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The 1968 East LA Walkouts and the Sorry State of US Education

by Camille Christenson



Illustration by Weronika Ziarek. Photo credits: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center & Denver Public Library

During the 1967-1968 school year, Vicky Castro and Paula Crisostomo, two Mexican-American high school students in East Los Angeles, presented a list of demands to the Los Angeles School Board. For weeks, they and other student leaders had been raising political awareness among the student body regarding racist educational inequalities they faced in their schools. They wrote underground newspapers bursting with Chicano pride and created a survey to gather Mexican-American students' concerns about school conditions. Several hundred students responded and the results "[went from wanting better food all the way up to, you know, 'we want to go to college.'](#)" The School Board never even considered the demands; they threw out the surveys because they did "[not have the authority to control what the whole of society was doing.](#)"

Irate at the School Board's inflexibility, the student leaders decided on a new strategy: they would walk out and protest. They approached their social studies teacher Sal Castro, one of the few teachers they trusted, with their idea. He encouraged them by saying, "Don't walk out: organize." The students created strike committees to manage the walkouts and ease decision-making once the walkouts were in progress. They received help from college students from nearby UCLA, who agreed to stand in as bodyguards for the protesters. News of the planned demonstration spread; as the day approached, one student remembered, "everyone knew it was going to happen."



A man in a car holds a sign that reads "Is Educ. A Crime?", 1968. Photo by Devra Weber, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's La Raza Photograph Collection

The walkouts in March 1968 included some 15,000 Mexican-American high school students from five high schools in East Los Angeles. While staff hid, students stood on desks, banged on lockers, and flooded the streets with protest signs that read "we want education, not eradication," "Better Education," and "Unite for Better Schools!" They took to nearby parks to share impassioned speeches on education equality. Police appeared on the scene; the college students fulfilled their promise of acting as bodyguards. Students refused to disband. Luis Torres, a student participant, remembered "brainiacs, jocks, cheerleaders, nerds, and gangbangers, all marching together."

In 1968, the students' demands centered around issues with segregated schools, a Eurocentric curriculum, and the diversification of school staff. 53 years later, those demands remain largely unfulfilled in many American schools.



Students demand the removal of John Hogan, a teacher at Roosevelt High School who made racist remarks toward students, at a Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education meeting, 1968. Photo by Devra Weber, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's La Raza Photograph Collection

Segregation was baked into the fabric of Los Angeles' education system. From [1880 to the 1960s](#), Mexican immigrants flocked to California. In 1927, [65,527 students](#) who immigrated with their parents enrolled in California's schools. In 1931, [80% of school districts had segregated classrooms](#) with a significant number of Mexican students. These problems persisted between 1942 and 1964, during which [4.5 million](#) Mexicans immigrated to California to join the labor force after the creation of the [Bracero Programs](#), a mutual contract labor program between the United States and Mexican governments.

The influx of Mexican immigrants to California led to significant residential and school segregation and negatively impacted the education offered to the Mexican-American community. In response to white Californians' demands of creating "Mexican schools," students who emigrated from Mexico were bused to different parts of the city to ensure they remained separate from their white counterparts. The school buildings were deplorable; white kids enjoyed new playground equipment while the Mexican-American students attended recess in "an empty, dirt-floored lot." Separate curricula were created for the different schools, and Mexican-American students were taught to "become field workers and house cleaners." The different schools intentionally kept Mexican-American students out of school by starting two weeks later than the white schools and had shorter days so children could work in the fields.



“Shorty,” from Jardín 13 in Pico Rivera, attends the Roosevelt High School walkout, 1968. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center’s La Raza Photograph Collection

While *Brown v. Board of Education* officially desegregated US public schools in 1954, further efforts at full integration have floundered. School districts are based on geographic locality. Since socioeconomics and race continue to play an outsized role in where Americans live, so too do they dictate the wealth and racial diversity of school districts. [The demographics](#) for a predominantly white school in 2016 were as follows: 69.3% white students, 13.7% Latino, 8.1% Black, and 4.2% Asian. For a predominantly Latino school, the statistics were 55.1% Latino, 25.2% white, 11.3% Black, and 4.9% Asian.

When students are also segregated by factors outside the classroom, they are more likely to bring external stress factors into the classroom, which impacts their learning. In attempts to desegregate schools, students of color were bused to predominantly white schools where they were given a Eurocentric curriculum “[prepared for predominantly white postsecondary and professional settings](#)” and experienced discrimination from their teachers and white peers.



Protesters demonstrate against Principal Davis at Lincoln High School, 1968. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's La Raza Photograph Collection

The problem extends all the way down to early childhood education programs. [A report by the Urban Institute](#) found that such programs were twice as likely to be comprised entirely of Black or Latino children. Research shows early interactions with different ethnicities and races impact a child's perspective later in life, and early segregation in early childhood programs can "[lead to missed opportunities for contact and kinship during a critical point in child development.](#)"

Improved integration would bring tangible, meaningful benefits to our educational system. When placed in integrated schools and provided with more resources for post-high school opportunities, graduation rates for Black students [increased by 15%](#). Higher attendance and greater access to school resources [dropped a student's likelihood](#) of living in poverty as an adult by 11%. [Integration](#) brings higher parent involvement, better resources for all students, less racial and ethnic discrimination, better health and well being, less beliefs in stereotypes, higher achievement levels, and higher teacher retention rates.

In the years leading up to the demonstration, the East Los Angeles students who protested in March 1968 realized their heritage, culture, and history were missing from their curriculum. Growing activism in various pockets in the Latino community across the Southwest inspired East Los Angeles high school students to start embracing their Chicano identities throughout the 1960s. Students started using the term *Chicano*, a historically [derisive term](#), "[as a powerful symbolic code](#)" to show their pride in their Mexican heritage. They read work that resonated with them by Latino poets and created student groups to raise awareness of the issues affecting the Mexican-American students in their schools.

Local “Americanization” programs ironically helped spark the cultural awakening. The LA Commission on Human Rights, when tasked by the Mexican-American Education Committee, [established educational camps for Latino students](#). The commission agreed to implement the camps and conferences to help Mexican-American students “[develop themselves into Anglo-American life;](#)” instead, the students became “[proud of their Mexican background.](#)” The powerful messages from these events helped the high schoolers recognize that the lessons taught inside their classroom failed to represent them, and [propelled them to protest in 1968.](#)



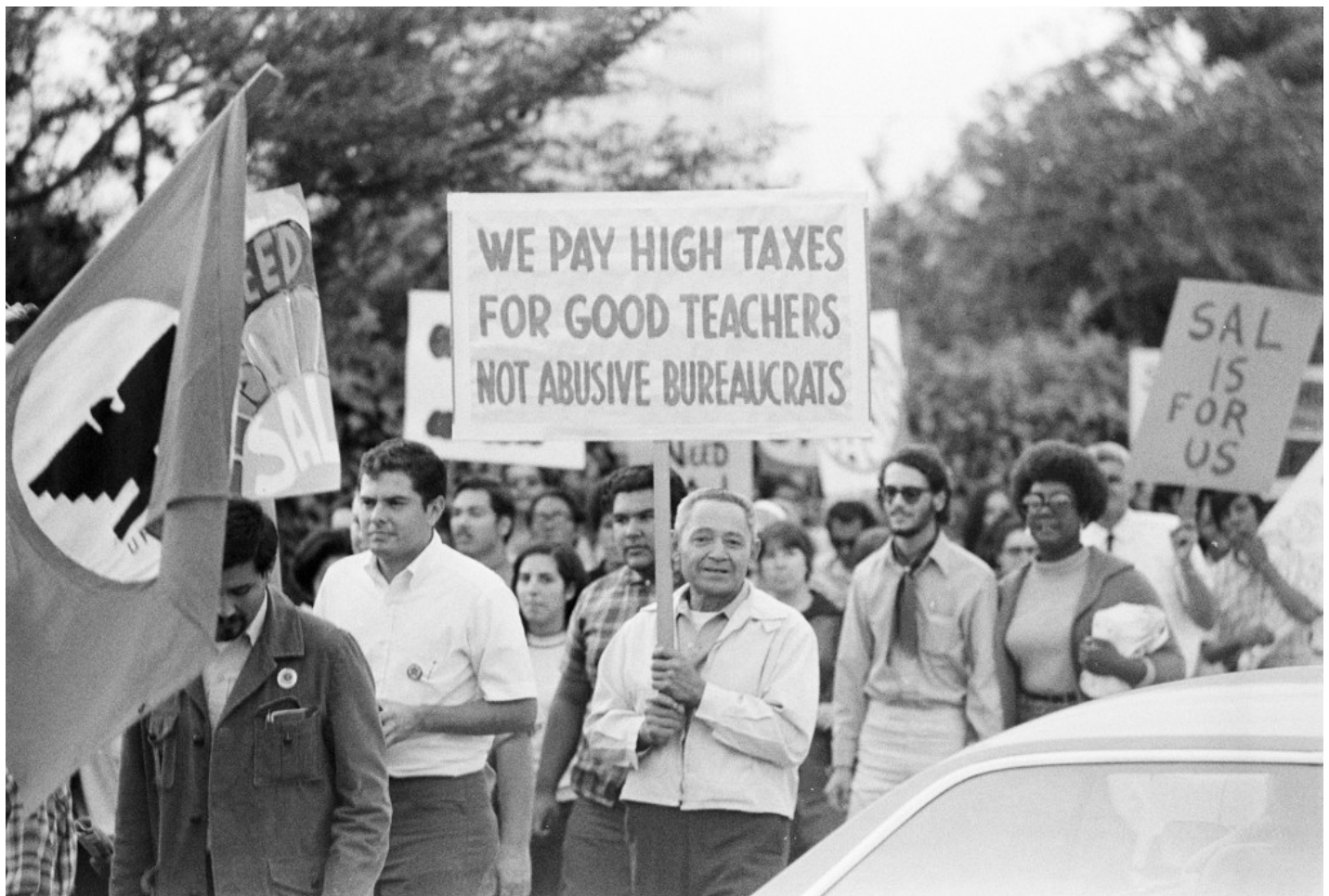
Students attend the Roosevelt High School walkout, 1968. Photo by Devra Weber, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center’s La Raza Photograph Collection

The Eurocentrism of today’s curriculum standards across the United States would disappoint the 1968 students. Students are too often taught only the white perspectives of American history while ignoring the painful racist aspects of the country’s past. Non-school personnel are one of the biggest roadblocks to bringing proper and accurate representation into our classrooms. Recently, parents of students at Maria Montessori Academy (a local charter school in Utah) complained about their children attending a Black History Month program in February 2021. The school allowed families to opt-out in order “to exercise their civil rights to not participate in Black History Month at the school.” In Texas, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) adjusted social studies standards with amendments made in 2010. The new curriculum glosses over slavery and Jim Crow laws, so whitewashing American history that the Thomas B. Fordham Institute called the standards “[a politicized distortion of history.](#)” Former President Donald Trump criticized anti-racist curricula and attempted to stop the “toxic propaganda” by creating an executive order to “restore patriotic education” called [the 1776 Commission](#). The commission was written to promote a “patriotic education”, which actually misrepresented historical events and figures.

Students become more compassionate and tolerant, understand content better, have higher confidence levels, and are better prepared for the workforce when more [diversity and representation](#) are incorporated into the curriculum. Nevertheless, people from all levels of society continue to push for a Eurocentric curriculum, therefore perpetuating disinterest regarding students' wide array of cultures, heritages, and backgrounds.

One area of improvement since the East Los Angeles blowouts has been the availability of Spanish-speaking classes and English as a Second Language (ESL) services. Historically, regulations against speaking [Spanish in the classroom were enforced since the early 1900s](#) across the Southwest. The rules forced students to speak exclusively in English, which was another attempt to erase Latino culture in the classroom. It also further prevented students from receiving educational opportunities because they were unfairly punished, isolated from their peers, and had difficulty understanding class content. In [Lau v. Nichols \(1973\)](#), the Supreme Court concluded that [limited-English-proficient students were withheld equal educational opportunities if schools didn't address language barriers](#). By 1988, the Los Angeles School District implemented over 6,000 classrooms for Spanish-speaking students because of the walkouts. Beyond Los Angeles, school districts integrated native language instruction for English as a Second Language students (ESL), and in 2011, [there were over 2,000 programs in both English and Spanish](#). At the local level, ESL services have been upgraded and can continue to grow in the future.

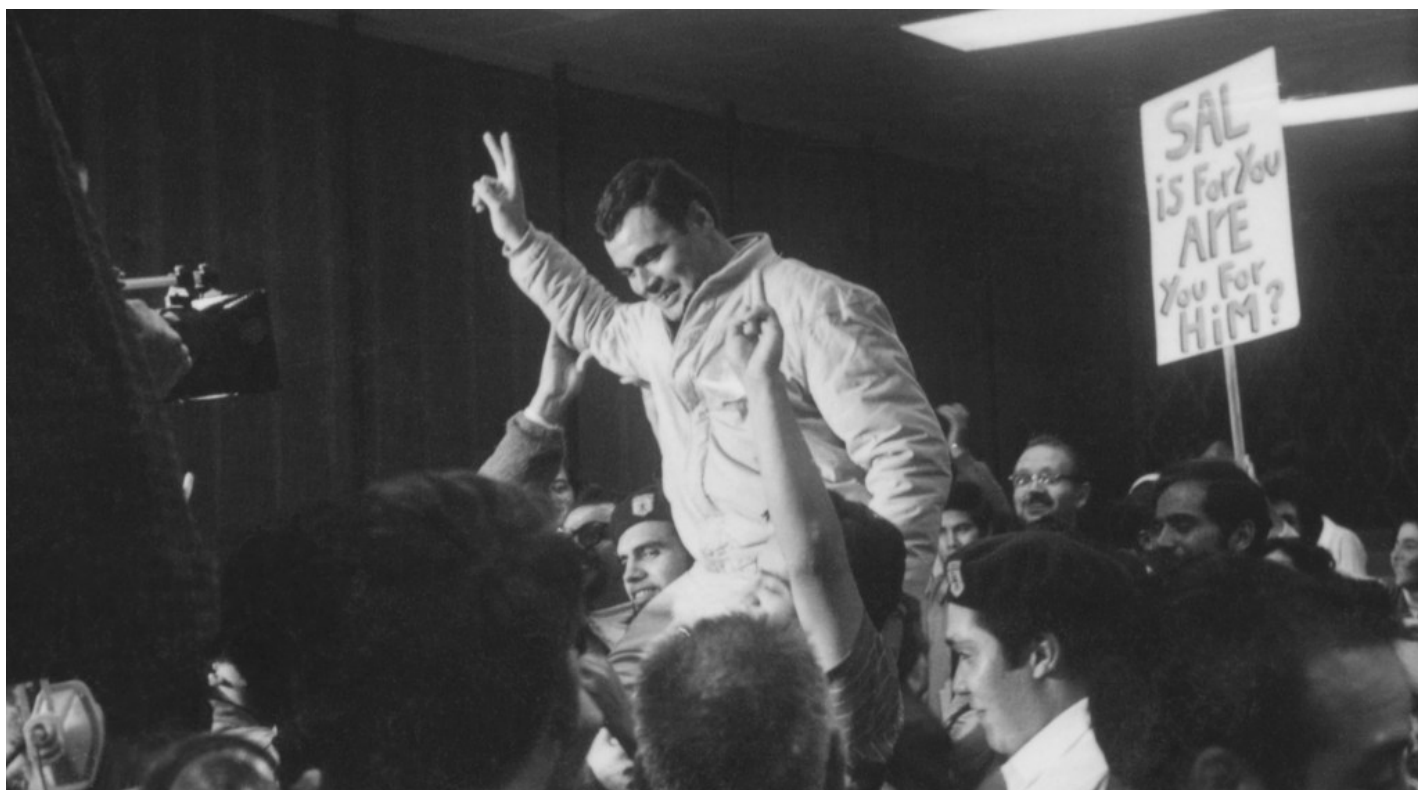
Another demand from the students in 1968 stemmed from their desire to have more representation and diversity in the school staff. [Under-qualified and culturally insensitive white teachers dominated the teaching profession in East Los Angeles schools](#), and parents recognized they were ["rejects from more affluent schools."](#) Many white teachers disliked their placement, leading them to either leave the profession or transfer to another "more affluent" school. As a result of the high turnover rate, schools cycled through under-qualified teachers without proper training. Author Alfredo Mirandé [concludes](#) that Mexican-American students were "taught by teachers...whose training [left] them ignorant and insensitive to the educational needs of Chicano students."



Protesters demand the reinstatement of Sal Castro to Lincoln High School during a march to the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, 1968. Photo by Luis Garza, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's La Raza Photograph Collection

Administrators also made no effort to enforce the law requiring students under 16 to stay in school and even prevented pregnant teenagers from attending school. This attitude from administrators pushed students out before they could complete their secondary education. Henry Gutierrez, a former student, [explained that](#) students weren't dropping out, they were being "pushed out" because "their needs weren't being met, their culture was not addressed, the school wasn't really doing anything for them."

Representation when it comes to teachers and administrators matters. Consider the example of Sal Castro, a social studies teacher at Lincoln High School. He deliberately incorporated Mexican history into his lessons, which sparked students' critical thinking skills. In 1969, he arranged a "Fiesta de Los Barrios" to celebrate Mexican culture, artwork, singing, and dancing rituals to mark the one-year anniversary of the walkouts. He was, however, the exception that proved the rule; Mexican-Americans [made up just 2.25%](#) of teachers in California during the 1966-67 school year.



People attend Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education meeting to reinstate Sal Castro at Lincoln High School, 1968. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's La Raza Photograph Collection

By 1988, [the percentage of Latino teachers](#) had increased from 3% to 10%, and Latino principals made up 32% of high schools and elementary schools in Los Angeles. Perhaps most significantly, William R. Anton, who was Latino, [became Deputy Superintendent](#), the second highest position in a school district. Ultimately, an unintended positive consequence of the protests was that some teachers at Jefferson High School (a predominantly Black high school that joined the protests in solidarity) were inspired to demand a Black principal. Despite isolated success, school administrations across the US lack diversity. In 2017-2018, the demographics of public school principals across the United States were [78% white, 11% Black, and 9% Latino](#).

Although it may have been an unprecedented request at the time, the East Los Angeles students were prescient in their demand for a more diverse staff. [Research now shows](#) a decrease in suspensions, higher academic results, and higher academic standards for Black students when they have Black teachers. Unfortunately, by 2011-2012, public schools made only meager strides in diversity; in the 2011-2012 school year, just [18% were teachers of color](#). That was only a 5% increase from the 1987-1988 school year.

High turnover rates and teacher inconsistency also continue to affect schools. Students in the US today face similar obstacles to those encountered by the students in 1968. [Adverse ramifications](#) of frequent teacher turnover includes larger class sizes, less class offerings, inconsistency with instruction delivery, and lower teacher collaboration. Just like in the 1960s, teachers today either [leave the profession or change](#) to another school. The turnover rate in schools servicing historically under-served students, such as the schools in East Los Angeles, was approximately 50% [higher](#) than other schools according to a 2019 study.



Protesters in a car drive by with a sign that reads “Get the Cops Out of the Schools Now!”, 1968. Photo by Devra Weber, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center’s La Raza Photograph Collection

After two weeks of consistent walkouts, the students begrudgingly returned to the classroom. Community leaders, parents, and some teachers stepped in to demand meetings and responses from the school board. The Los Angeles School Board blamed money as an explanation for why they couldn’t address the students’ demands. Despite the tepid response from the LASB, the impact of the walkouts reached far beyond Los Angeles. Senator Robert F. Kennedy met with the students to validate their concerns in person during the protests. Representatives flew in from Washington D.C. in response to the school board’s plea.

Although the students intended to change the public education system, one of the unintended outcomes was the beneficial impact on higher education. Los Angeles colleges and universities started reaching out to more Mexican-American students, which led to higher percentages of Latino college students. In 1969, California college students took inspiration from the high schoolers’ actions; they [conducted hunger strikes](#) and protested for Chicano Studies programs, which were implemented. Soon, universities across the Southwest and as far afield as Wisconsin began launching similar curricula. Eventually, the programs became departments, which led to an increased representation of Mexican-American professors.



Protesters demand the reinstatement of Sal Castro to Lincoln High School during a march to the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education, 1968. Photo by Luis Garza, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's La Raza Photograph Collection

The 1968 East Los Angeles blowouts sparked critical conversations about educational equality that are still relevant in 2021. Schools segregated by race and class lead to an unequal distribution of resources, contrast in the quality of school buildings, and racist attitudes from staff and peers towards students of color. Furthermore, Eurocentric curricula still dominate lesson plans. Aspects of students' cultures, heritages, and histories are improperly reflected or completely ignored. Finally, executive positions of school staff remain mostly white.

One aspect, however, has changed: students now know they have the ability to speak up and speak out. The East Los Angeles blowouts ultimately demonstrated the magnitude of students' strength in protesting and "introduced a new weapon—a new monster—the walkout." Mexican-American students across the United States from Texas to Chicago adopted this protesting technique immediately following 1968. Between 1968 and 1972, students in Texas alone conducted 39 walkouts. In 2006, students adopted this practice when 24,000 students walked out of 52 Los Angeles schools. They protested against "federal immigration policy changes." 200 Pittsburgh students took inspiration from the student activists of East Los Angeles in February 2017 when they protested against then-Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos' support of redirecting federal money from public schools to voucher programs. I personally witnessed my high school students join a nationwide walkout against gun violence in schools in 2019. I vividly remember envisioning the students of 1968. I gave them credit for bequeathing my students this powerful method of fighting for their beliefs. Witnessing this action firsthand reminded me that our educational system won't change without listening to the voices of our students.