

Matteo D. Zuleta

Dr. Hernan Ramirez

Sociology 107

6 December 2024

The East Los Angeles Walkouts of 1968 and Current State of Education for Latina/o Students in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Whenever you hear the words “East Los Angeles” in a sentence, what is the first thing you think of? Do you associate this section of Los Angeles as a horrible and ghetto place to live where its mostly Mexican residents are very lazy individuals who don’t put real effort towards succeeding in life by earning achievements related to education? On the flip side, do you view them as very hard working, persistent people who are more than willing to do courageous actions in order to break free of the chains of systematic oppression that they are under, especially relating to the educational system in East Los Angeles. Well, a total 15,000 to 20,000 Chicano students did just that from March 1-8 in 1968. They walked out of their classrooms in numerous East LA high schools such as Garfield, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Wilson, and Belmont High Schools to protest about the numerous forms of widespread educational inequality and discrimination within the system and demanded a series of reforms that would put them in a better position to succeed in school. This was considered as the first major mass protest against systemic racism by Mexican-Americans in the history of the United States. You might be wondering about why do Mexican-Americans identify themselves as Chicanos? A revered Mexican-American journalist Ruben Salazar once said, “A Chicano is a Mexican-American is a non-Anglo image of himself” (Salazar). Mexican-Americans identified themselves as Chicano’s because they didn’t see themselves associated with the mainstream Anglo culture of America since they constantly resisted against getting

assimilated into it. They were extremely prideful about their Mexican heritage and constantly advocated for political, economic, educational, social, and systematic change that was aimed at improving their status quo as a collective and minority group in the United States. These widespread efforts to enact throughout the 1960's and 70's were known as the Chicano Movement. Learning about the The East LA Walkouts made a strong impression on me since these calls for monumental change by Chicano students took place right here in Los Angeles. Whenever learning about an event or story relating to the history of Los Angeles, I tend to dedicate a lot of my free time researching it because they are so fascinating to me since it took place right here at home. These students bravely walking out of their schools and making their voices heard by protesting about the many failures of the LA Unified School District educational system that hinder their success in education is very admirable to me. The East LA Walkouts are significant to American history because it was the cultural awakening for Chicano students of the many difficult conditions and obstacles they were up against in their quest to simply get a good high school education in East Los Angeles. Despite encountering numerous bouts of adversity that might deter a lot of people from being committed towards pushing for systematic change, these students kept on pushing and never gave up. Although there has been some key progress made in improving the educational experience for Latino students, there are still a lot of glaring issues that need to be addressed by the Los Angeles Unified School District.

A yearly gathering amongst Chicano students was the catalyst that helped spur the East LA Walkouts of 1968. This was known as the Chicano Youth Leadership

Conference originally established in five years prior to the walkouts in 1963. It was held in a Jewish campground called Camp Hess in the famous and luxurious beachside city of Malibu, California. A lot of the student leaders from the walkouts attended these conferences. In these conferences, students would share to each other about their personal struggles relating to situations regarding their families and about their lives in school. Also, Chicano students learned about the important facts and significant moments in Mexican-American history. Longtime Latino journalist Antonio Mejias-Rentas interviewed a Chicano Studies professor at Cal State Los Angeles named Valerie Talavera-Bustillos in 2022 about the walkouts and the impact the Chicano Youth Leadership Conferences had on students. She said, “Seeing, listening, and being proud of these accomplishments really helped the students think critically about their own family [situations]. What they were going through [at home], but also their own lives in school. To say, ‘Why should we put up with these things?’”(Mejias-Rentas)? Learning about the accomplishments and feats of Mexicans and Mexican Americans inspired the students to really dive deep into the difficulties experienced at home and school and see how the unequal education system they were in contributed to these struggles. When finding out the many different types of accomplishments that Mexican-Americans have made throughout history, Chicano students began to see themselves as potentially game-changers in transforming the unequal conditions they were in into something very beneficial. It is also worth noting that the Chicano Youth Leadership Conference was led by an individual named Sal Castro. He was a teacher at Lincoln High School in East Los Angeles and would inspire students to be prideful about their cultural heritage and

advocated for empowerment amongst the Chicano community. He would later play a significant role in the East Los Angeles Walkouts by helping students organize them.

In terms of the conditions and inequalities that Chicano students had to face in school, they were alarming to put it in the simplest of words. In order to provide a little context, there were 130,000 Chicano students attending schools in East Los Angeles. However, their graduation rates were one of the lowest in the United States. To top it off, a nonprofit organization called United Way of Greater Los Angeles that focuses on addressing disparities in low-income neighborhoods such as education presents a glaring example of an East Los Angeles high school's dropout rate and two troubling statistics. They say, "The dropout rate at Garfield High School in East Los Angeles was a staggering 57.5%. Average class sizes in area schools were 40 students and the ratio of school counselors to students was one counselor to 4,000 students" (*The Walkout- How a Student Movement in 1968 Changed Schools Forever (Part 1 of 3)*). This means that well over half of the students enrolled at Garfield High School don't wind up graduating. Additionally, the large class sizes might affect the engagement level of students in a negative way and make it harder for them to develop meaningful relationships with their teachers based on mutual understanding. The lack of counseling also hurts students in not being able to gain knowledge of which classes are needed to graduate high school and how to apply for college. Antonio Mejia-Rentas also points out, "Students complained they were being steered toward vocational and domestic training, instead of academic courses that would help them get into college" (Rentas). This is a very discriminatory practice in itself because school officials were using stereotypes about

Mexican-Americans being in occupations such as involving manual labor and housekeeping to justify students about heading towards this path instead of letting them know of which courses will help them in getting to college. Eventually, thousands of Chicano students decided that they were done being chained by this prejudiced unequal system in education and expressed this fact empathetically by continuously walking out of their classrooms in March of 1968.

In any large-scale protest such as the East LA Walkouts that is filled with emotion, police should be there without a doubt to make sure everybody is safe and nothing gets out of hand. However, the Los Angeles Police Department refused to do these two simple things that they are sworn to do. Instead, they harassed demonstrators who didn't even commit any major violence at all. The most 'violent' thing that the students did was throw bottles at passing police cars. Edward J. Escobar, a former professor at Arizona State University in their Department of Chicana/o Studies described an account of police brutality towards students and the LAPD's justification for doing so. He said, "A newspaper that developed from the walkouts, Chicano Student News, described in detail how two Chicano teenagers were "jumped by four full grown armed policemen, beaten to the ground and held with a club to the neck." The LAPD attempted to justify its actions and discredit the student protests by claiming that Communists had participated in and influenced the walkouts" (Escobar 14). Police infringing on the students' right to protest about the unequal conditions at the schools by physically beating them up without a viable excuse is simply heinous. The Los Angeles Police Department discrediting the walkouts the way they did shows the influence of media coverage at the

time. Even though not all media outlets such as newspapers mentioned Communists influencing the walkouts, the concept of ‘underground’ agitators being heavily involved with the East LA Walkouts was very prevalent. One newspaper report said, “Police and school authorities today are probing underground agitation as the cause of disorders Tuesday and Wednesday at four Los Angeles high schools...” (Harrington 2). This report portrays the notion that agitators from the shadows are influencing students to disrupt the educational system and cause scenes. However, this type of viewpoint contributed to the LAPD viewing Chicano students as radicalized by certain groups of people.

Despite the numerous instances of police harassment against Chicano students and newspaper reports viewing them in a negative light, they refused to give up on their goals to enact change in East LA high schools. Shortly after the walkouts, the Educational Coordinating Issues Committee was formed by students, walkout leaders, teachers, parents, community activists. The purpose of this committee was to keep speaking out about student concerns and address them to the Los Angeles Board of Education. A little more than two weeks after its formation, the Educational Coordinating Issues Committee met with the Los Angeles Board of Education and presented a list of demands which would’ve fundamentally changed the educational landscape for Chicano students. These demands included removing teachers from East LA high schools who openly display prejudice towards Mexican-American students, class curriculum being developed to include Mexican-American history and their contributions to U.S society, a more inclusive cafeteria menu that includes Mexican food, all libraries in East LA high schools undergoing expansion in which sufficient library materials will be provided in

Spanish, and a bilingual education program being instituted at schools whose students are mainly Mexican-American. However, the Los Angeles Board of Education ended up denying all of these demands. Latino researcher Henry J. Gutierrez describes the response of Los Angeles School District superintendent Jack P. Crowther and his reasoning for the school district not implementing the demands. Gutierrez says, “The School District Superintendent Jack P. Crowther made a statement in which he challenged and denied a number of assertions made by the EICC and student walkout leaders. Where he acknowledged that problems existed, he claimed the school district lacked the funds to accomplish the changes desired by the walkout leaders” (Gutierrez 20). While there is a debate regarding if LA Unified actually didn’t have the funds to make changes or they were being discriminatory, Chicano students brought a high level of awareness to the unequal conditions of the educational system they are in to many people and started the discourse of what needs to be done to reform and systematically alter this system.

Ever since the walkouts occurred fifty six years ago, there has been some notable progress that has contributed to the increasing success for Latino students in the Los Angeles Unified School District. To provide context beforehand, a public data reporting website for the California Department of Education named DataQuest reports that 73.8% of students enrolled in LA Unified are Latina/o (*Enrollment by Ethnicity- Los Angeles Unified (CA Department of Education)*). The first notable feat of progress that has been done is the establishment of bilingual programs in elementary, middle, and high schools. This is noteworthy because it was one of the demands by the Educational Issues Coordinating Issues Committee to the LA Board of Education back in 1968. Twenty three

years after its rejection, the Los Angeles Unified School District finally founded its first Spanish/English dual language program. These programs are beneficial to all students regardless of ethnicity and cultural background because they help promote seeing the world from a more open-minded perspective relative to the languages that are being taught. Also, they are linked to enhanced cognitive function especially in terms of critical thinking and problem-solving. As it stands right now in LA Unified, there are 189 bilingual Spanish/English programs at its schools (*Multilingual Multicultural Programs Alphabetical List*). If it weren't for the dialogue caused by the East LA Walkouts of needing to structurally change the educational system for Latina/o students, these programs probably wouldn't have been established. Another optimistic sign of progress for Latina/o students in LA Unified high schools excluding charter schools is their increasing graduation rates in the last 7 years. In 2016-17, 75.5% of Latina/o students graduated from high school within four years (*2016-17 Four Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate*). Fast forward to 2023-24, 86.3% of Latina/o students graduated from high school (*2023-24 Four Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate*). To put these numbers into perspective, there has been a 10.8% increase in graduation rate for Latina/o students. This makes them more likely to attend college and be able to work in some good-paying jobs since they require a high school diploma. This progression shows that there have been huge stepping stones in the goal of increasing the likelihood that Latina/o students have more fulfilling and successful educational journeys throughout their time in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

However, there are still a couple significant hurdles that are experienced by Latina/o students which need to be addressed with a high sense of urgency. First and foremost, the results for California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress in the 2023-24 school year show that Latina/o students are at a wide disparity in meeting the standard for English Language Arts and Mathematics compared to their White and Asian counterparts. In Los Angeles Unified School District public schools, 36.76% and 26.00% of Latina/o students have met or exceeded the standard in ELA and Mathematics respectively. Meanwhile, 62.97% and 54.05% of White students have met or exceeded the standard in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Lastly, 75.36% and 71.86% of Asian students have met or exceeded the standard in these two subject areas (*2023-24 English Language Arts/ Literacy and Mathematics Smarter Balanced Assessments*). The gap of Latino/a students by comparison with their fellow White and Asian counterparts in their results is significant and a cause for concern. This means that Latina/o students are at a huge discrepancy in understanding the fundamentals of how to read books like novels, write informational papers on specific topics, listen and evaluate when others speak, being able to articulate their thoughts and ideas, and recognizing math equations. A solution to closing this gap and helping Latina/o students is for the LA Unified School District to better invest in hiring tutors and providing them with the resources necessary to help them succeed. However, this would only work if the resources or tutors address the specific needs for struggling students. The second big issue that LA Unified Latina/o students have to face is being in a racially segregated school system. Even though the Supreme Court of the United States declared that racial segregation in schools was

unconstitutional in its landmark decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, a lot of students still experience segregation due to either living in rich or poor neighborhoods. An investigative journalism organization named ProPublica built a database called *Miseducation* in 2018 showing the racial disparities in various categories at schools and districts across the United States. For the Los Angeles Unified School District, ProPublica ranks it very high in terms of the uneven level of distribution of Latina/o and White students across schools. A startling example of this is Woodrow Wilson Senior High School. This is one of the East Los Angeles high schools in which students walked out from. According to ProPublica, 92% of Wilson's students are Latina/o while only 1% of students are White (*Miseducation Woodrow Wilson Senior High School ProPublica*). Think about these numbers for a second, this high school is overwhelmingly Latina/o and there is no racial integration despite segregation being illegal. This is very alarming because schools whose students are Latina/o or any other minority group tend to be in high-poverty and therefore decreasing the quality or lack thereof resources that are needed to help students succeed in their educational journeys. There isn't an easy fix to this glaring problem. In order to at least alleviate this issue, the LA Unified School District must be innovative in promoting racial integration amongst its schools and balancing out funding to diversify them more.

The East LA Walkouts are significant to American history because it was the cultural awakening for Chicano students of the many difficult conditions they were up against such as being discouraged from going to college by school officials, the lack of counseling, and oversized classrooms. This made it very difficult for students to succeed

in their quest to simply get a good high school education in East Los Angeles. Despite encountering numerous bouts of adversity that might deter a lot of people from being committed towards pushing for systematic change like police harassment and being vilified by newspaper reports, these students kept on pushing and never gave up. Although there has been some key progress made in improving the educational experience for Latino students with the establishment of Spanish/English bilingual programs and increasing graduation rates, there are still a lot of glaring issues that need to be addressed by the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Learning all about the East Los Angeles Walkouts in my Intro to Chicana/o Culture class has contributed to my understanding of Chicana/o culture in a big way. Throughout my time learning about this topic by reading about it and watching the HBO Film called “Walkout” that does a very good job depicting what the East LA Walkouts were like, I gained a great sense of respect and appreciation for Chicana/o students of the Los Angeles Unified School District. They were aware of being tied to the chains of a very systematically oppressive and unequal educational system. Instead of accepting for what it is and believing what school officials had to say about their potential, 15,000-20,000 Chicana/o students decided that they had enough being treated poorly and being under bad conditions while at school. The immense pride of their Mexican heritage and knowing the struggles that fellow Mexican-Americans have gone through historically was a spark that made the East La Walkouts of 1968 a reality. The courage of Chicana/o students during the walkouts and being persistent in the face of numerous forms of adversity is very inspiring to me. I don’t consider myself a very outspoken person in

expressing my personal views on controversial and heated topics. However, if there was ever an issue that ended up affecting my family, friends, and community, I might be compelled to speak up and spread awareness of said issues after seeing what Chicana/o students did. Lastly, whenever you hear the words “East Los Angeles” in a sentence, what is the first thing you think of? Is this section of Los Angeles a horrible and ghetto place to live where its mostly Mexican residents are very lazy individuals who don’t put real effort towards succeeding in life by earning achievements related to education? The other option is do you view them as very hard working, persistent people who are more than willing to do courageous actions in order to break free of the chains of systematic oppression that they are under, especially relating to the educational system in East Los Angeles? I’m not going to reveal or push you to think about what the right answer to this question is. If you choose to really take the time in reflecting on the East Los Angeles Walkouts and the current state of education for Latina/o students in the Los Angeles Unified School District, the answer will naturally appear before you. Go ahead, it might fundamentally change the way you view the world and people from many walks of life!

Works Cited

Escobar, J. Edward. *The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971*. The Journal of American History, 1993.

Gutierrez J. Henry, *Racial Politics in Los Angeles: Black and American Challenges to Unequal Education in the 1960s*. Southern California Quarterly, 1996.

Harrington H. Johns. *LA's Student Blowout*. The Phi Delta Kappan, 1968. *Miseducation Woodrow Wilson High School ProPublica*. ProPublica, 2018.

Multilingual Multicultural Programs Alphabetical List. Los Angeles Unified School District, 2024.

Rentas-Mejias, Antonio. *How 1968 East LA Student Walkouts Ignited the Chicano Movement*. HISTORY, 2022.

Salazar, Ruben. *Column: Who is a Chicano? And What Is It the Chicanos Want?* Los Angeles Times, 1970.

The Walkout- How a Student Movement in 1968 Changed Schools Forever (Part 1 of 3). United Way of Greater Los Angeles, 2018.

2016-17 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate of LA Unified. California Department of Education, 2017.

2023-24 Enrollment by Ethnicity Report of LA Unified. California Department of Education, 2024.

2023-24 Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate of LA Unified.

California Department of Education, 2024.

2023-24 English Language Arts/ Literacy and Mathematics Smarter

Balanced Assessments. California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2024.