

IN THE CLASSROOM

# Schools See 'an Awakening' of Student Activism

## Youths at campuses in disadvantaged areas meet with success as they demand improvements.

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Roosevelt High School's newly appointed principal, Cecilia Quemada, had barely been on the job for a month when a group of student activists approached her with a list of requests last October.

The teenagers, who are members of an organization called Youth Organizing Communities, spoke passionately about improving education for the 5,100 students who attend the severely overcrowded campus on Los Angeles' Eastside. The school is notorious for low test scores, and in 2001 it was one of 13 schools in California, and 10 in Los Angeles Unified, targeted for reform by the state.

The students wanted more information on college preparatory courses and graduation requirements, improved academic counseling and culturally relevant social studies classes emphasizing the history of Latinos, who make up the majority of the student body.

"The administration was making all of these rules we had to follow, but we didn't really know what was going on," said Rene Martinez, 16, a Roosevelt student. "It wasn't fair, so we decided we had to do something about it."

Quemada had been charged with the task of revitalizing the campus, after the controversial decision by the state and district to remove the previous principal, Henry Ronquillo. She was put off, at first, by the students' collective determination.

"I was really uneasy about it," she said. "That whole activism thing, you know, that can work in reverse sometimes."

Quemada didn't want to be pushed around, but she also didn't want to ignore the concerns of students. So she met with them and eventually agreed to some of their ideas. Within a few months, some of the students' wishes were met.

The school's tardy room was closed after the group complained that it was a waste of instructional time for students. Instead, tardy students remain in class and receive alternative punishment, such as after-school detention, as well as counseling.

Quemada agreed to add two Mexican American studies classes to the course list, hire three more

guidance counselors and include mandatory counseling about graduation course requirements during homeroom.

"Here was a group that wanted to be in the loop, and I thought, 'Why not make something positive out of that?' " Quemada said.

Youth Organizing Communities, which has more than 50 student members at Roosevelt, formed three years ago as an outgrowth of a statewide movement against Proposition 21, a measure that allowed prosecutors to decide whether juveniles ages 14 to 17 who are charged with murder or sex crimes should be tried as adults. Proposition 21 passed in March 2000, but the Los Angeles students who participated in the statewide movement wanted to take their activism back to their campuses.

The student organization is sponsored and funded by Inner City Struggle, an East Los Angeles community action organization supported by private and public grants and donations. Youth Organizing Communities started its second chapter at Garfield High School recently.

Youth Organizing Communities is one of a handful of youth activist organizations in Los Angeles that have emerged over the last several years to advocate for better conditions in their schools. For example, South Central Youth Empowered Through Action, a similar coalition of students, has been seeking more Advanced Placement courses on such campuses as Fremont, Locke and Manual Arts.

The Eastside students meet three to four times a week during lunch, after school or on weekends, either on campus or at Inner City Struggle's one-room office on Whittier Boulevard.

They discuss problems in their schools such as unsafe learning environments, too few bathrooms, overcrowding and not enough books. They also receive tutoring and mentoring from college counselors who volunteer their time.

"This provides a safe place for you to come and voice your opinion and know you can make a change," said Nancy Meza, 15, a Garfield student.

One of the group's recent campaigns was called Educational Justice Week, which took place in February. Students took to campuses to talk to their classmates about economic and educational inequality, and to make them aware of the classes required for high school graduation and college admittance.

The students involved are "working with the administration to create policies that support students. And that's a large step forward," said Lester Garcia, 20, who helped form the group when he was a student at Roosevelt and who now, while attending Cal State Long Beach, is the youth organizer for Inner City Struggle.

Many teachers at Roosevelt say they are impressed by the hard work of the students.

Aldo Parral, a history teacher at the school, said students involved with the group are "more confident and empowered, whereas, in the past, they let the system overrun them."

The group's advisor, Javier Cid, also a history teacher, said the group "is more than just a club, it's a movement, an awakening."

Los Angeles Unified school board member Jose Huizar and state Sen. Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles) recently sponsored a community fund-raiser for Inner City Struggle and Youth Organizing Communities, raising \$5,000.

"I was very impressed with their knowledge of the educational system, and their real

identifications of the inequities in our school system," Huizar said. "I found them advocating for some of the very same issues I was advocating for on the board of education."

Now, group members say they want to see similar improvements at Garfield, Wilson and Lincoln high schools.