Raza! A huelga school class, September, 1970. Courtesy *Houston Post*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



Yolanda Flores teaches a huelga school class at North Side People's Center, September, 1970. Photograph by Othell O. Owensby. Courtesy *Houston Chronicle*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



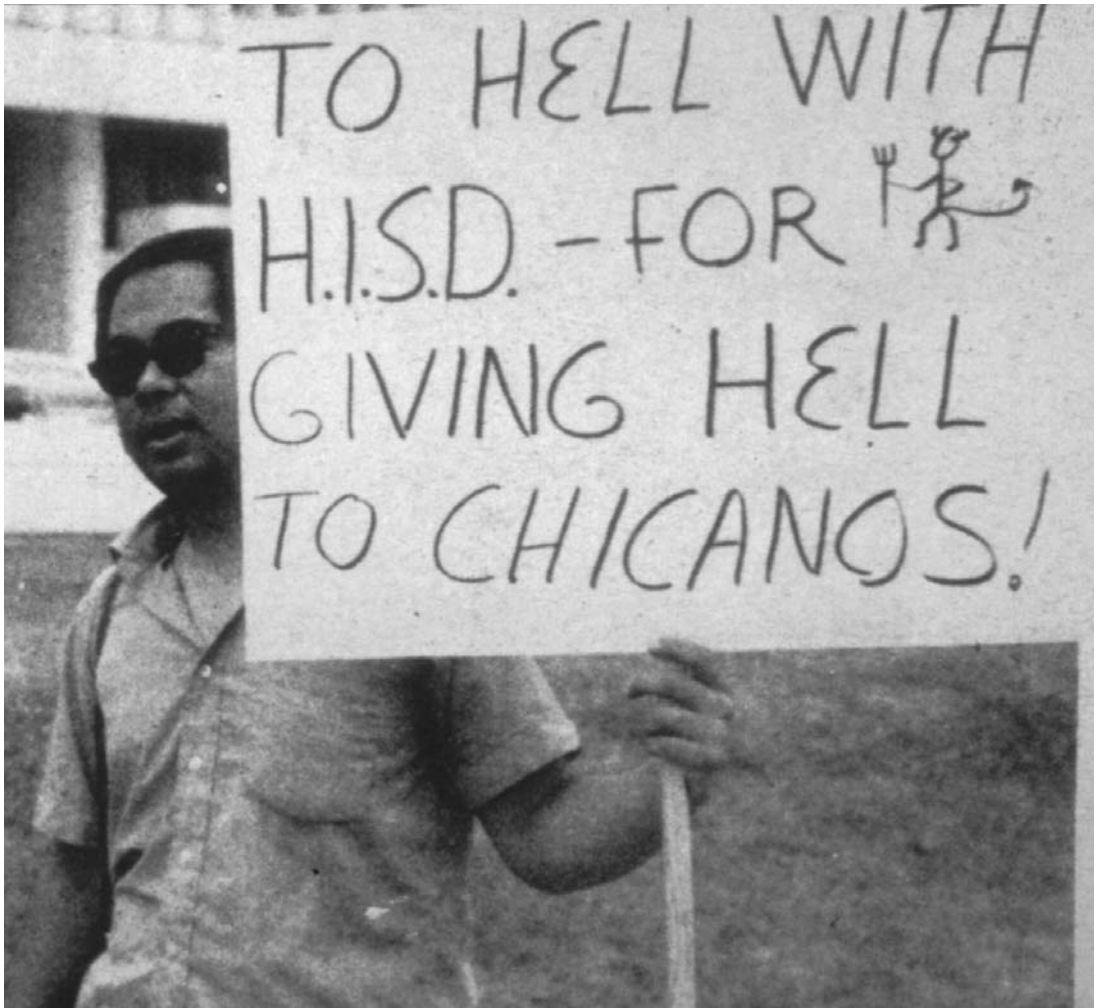
A huelga school class with several tables of children, September, 1970. Courtesy *Houston Post*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



## THE MAYO 9

The MAYO 9, September 15, 1970. (left to right: José Francisco Campos, Idelfonso “Poncho” Delgado Ruíz, Hector Almendárez, Carlos Carrizal Calbillo, Santos Hernández, Anthony Merced López, Gregory Salazar, Walter Birdwell, Yolanda Garza Birdwell.) Courtesy *Space City News*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.





“To hell with H.I.S.D.,” May, 1971. Courtesy *Houston Post*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



Four speakers addressing the Moody Park rally, Sunday, August 15, 1971. Courtesy *Houston Chronicle*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



Crowd at Moody Park rally (between 2,000 to 5,000 attended), Sunday, August 15, 1971. Courtesy *Papel Chicano*, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.



## PART III

# **The Struggle for Recognition, 1970–72**

