“The Mexican American community is beginning to rumble,” noted Ben Canales, an official with a Mexican American community group by the name of United Organizations Information Center.¹ This comment was made at a committee meeting before the Houston board of education in October 1969 and aptly reflected the Chicano community’s growing dissatisfaction with the local school district’s unwillingness to improve the conditions under which Mexican American children were educated.

The rumbling in the community noted by Canales referred to the growing restlessness among middle and working-class Chicanos over the neglect by government institutions of their political interests and special needs. Since 1960, Mexican Americans in Texas, especially middle-class individuals who were members of existing organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the American G.I. Forum, and the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations (PASO), had worked hard to elect liberal politicians, to enact federal legislation aimed at meeting the educational and vocational needs of Mexican American children, and to ensure the passage of important civil rights measures. Despite their involvement in the political process, Mexican Americans continued to be neglected by authorities and agencies at all levels of government.²

Failure to bring about any significant changes in the treatment of Mexican Americans laid the groundwork for further radicalization and political mobilization. The Farmworkers’ strike and its brutal suppression by the Texas Rangers and state police as well as the Minimum Wage March of the summer of 1966 unleashed a series of new organizations with different ideological notions of ethnic identity, political culture, and social change. These organizations began to mount a vigorous campaign against all forms of inequalities

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¹ J. L. Rury (ed.), *Urban Education in the United States*, © John L. Rury 2005
in American institutional life. Public education was one of those institutions that increasingly came under attack.\(^3\) Canales’s statement was in reference to this complex process of ideological fermentation, organizational development, and political mobilization that was occurring in the Chicano community in Houston and throughout the state. The shift in emphasis and tactics in the struggle for adequate education reflected a pivotal change of focus in community activism—from negotiating limited political and cultural change to demanding a broad restructuring of the larger society.

**EARLY EFFORTS AT EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

Chicano efforts to promote school reform which aimed at eliminating discrimination and at improving school performance emerged gradually during the 1960s. Several forces fueled the broader movement by Mexican Americans for equality and justice in the United States during this period—the material conditions of the 1960s, the national and international political climate, and the continued efforts by African Americans to eliminate racial discrimination.\(^4\) These same forces inspired an increased involvement in education, as men and women of different ages and social classes and with multiple ideologies and perspectives worked together or in tandem to change the schools so that they could better serve the Mexican American population.

Although Mexican Americans had a rich legacy of activism in the schools by the early 1960s, it was subdued and narrowly focused. Activism in the schools focused on three areas of activity. First, sporadic efforts were made to improve the treatment of Mexican American children in the schools and the quality of their education. For instance, in the summer of 1961, parents from the Clayton Homes area met to discuss conditions in their local schools. They set up committees to find ways of improving the quality of the school facilities provided for their children. Although it is unclear what happened to these recommendations or what further actions the Clayton Homes tenants took, the establishment of these committees indicated a deep concern for quality education for their children.\(^5\) At times, specific incidents of discrimination were challenged. One such incident occurred in early 1960 when the school board was engaged in a debate over the need for free lunches in the schools. One school board member remarked that “Mexican American children did not need free lunches because they would rather eat ‘pinto beans.’”\(^6\) This remark incensed the community and led to the study of and support for a free lunch program in the Houston Independent School District (HISD). This study was sponsored by three Mexican American organizations: LULAC, the American G.I. Forum, and the Civic Action Committee.\(^7\)

The second major focus of Mexican American activism during this early period occurred at the University of Houston. In 1963, Mexican American students at the University of Houston founded a branch of the PASO on campus to promote awareness of their community’s needs and to endorse candidates who the group felt best represented the community’s interests.