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“Sitting on a Tinderbox”: Racial Conflict, Teacher Discretion, and the Centralization of Disciplinary Authority

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The centralization of school discipline in the second half of the twentieth century is widely understood to be the inevitable result of court decisions granting students certain civil rights in school. This study examines the process by which school discipline became centralized in the Los Angeles City School District in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, and finds that the locus of control over student discipline shifted from the school site to the centralized district largely in response to local pressures. Indeed, during a period of large-scale student unrest, and in an environment of widespread racial and cultural tensions, many Los Angeles students, parents, community members, and educators actively promoted the centralization of school discipline—although often for directly conflicting purposes. Ultimately, this article argues that the centralization of school discipline was not inevitable and must be understood in the broader historical context in which it occurred.

The problem of student discipline is as old as schooling itself—a continual challenge to teachers and a perennial cause for concern in the general public (Cuban 1993; Elam 1984; Gallup 1972; Kaestle 1983). Yet, the organization of discipline—how it is governed and by whom—has changed considerably in recent decades. Throughout most of American history, student discipline was largely decentralized: local educators were responsible for determining appropriate classroom behavior and for meting out punishments as they saw fit. The governing principle of this arrangement was the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, which contends that teachers and principals act “in the place of the parent” when students are under their charge. Educators were thus allowed considerable discretion in the administration of discipline—even in cases in which a student’s actual parents disagreed (Bybee and Gee 1982; Kaestle 1983). Well into the twentieth century, and long after Progressive Era reformers

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had centralized most other aspects of schooling, school discipline remained a local and relatively unregulated process.

Today, however, teachers and principals are expected to enforce centralized rules and regulations regarding student behavior and are granted little—if any—personal discretion. In fact “zero tolerance” policies, which in the past decade have been implemented in some form in nearly every school district in the nation, are specifically intended to limit local educators’ discretion by requiring them to impose uniform penalties for certain student infractions (Johnson et al. 2000; Skinner 2004). Moreover, at the same time that the primary site of school disciplinary decisions has moved from schools and classrooms to the district, the act of discipline has become increasingly procedural—often resembling court trials, replete with hearings and, in some cases, lawyers (Bowman 2003; Epstein 2003).

These developments are only the latest manifestation of a general centralization of educational authority in recent decades; curricular and assessment decisions, for example, have gradually moved from teachers and schools to districts, state houses, and, with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government. An exploration of how and why disciplinary authority shifted from school sites to bureaucratic institutions, then, also sheds light on the organizational transformation of education more broadly.

The centralization of school discipline in the United States is most commonly characterized as the inevitable result of key court decisions in the 1960s and ’70s granting students certain civil rights in school (Arum 2003; Blacker 2000; Thernstrom 1999; Weinig 2000).¹ Yet, that explanation minimizes the degree to which racial and cultural tensions in schools and neighborhoods weakened teachers’ and principals’ authority independently of court decisions, and ignores the role that local actors—including educators—played in the centralization of school discipline.² In fact at the level of the district, teachers were often complicit in, if not directly responsible for, centralizing disciplinary authority, and an understanding of their role in this process, as well as the role of other local actors who worked to shift authority away from schools and educators, suggests a new interpretation of the centralization of authority in American public schooling—in the realm of discipline and in education in general.

In this article I present an explanation for the organizational transformation of school discipline that is more dynamic and historically grounded than

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accounts that focus on the effect of court rulings alone. Through a close examination of how and why school discipline became increasingly centralized in the Los Angeles City School District in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I argue that the process was neither inevitable nor primarily dictated by changes in “court climate” (Arum 2003), but rather was shaped by racial conflict and distrust between minority students and their white teachers and school officials.³ At the height of federal and state courts’ recognition of students’ rights, the Los Angeles Board of Education adopted a series of policies that served to shift authority over school discipline away from school-site educators and toward the centralized district. Yet, an investigation into the debates and discussions around the development of these policies reveals that they were largely created in response to local pressures exerted by students, parents, educators, and community members—albeit often for directly opposing purposes.

Specifically, in the late 1960s, many black and Mexican American students, parents, and community members, unhappy with the conditions and quality of their schools and distrustful of their (mostly white) teachers and principals, staged protests and demonstrations against the Los Angeles school system. Among the protesters’ many demands and grievances were appeals to the Board of Education to limit school-site educators’ discretion in enacting discipline. Los Angeles teachers, principals, and other community members often reacted to these protests by urging the Board of Education to clamp down on student unrest and school disturbances through the creation of firm, district-level directives and regulations.

The board responded to both sets of demands by creating new rules and procedures that expanded the role of the district in the administration of discipline and shifted the locus of control over many disciplinary decisions from school sites to district-level offices and officials. In doing so, the Los Angeles Board of Education became a pioneer and model in the reorganization of school discipline—particularly for large, urban districts encountering similar racial, cultural, and political tensions. Indeed by the mid-1970s, the notion of local governance and the doctrine of *in loco parentis* had been effectively replaced as the governing principles of school discipline—in Los Angeles and around the country; in their place were centralized regulation and bureaucratic rule making, and these principles were only reinforced and expanded in the years that followed.

Unrest in the Los Angeles City School District

The Los Angeles City School District was the second-largest school system in the nation in the late 1960s. It enrolled over 627,000 students and, at a time

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when racial politics in America was understood in primarily black-white terms, served a truly diverse population: approximately 56 percent white, 21 percent black, 19 percent Mexican American, and 4 percent Asian American (Los Angeles Unified School District 1974).

The racial geography of Los Angeles, however, coupled with years of purposeful gerrymandering, produced overwhelmingly segregated schools. Over half the district’s Mexican American students attended schools that were predominantly Mexican American, while over 80 percent of black students attended schools that were predominantly black. White students attended schools that were almost exclusively white. The little racial integration that did exist in the district tended to be between black and Mexican American students (Caughey 1967; López 2003).

In addition to being segregated, the city’s schools were profoundly unequal. While black and Mexican American students tended to attend old, decrepit schools that were so overcrowded that many ran half-day sessions, schools in white suburban San Fernando Valley were new, spacious, and often operating below full capacity. In predominantly poor and minority schools, academic achievement was far below the city average; teachers had less experience; and students were more likely to lack access to a school cafeteria or library, be taught a low-skills curriculum, and eventually drop out of school without graduating than were their peers attending schools in the “advantaged” neighborhoods of the district (Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots 1965b; López 2003; Sides 2003).

Black and Mexican American students, families, and activists who waged protests against the Los Angeles City School District in the late 1960s often targeted these educational inequities. They demanded improved facilities, smaller classes, up-to-date textbooks, adequate libraries and cafeterias, additional counselors, and better quality teachers. However, the school protests in Los Angeles were about more than material conditions and resources. Those who participated were also rejecting the legitimacy of an educational bureaucracy that maintained inherently unequal schools, and were challenging the hegemony of the white middle class that controlled those schools.

Indeed, despite the fact that the city’s nonwhite population was rapidly growing and that minority Los Angelenos had made some inroads into formal school governance, the Los Angeles City School District remained a white-run institution. In 1966, 84 percent of the teachers and 95 percent of the principals in the city’s secondary schools were white, while the corresponding percentages in the elementary schools were 76 and 91 percent, respectively. Schools in minority neighborhoods tended to have a higher percentage of minority teachers but were still largely presided over by white principals (Los Angeles City School District 1966).

Proportionately, nonwhite Los Angelenos were better represented on the

Board of Education than in positions of school leadership. Two minority members served on the seven-person governing body in the late 1960s: James Jones, a black pastor who was elected to the board in 1965, and Julian Nava, a Mexican American university professor who was elected in 1967. Yet, as the school protests made clear, from the perspective of many black and Mexican American students and community members, the city school district was still controlled by—and in the interest of—white Los Angeles. Thus, protesters issued demands for new policies and a curriculum that would acknowledge the presence and worth of the district's nonwhite students. These demands included bilingual education, textbooks acknowledging black and Chicano culture and heritage, the appointment of more minority teachers and principals, dress and grooming codes that recognized cultural diversity, and above all, a greater respect for the concerns of black and Mexican American communities.

Most of the protesters' demands were not new, but the Watts riot—or Watts uprising, as many local residents and commentators referred to the event—had transformed the political contours of Los Angeles and its school district, and shaped both the protesters' actions and school and city officials' responses to them (Acuña 1984; Horne 1997; López 2003; Sides 2003). Indeed, while schools had been left untouched during the violence of Watts, even as buildings around them were burned and looted, they became sites of racial conflict and confrontation in its aftermath. In the months and years following Watts, poor minority students and families grew progressively impatient with the dismal conditions of their schools and with the theories of cultural deprivation they were offered to explain their low student achievement (Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots 1965b; López 2003, Muñoz 1989).⁴

At the same time, although views and reactions varied, Los Angeles teachers and principals working in predominantly minority schools increasingly saw themselves as potential targets of violence and student rebellion, and often responded by seeking additional security guards on their campuses and by calling in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) at the first sign of trouble.⁵ The presence of uniformed officers on school grounds—particularly the LAPD, whose reputation as a corrupt, abusive, and racist police force was only buttressed by Watts—fueled additional conflict between minority community members and the schools (Horne 1997; Schiesl 1990). Yet, the more students and communities protested the presence of police on their campuses, the more principals and teachers seemed to want them there.

While similar in many ways to other student and community protests of the period, the school protests in Los Angeles were unusually large and widespread; over the course of two school years—1967–69—they disrupted over three dozen schools, forced the closure of several others, filled the front pages of the local newspapers, and halted the Board of Education's proceedings on

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multiple occasions. Although the vast majority of the protesters’ demands went unmet, the protests themselves were markedly effective in disturbing the status quo in Los Angeles, if not quite in transforming it. Specifically, while the protests brought few new resources to minority schools, they successfully challenged the authority of school-site educators and had a lasting impact on the organization of school discipline. In the following sections I examine two sets of these protests and demonstrate how they contributed to the centralization of discipline across the Los Angeles City School District.

“In a Far Different Mood Today”

The first school protest to significantly affect the district at large took place in the fall of 1967 at Manual Arts High School in South Los Angeles. The central target was the school’s white principal, Robert Denahy—whom black parents and students had been working to oust since the previous spring. Complaints centered around two ideas—that Denahy did not communicate with or make himself available to parent and community groups and that he treated students (and by extension the community) in an authoritarian manner. Grievances included the alleged use of “physical threats or coercion” in conducting student discipline, the failure to contact parents when their children were suspended, the practice of keeping student bathrooms locked and inaccessible during the school day, and the overidentification of students as “social-adjustment cases,” a label that resulted in their removal from regular classrooms.⁶

After letters and petitions sent to the district proved unsuccessful, concerned parents and community members began picketing Manual Arts at the start of the 1967–68 school year. They were supported in their efforts by local black leaders. One state assemblyman filed a lawsuit seeking Denahy’s dismissal due to incompetence, and most black politicians in the area, as well as the head of the local NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), joined him in the suit.⁷ The participation of elected officials helped bring legitimacy to the protesters’ demands, but the presence on the picket lines of organizations such as the United Slaves and Black Congress also fueled critics’ assertions that the campaign against the principal was the work of extremist outsiders, rather than parents. Although the protesters dismissed this claim, they did acknowledge that racial pride—or at least a rejection of racial oppression—guided their efforts. As one group involved in the protests explained in a letter to the board, black parents were “in a far different mood today” than they had been in earlier eras, and they no longer accepted “the idea that if a child fails, something must be wrong with him.” Instead, the letter insisted, “something is wrong with [the school].”⁸

Meanwhile, educators at Manual Arts and throughout the district, viewing the battle against the principal as a direct affront to their professional authority, closed ranks around Denahy. Along with the Manual Arts Faculty Association, the Senior High School Principals of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Association of Secondary School Administrators (LAASSA) urged the board to maintain its support for the principal.⁹ If protesters could set up pickets outside the school demanding a principal's transfer, they asked, how could that principal be expected to command students' respect and obedience within its walls? And how could teachers be expected to maintain order in the classroom if the exertion of outside pressure were proven effective in changing school policy and personnel? Denahy had become a symbol of a larger struggle over school control and student governance. For the protesters, he represented the arrogance and indifference the white school system regularly exhibited toward its poor minority students; for teachers and administrators, he embodied the right of educators to govern schools and students without interference.

The spectacle of Watts was likely lingering on everyone's minds when the picketing at Manual Arts turned violent in mid-October. Setting a pattern that was repeated several times in the following years, the violence began with the arrest of a well-known black community activist on school grounds. Her arrest, and the fact that the LAPD had been called to the campus, initiated several days of what the *Los Angeles Times* described as a "rampage": students and protesters threw rocks, set small fires, and stopped traffic along a main roadway near the school—resulting in injuries to bystanders and to at least one fireman. Over 100 people were arrested over the course of several days, during which time the LAPD put its entire force on tactical alert and dispatched literally hundreds of policemen to the school and surrounding area.¹⁰

By the following Monday, a full boycott of Manual Arts was underway. Approximately half of the school's students and more than half of its teachers stayed away from school. The district called in substitute teachers in order to keep Manual Arts open for the almost 2,000 students who had shown up, and the Board of Education held a special session in order to address the conflict. After much internal debate, the board eventually agreed to allow Denahy to transfer—as opposed to weeks earlier, when it had turned down his request as a sign of support. Within days he had taken a leave of absence and been granted a position at a different school for the following semester.

It appeared the protesters had emerged victorious. The headline in the *Herald-Dispatch*, a local black newspaper, trumpeted the news: "Manual War Won, Denahy Goes."¹¹ Indeed, protesters had succeeded in removing an unpopular principal, and, more important, they had successfully challenged the notion that a principal's authority was absolute. In the end, the doctrine of *in loco parentis* had not trumped parental and community voice.

Yet, at the same time that the board voted to allow the principal to transfer,

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it also agreed to some key demands from the faculty of Manual Arts—demands that effectively led to the implementation of increased measures of control at the school. Specifically, the board agreed to assign additional security guards to Manual Arts and to apply for an injunction against protesters that would allow for their arrest. These actions created an increased presence of noneducators enforcing discipline and order on the Manual Arts campus, and ultimately led to the arrest of additional community protesters.¹²

In many ways, events at Manual Arts foreshadowed the multiple protests and walkouts that occurred across the district in the months that followed. Protesters had brought complaints regarding school-site personnel and school-site decisions to the Board of Education, seeking intervention on their behalf. Educators and their supporters brought complaints regarding school discipline and violence to the Board of Education, seeking intervention on their behalf. The board responded by doing some of both: it acknowledged that parents and community members (and even students) had a legitimate claim in challenging the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, while at the same time it expanded the role of the centralized district in maintaining order in the school. The board had ended a standoff between protesters and educators—by inserting itself into matters that had traditionally been addressed locally.

“We Want a Lot Now”

The best known and most often celebrated of the Los Angeles school protests of the late 1960s were the massive student walkouts in the spring of 1968. They are often remembered as the “Chicano blowouts” of East Los Angeles—primarily because they constituted one of the first displays of brown power in urban America, and because they propelled the predominantly Mexican American East Los Angeles community firmly into the educational policymaking process. In total an estimated 10,000 students in East Los Angeles walked out of their schools the first week of March—carrying placards proclaiming messages such as “Viva la Raza,” “Brown Is Beautiful,” and “We Are Not Dirty Mexicans” (Acuña 1984; *Chicano!* 1996; López 2003; Muñoz 1989). Although the blowouts began in East Los Angeles, they rapidly spread into other neighborhoods and ultimately involved thousands of (mostly black) students from South Central Los Angeles and over 1,000 students from the racially mixed Venice High School as well.¹³

For over a week, student protesters—often joined by parents and community members—boycotted classes, held rallies, picketed schools, spoke to the media, and scuffled with police; a few of the blowout leaders met with a visiting and sympathetic Bobby Kennedy. The protesters’ message was one of cultural pride, as well as frustration with the conditions of their schools and the dis-

crimination and oppression they experienced there, and they took the opportunity the protests garnered them to assert their grievances in multiple forums. The protesters submitted their demands to their principals, district officials, local politicians, and the media.¹⁴ Their targeted audience, however, was the Board of Education—in part because the board controlled the distribution of resources and made policy decisions regarding hiring, curriculum, and school facilities and in part because the protesters were appealing to the board to intervene in, and even overrule, policies and decisions that had been made at their local schools. In East Los Angeles, Mexican American students and their supporters issued a host of demands regarding school rules and disciplinary procedures, ranging from changes in dress and grooming codes to the elimination of corporal punishment. Similarly, in South Central Los Angeles, black students demanded grooming codes that would permit their “natural” hairstyles (i.e., Afros) and the removal of the LAPD from their campuses.

Protesters also brought their demands to the Board of Education because, as democratically elected officials, its members were answerable to the community in a way that local educators were not. In fact board members were elected through districtwide races, making them accountable to voters in every corner of the diverse and sprawling district. James Jones and Julian Nava played particularly important roles in this regard. Although Nava, a graduate of Roosevelt High School in East Los Angeles, was later criticized by Mexican American activists for his response to the blowouts, he championed several of the protesters’ causes throughout his tenure—including bilingual education, culturally inclusive curricula, and the need to hire more black and Mexican American administrators. Similarly Jones, who was politically further to the left than Nava, sought to promote protesters’ efforts. At one point he issued a personal promise that student protesters from Jefferson High School would get black administrators, as they demanded.¹⁵

At the same time, however, while Jones and Nava often spoke for and sought to represent minority students and families, they had been elected by broad-based coalitions that included teachers, white liberal voters, and, at least in the case of Nava, self-identified conservatives.¹⁶ Thus, like their fellow board members, they sought to balance the competing demands of these constituencies. As Ralph Richardson, a traditionally “liberal” board member, explained, reflecting back on the protests many years later: “I was aware that there was frustration within the minority community; I was aware that there was great political opposition within the majority community; and so I knew that in a sense we were sitting on a tinderbox.”¹⁷ In order to prevent the tinderbox from exploding, the board made decisions to assuage both the protesters and their critics, and in the process further involved itself in matters that had traditionally been handled locally.

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Ultimately, the board took no action on the vast majority of the students’ demands, claiming that although it was “in agreement with 99 percent” of them, it lacked the necessary financial and human resources.¹⁸ There was some truth to this statement; the greater Los Angeles area was in the early stages of what would become California’s “taxpayers’ revolt,” and local voters’ had repeatedly rejected school bond measures, after a decade and a half of consistently approving them (LaNoue and Smith 1973). The larger issue, however, was political will. The board had the authority to distribute its existing resources differently but chose not to do so. Yet, while the board met very few of the protesters’ demands that required additional expenditures, it made several key concessions that in both symbolic and practical terms weakened school-site educators’ authority.

The first concession was to grant amnesty to all students who participated in the walkouts. This decision later proved highly troubling to critics, but placed in the context of students’ demands regarding learning conditions, curriculum, and unfair school rules and practices, the amnesty must be seen, at best, as a modest victory for the protesters.¹⁹ First, the amnesty was a response to the walkouts and did not address any of the conditions or regulations students were protesting. Second, given the number of students involved, amnesty was the most practical response for the board. As the president explained to critics months later, allowing thousands of students to be expelled from school would have likely led to even greater unrest.²⁰ However, in granting amnesty to students who had purposefully broken school and state rules, the board did at least symbolically legitimize their complaints. Moreover, the amnesty effectively overruled school-site administrators and teachers who sought to enact penalties for truancy, defying authority, and other charges related to the walkouts. The action thus undermined local school authority by requiring all school-site educators to defer to the board.

The board’s second concession was to hold an official meeting in an East Los Angeles high school to hear and discuss protesters’ and community members’ concerns and demands. The meeting did not lead to any immediate changes in school policies, but the board agreed to send several of the protesters’ demands to committee for discussion—including those concerning disciplinary rules and practices that had always been the prerogative of local schools.²¹ In the short term, the board’s willingness to consider taking action in matters long established and carried out by teachers and principals signaled a change in student and school governance. For example, instead of responding to complaints about the use of corporal punishment by asserting that this form of discipline was the often unpleasant duty of a school principal, the board agreed to investigate the matter more fully.²² This began a process that would eventually lead to a districtwide ban on the practice. Similarly, in 1971 the board voted to eliminate all school dress and grooming codes—based on

the recommendation of a subcommittee that had been discussing the matter since it was raised during the blowouts.²³

In the long term, then, the board's decision to consider demands related to school discipline ultimately led to a loss of local discretion for teachers and principals. In addition, the board's willingness to hold an official meeting in East Los Angeles granted a degree of legitimacy to the protesters and their actions. In fact, the board's staunch conservative member—J. C. Chambers—refused to attend the special session precisely on these grounds.²⁴

The board's third concession to the protesters was to change its policy regarding principal appointments. Keeping true to Jones's promise, the board bypassed the district's traditional (and officially merit-based, race-blind) promotion and placement procedures and appointed three black administrators to Jefferson High School. While the board insisted that Jefferson's new administrators had not been given their positions because of their race, it was clear to most observers that the appointments were the result of the school protests. The following semester students at Fremont High School—another predominantly black school in South Central Los Angeles—conducted a similar school walkout to demand the appointment of black administrators. The board again voted to assign a black principal to the school and, after brief negotiations with the Association of Elementary School Administrators of Los Angeles, passed a board rule essentially codifying the practice of assigning black (or in some cases Mexican American) personnel to predominantly minority schools. This new policy legitimated protesters' claims that race mattered in the construction of local authority, and it also served to shift a responsibility that had once been the sole prerogative of the superintendent to the board itself.²⁵

Indeed many of the Los Angeles Board of Education's actions in the context of the school protests served to expand its role in local school administration and governance. At the time of the blowouts, it did so primarily in response to student and community demands. In their aftermath, however, the board often expanded its role in and authority over the day-to-day proceedings of local schools in response to pressure exerted by teachers and principals.

“We Question the Board's Judgment and Competency”

While some teachers had supported the student walkouts in the spring of 1968 and others supported the smaller protests that followed, most teachers, principals, and other educators expressed shock, anger, fear, and frustration in the aftermath of the Los Angeles school protests. They directed these feelings at both the protesters and the Board of Education for its apparent willingness to appease them. In the weeks and months following the blowouts, as students

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returned to their classrooms, Los Angeles teachers and administrators submitted their own demands and petitions to the board—seeking policy remedies for what they perceived had been a serious undermining of their authority. Specifically, they urged the board to adopt strict rules and punitive measures regarding student indiscipline and to provide institutional support in the form of police and/or full-time security guards to patrol individual schools and corridors.

Los Angeles educators were particularly upset by the board’s decision to grant amnesty to all students who had participated in the blowouts, but they were also upset about its willingness to consider overruling educators’ local disciplinary authority in other matters. In letters, petitions, and presentations to the Board of Education, they argued that the board’s actions had disregarded existing rules; sent a mixed message to students, parents, and educators; and weakened teachers’ and principals’ ability to maintain order. Seventy teachers at Roosevelt High School in East Los Angeles, for example, signed a petition that stated: “Because of the Board’s vacillation, teacher morale is depressed, student attitude is confused, and Administrative authority is undermined.” The petition continued with a list of 13 grievances against the board. They complained that the board’s stance had allowed students to threaten teachers “for opposing unlawful actions” and that “the image of the teacher [was] hurt by permitting insubordination in the classroom and condoning the apparent lack of concern for education by students.” Teachers were not asking to create special penalties for these students, a spokesperson from Roosevelt explained, they merely wanted the board to allow them to enforce existing rules and regulations regarding student absences.²⁶ The president of another school faculty club in East Los Angeles told the board that a student could now walk into class and say, “I was absent and you can’t do anything about it,” and the student would be correct.²⁷

Of course Los Angeles educators were not a monolithic group, and not all principals and teachers viewed the student and community demonstrations as direct challenges to their authority. Some teachers supported the school protests, by walking out with students, conducting sympathetic boycotts of their own, or formally supporting protesters’ demands. Others voiced their support for the student amnesty, even if they had not agreed with the protesters’ actions.²⁸

Often faculty responses to the walkouts and protests were shaped by race and ethnicity. In East Los Angeles, for example, many of the teachers who participated in or approved of the student blowouts were Mexican American. As one teacher told a newspaper reporter at the time, “We feel disturbed and ashamed that these kids are carrying out our fight. We should have been fighting for these things as teachers and as a community.”²⁹ Similarly, in South Central Los Angeles, when students walked out of Fremont High School to

demand the appointment of a black principal, they were joined by many black teachers (Mauler 1976, 129–38).

At times, however, educators' responses to school protests crossed racial lines. At both Jefferson and Fremont high schools, for example, majority-white faculties not only echoed students' demands for additional resources but also supported students' requests for the appointment of black administrators.³⁰ The reverse was also true; many Mexican American teachers (as well as many Mexican American students and parents) did not approve of the blowouts in East Los Angeles, and at Manual Arts in the fall of 1967, some black teachers had spoken out against the black community protesters and in support of the school principal.³¹

In general, however, teachers and principals in Los Angeles were frustrated that the board had not been more firm and punitive in responding to what they viewed as widespread disobedience and oppositional—if not criminal—behavior. Even educators in white suburban schools were often adamant in demanding that the board recast its policies to strengthen their disciplinary authority. For example, the faculty association of Bancroft Junior High School—a virtually all-white school in West Hollywood—complained to the board that although no demonstrations had occurred at their school, Bancroft teachers' ability to maintain order had nonetheless been undermined by the board's decisions: "Our classroom authority and achievement weakens," a representative wrote, "as your guidelines fall slack."³²

Nor did these complaints and concerns quickly die down. Throughout the following school year, teachers and administrators continued to call for firmer disciplinary rules and regulations and to demand the codification of their authority. In appealing to the board, Los Angeles educators found themselves in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, they wanted the board to adopt centralized discipline policies so that local educators felt supported and not burdened with the weight of making individual decisions each and every time they enacted discipline. On the other hand, they sought to affirm their local discretion through centralized rule making.

For example, LAASSA complained to the board that teachers and administrators were "completely unsure of how to deal with some specific problems" and believed that "each specific confrontation between the schools and the disruptive elements" was "a matter of individual policy." Yet, at the same time, LAASSA urged the board to strengthen school administrators' discretionary authority so that they did not have to turn to the board for policy decisions: "We do not want to come to you with . . . individual and specific problems. We feel perfectly capable of dealing with these problems if we have a general policy which has been established as a guideline and which will be adhered to."³³

The district did in fact have a systemwide discipline policy in place, but it

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lacked specificity—a characteristic of the policy that Los Angeles teachers and principals had once promoted but now found problematic. When the district’s first centralized discipline policy had been adopted a decade earlier, its primary function was to affirm that local educators had the authority to administer discipline under the doctrine of *in loco parentis* (Kafka 2003). Yet, with students and community members openly rejecting that authority, and with the board making decisions that seemed to legitimize protesters’ actions, Los Angeles educators wanted the board to develop a new policy that was both more specific and more punitive. They sought to govern students through rule of law rather than through parental prerogative, and they wanted the weight of the district behind them.

The board did not immediately respond to these complaints, other than to assure angered teachers and principals that it did not support student indiscipline. As the school year progressed, however, and school unrest continued, the board began to develop a firmer stance toward student protests and walkouts. When a large-scale school boycott erupted across South Central Los Angeles in the spring of 1969, the board took a hard line. After disrupting 16 predominantly black schools in the area, forcing the closure of two, and inspiring other walkouts and boycotts across the district, protesting students in South Central Los Angeles returned to classes five days later without obtaining any concessions from the board.³⁴ If the board had once elevated the legitimacy of protesters’ claims over those of teachers and principals, it was now reversing course and seemed to be responding directly to the demands of Los Angeles educators.

For example, almost immediately after the boycotts in South Central Los Angeles began, the board issued a statement asserting that “disorder and disruption” would “not be countenanced” and that the board would “seek the prosecution of those who violate the law.”³⁵ Similarly, after some principals sought to bar certain student groups from their schools, the board officially “reminded” site administrators that they had the right to ban or suspend any organization that had violated school regulations.³⁶ While the formal reminder was not a new policy, it signaled to principals that they had the support of the larger district if they chose to oust disruptive students and groups from their campuses. At least one principal soon acted on the board’s renewed policy; a chapter of the United Mexican American Students was banned at Roosevelt High School in mid-March after several of its members conducted a 40-minute sit-in in the principal’s office.³⁷ Perhaps most important, the board refused to negotiate with the protesters and denied the students’ request that it hold a meeting at a high school in South Central Los Angeles—a decision that had racial implications since the board had met with Mexican American families and students in East Los Angeles the year before.³⁸

Indeed, this same board had agreed (with the exception of one member)

to listen and respond to the dozens of complaints and demands issued by students and community groups involved in the blowouts and had only recently approved a measure intended to ensure the appointment of minority administrators to minority schools. Yet, its response to the protests in South Central Los Angeles—and in particular its response to acts of student disobedience—seemed new.

There were a number of reasons behind this apparent change. First, Los Angeles educators had not been alone in admonishing the board for its apparent leniency toward student protesters. A broad group of parents, businessmen, politicians, concerned citizens, and even students from all over the district and beyond had complained that the board's decisions had undermined teachers' disciplinary authority—and the authority of law and order in America. The state superintendent of public instruction had even rebuked the board for granting amnesty to student protesters, arguing that students who walked out of classes had broken the law and should have been disciplined accordingly.³⁹

Second, the board was responding to a shifting political climate. The school protests did not, after all, occur in a vacuum; they were but one of many political campaigns aimed at reforming or restructuring the Los Angeles City School District during this period, and the various permutations of these campaigns often shaped the board's actions. For example, the board did not want to appear to countenance (black) student violence as it worked to create some integrated school "complexes" in response to a desegregation lawsuit. Yet, it was willing to placate some of the protesters' demands—particularly those calling for increased local empowerment through the appointment of black administrators—as a form of appeasement more palatable to the white majority than the prospect of crosstown busing. In addition, in the context of several (at times competing) efforts to bring greater decentralization to the district, the board was particularly inclined to agree to limited actions that appeared to offer increased local control to alienated communities (LaNoue and Smith 1973; Orfield 1984; O'Shea 1975).

At the same time, however, "law and order" had risen to the top of voters' concerns nationally, and citizens' patience with student protest—from college campuses to political conventions—had long grown slim (Flamm 2005). Locally, city and state government was subject to rising white conservatism—"white backlash"—and the Board of Education in particular was under attack for its perceived leniency in handling student indiscipline and "arrant anarchy" in the schools (Sides 2003). Its two most liberal members—Jones and Richardson—were both up for reelection in the spring of 1969 and were in contest with a conservative slate promising to stop "the riots and violence" that the liberal-leaning board had supposedly allowed.⁴⁰

From an institutional perspective, however, the board's response to the

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school protests in the spring of 1969 was not a dramatic departure from its earlier actions. While the board was taking a harder line against the protesters, the policies it adopted served to further strengthen its role in regulating student discipline. Indeed, in issuing firm statements and directives sanctioning teachers and principals to take action against student protesters, the board was both affirming educators’ disciplinary authority and demonstrating that this authority was derived from the board itself. Educators’ ability to establish and enact discipline at their school sites was not framed in terms of their rights as “acting parents” but rather as members of the district bureaucracy.

Moreover, at the same time that the board was “reminding” educators of their authority to maintain discipline, it continued to increase the presence of police and security officers in the city’s schools, signaling a willingness to rely on noneducators to maintain discipline and order. This was a reliance that educators themselves largely supported. In a matter of years, the school security force in Los Angeles—personnel who were directly accountable to district-level supervisors rather than school-site administrators—increased from less than two dozen to over 100, and this number would triple by the mid-1970s.⁴¹ The board was thus simultaneously clamping down on student and community unrest and expanding its role in the maintenance and regulation of school discipline.

Conclusion

By the 1970s, the structure of school discipline in Los Angeles had changed. While many of the rules and regulations students were required to follow remained the same, much of the authority to establish and enforce those rules and regulations had shifted to the centralized district. In the course of several years, the Los Angeles City Board of Education had enacted policies that limited teachers’ and principals’ disciplinary discretion, framed school discipline in terms of district-level mandates, and greatly increased the role of security officers in the city’s schools. The board had responded to local pressures, balancing the demands of (mostly minority) students, parents, and community members against the demands of (mostly white) teachers, principals, and community members.

Of course the Board of Education was also influenced by the institutional and legal environment of the period. In 1971, for example, the board’s Personnel and Schools Committee cited the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent *Tinker* decision in recommending that all school dress and grooming codes in the district be abolished.⁴² Yet, it was the 1968 blowouts that had brought the issue to the policy table—not the court.

Not only was the centralization of school discipline in Los Angeles in the

late 1960s and early 1970s primarily the result of—and in response to—local efforts, it was also largely the outcome of a broader political struggle over the city's public schools. Indeed, the protesters who pushed the Los Angeles Board of Education to develop policies that limited teachers' and principals' control over school discipline did so in pursuit of greater equity and dignity for the district's poor minority youth; they targeted the organization of school discipline only to the degree that they viewed local school rules and disciplinary procedures as serving to perpetuate injustices and preserve inequities. At the same time, the teachers and principals who urged the board to expand the district's role in regulating school discipline did so in an effort to protect their authority at a time when it was widely contested. Los Angeles educators viewed their ability to enforce school discipline as central to their ability to maintain and promote social order—in their schools and classrooms and in society at large.

Yet, while these two groups battled one another through the centralized Board of Education, they also shared many interests and issued several common demands. Improved learning conditions for students often translated into improved working conditions for teachers, and the reverse was also true. At the same time that teachers at Manual Arts demanded increased school security to help maintain order in the school, for example, they issued many instructional requests to the board—including the hiring of more teachers, reducing the teacher-student ratio, and increasing classroom space. This pattern held true in East Los Angeles in 1968 and in South Central Los Angeles in 1969.

Despite these common interests, however, for the most part protesters and educators in Los Angeles went before the Board of Education as opponents rather than as allies. In fact teachers often presented their interests in direct opposition to those of students, families, and community members, and urged the board to take actions that would support school-site educators by punishing protesters. Racial politics heightened, and at times transcended, this tension between teachers' and students' interests, but teachers in white suburban schools also sought the creation of centralized policies that affirmed their authority over students and families.

In this sense, the struggle over disciplinary authority in Los Angeles was simultaneously a struggle over the shape and nature of teacher-student and teacher-family relationships. And while some teachers and protesters may have been unsure of the role the district should play in mediating those relationships, in bringing their demands and concerns to the Board of Education, and in asking it to intervene in discipline-related matters, both groups purposefully chose to negotiate their differences through the district.

These tensions between teachers and students, parents and community members, were not unique to Los Angeles. School districts around the country

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were encountering the same struggles over educational authority—in matters of curriculum and school governance as well as student discipline—and ultimately came to the same solution: reduced local discretion and increased centralization. Indeed, by 1975 over three-quarters of the nation’s school districts had systemwide discipline policies in place (Doob 1975). While court decisions and district leaders’ understandings of those decisions often played a role in the development of these policies, they were neither the sole nor most important factor in reshaping the organization of school discipline across the United States.⁴³

Today, teachers and the public remain ambivalent about the location of disciplinary authority. In a recent national survey, for example, 84 percent of middle and high school teachers and 70 percent of parents of middle and high school students supported the idea of giving school principals more authority “to handle discipline problems as they see fit,” while an even larger percentage of each group, 93 and 89 percent, respectively, expressed support for the establishment of “zero-tolerance” discipline policies (Public Agenda 2004, 4–5).⁴⁴ The discussion above helps make sense of the apparent contradiction in these findings: educators and families may like the notion of local authority, but distrust among teachers, students, families, and community members persists.

Ultimately, the shift in disciplinary authority away from school sites and teachers and toward the centralized bureaucracy of the district both was part of and helped to shape a larger movement toward greater centralization of educational authority in American public schooling. Discipline is, after all, a crucial aspect of education and a central component of teachers’ work. As educators, families, and community members turned to the district to intervene in matters of discipline, they also turned to other external agencies—including professional associations, state houses, and even the courts—to intervene in other realms of education that had traditionally been controlled at the school site. In doing so, they helped to reframe teacher-student and teacher-family relationships in increasingly bureaucratic terms, and to further shift educational authority beyond schools and classrooms.⁴⁵

Notes

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1. The two most prominent court decisions recognizing students’ civil rights in school were *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969), and *Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565 (1975).

2. Most scholarship recognizing the role of racial conflict in the development of centralized discipline policies tends to focus on more recent history (Casella 2001; Devine 1996). Noguera (1995) briefly mentions that the structure of school discipline today has its origins in educators' response to the civil and student rights movements of the 1960s, but focuses on school disciplinary practices in the 1990s. The current study provides a historical basis for claims that race and racial conflict have shaped school discipline, by looking closely at the process through which discipline was reorganized in one urban school district in the 1960s and '70s, and by noting that racial conflicts eventually effected changes in students' and teachers' concepts of discipline and disciplinary authority in white suburban areas as well.

3. This article draws on archival sources located at the Los Angeles Unified City School District Board of Education, as well as other primary and secondary sources from the period. I have not used oral histories for this study, primarily because my focus is on the process of change as it occurred rather than individuals' memories or rationales of events and actions decades later. See Fischer (1998) for a similar discussion on purposely not using oral histories to develop a historical narrative from this same time period.

4. See, e.g., Linda Bryant's September 25, 1965, testimony before the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots (1965a, 4:28–29).

5. Communication No. 1, Prepared by Office of the Deputy Superintendent of Business and Educational Services for Presentation to Committee of the Whole, September 2, 1965, Minutes, Regular Meeting Elementary, High School, and Junior College (hereafter School Board Minutes), Los Angeles Board of Education Subject Files: Juvenile Delinquency, binder 537, locker 27. On November 3, 1965, Jack P. Crowther, superintendent of the Los Angeles City School District, testified before the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots (1965a, 6:35) that teachers in South Central Los Angeles were having more trouble with discipline since the violence and were "being subjected to even bodily pressures . . . in the class and in the halls." There is no real evidence to corroborate this statement, and the superintendent went off the record in explaining the details to the commission. Yet, even if students had not become more unruly in South Central Los Angeles after the uprising, Crowther's testimony reveals what was believed to be true, which informed public perceptions and policy decisions regarding school discipline and violence in the area.

6. Letter from the Honorable Bill Greene sent to the Los Angeles Board of Education, September 28, 1967 (Mauler 1976, 92–93).

7. The lawsuit was filed by State Assemblyman Bill Greene and was joined by Congressmen Augustus Hawkins and Charles Wilson, Senators Mervyn Dymally and James Wedworth, Assemblyman Charles Warren, Assembly Speaker Jess Unruh, and Assemblywoman Yvonne Brathwaite (Mauler 1976). See also "NAACP-King, Split over Manual Arts Picketing," *Herald-Dispatch*, October 5, 1967, 1, 8; "Fires Set Manual Arts Hi—Faculty-Students in Danger: Faculty and Students Defend Principal Denahy," *Herald-Dispatch*, September 14, 1967, 1, 8.

8. "The Situation at Manual Arts High School," unsigned petition presented to the Board of Education (quoted in Mauler 1976, 287).

9. Presentation to the Los Angeles Board of Education by the President of the Senior High School Principals of Los Angeles, September 14, 1967 (Mauler 1976, 79).

10. "Youth Go on Rampage at Manual Arts High," *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1967, sec. 1:3, 24.

11. "Manual War Won, Denahy Goes—Pacoima Riot Set," *Herald-Dispatch*, October 26, 1967, 1, 8.

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12. “High School Demonstration Trials End: Retrials Sought,” *Open Forum*, March 1968, 1, 8.
13. “‘Brown Power’ Unity Seen Behind School Disorders,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1968, C1; “Education Board Halts Meeting in Climax to School Disorders,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1968, 1, 3.
14. Information regarding student and community demands during the blowouts was drawn from the following sources: “Demands Made by East Side High School Students Listed,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1968, A1, C4, C5; Memo to Members of the Board of Education from Jack Crowther, March 26, 1968, Los Angeles Board of Education Subject Files: Student Unrest, binder 683, locker 4 (hereafter SUSEF); School Board Minutes, April 4, 1968, April 8, 1968, June 24, 1968, July 8, 1968, November 25, 1968.
15. “Education Board Halts Meeting in Climax to School Disorders,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 8, 1968, 1, 3.
16. “Board of Education Endorsement,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1965, A4; “Jones’ Victory Keeps Liberal Bloc in Control,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1965, 3, 33; “The Importance of Being Nava,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1967, 34.
17. Speaking on *Chicano!* (1996).
18. “Demands Made by East Side High School Students Listed,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1968, A1. The board had lost two bond issues in 1966, for the first time in over a decade.
19. School Board Minutes, March 28, 1968; “School Board Yields to Some Student Points in Boycotts,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1968, 1, 3.
20. “Mrs. Hardy Delivers Blast at Suburbia,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1968, SF1, 8.
21. School Board Minutes, April 4, 1968, July 8, 1968.
22. Los Angeles Public Schools, *Annual Reports of the Board of Education*, vol. 7 (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Public Schools, 1905–6), 90, Los Angeles Board of Education Subject Files: Corporal Punishment, binder 703, locker 6, and binder 948, locker 25 (hereafter CPSF); “Board Sanctions Policy: Gompers’ Mothers Protest,” *California Eagle*, January 19, 1956, 1; letter from Ellis Jarvis (assistant superintendent) to Irene Turman, CPSF, November 29, 1954; Paul Burke, speaking at Committee of the Whole meeting on April 23, 1959, and entered into record at the regular school board meeting April 27, 1959, School Board Minutes, April 27, 1959.
23. Informal notes from the Personnel and Schools Committee Meeting, January 26, 1970, “Standing Committees, 1961–1969,” microfilm, Los Angeles City School District Board of Education (see also notes from March 9, 1970, and February 8, 1971); “School Dress Codes Abolished by Board,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 1971, 1, 16.
24. “School Board Hears Repetition of Demands at Lincoln Meeting,” *El Sereno Star*, March 28, 1968, 1, 16.
25. School Board Minutes, February 3 and 6, 1969.
26. Letter to the Board of Education of the Los Angeles City Schools and Superintendent Crowther, March 28, 1968, SUSEF, 682.
27. Quoted in “Angry Teachers Accuse Board of Laxity on Boycott,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1968, 1, 30.
28. Letters sent to the Los Angeles Board of Education from teachers at Roosevelt High School, dated March 13, 1968, and March 15, 1968, SUSEF, 682. Letter from teachers at Lincoln High School sent to the Board of Education March 17, 1968, printed in *Inside Eastside*, April 26–May 9, 1968, 2.

29. Quoted in "School Board Yields to Some Student Points in Boycotts," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1968, 1, 3.
30. "Recommendations from Jefferson Faculty," attached to interoffice correspondence to school district personnel from Everett Chaffee, deputy superintendent of instruction, entitled "Demands and Requests Presented by Various Groups in Connection with Student Walkout," March 13, 1968, SUSF, 682.
31. "School Board Hears Repetition of Demands at Lincoln Meeting," *El Sereno Star*, March 28, 1968, 1, 16; "Roots of Trouble Are Deeply Embedded in Community, Manual Arts High Typifies Problems in Negro Schools," *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1967, pt. 2:1, 6.
32. Letter to Reverend James Edward Jones [president of the Board of Education] from the Hubert Howe Bancroft Junior High School Faculty Association, May 3, 1968, SUSF, 683.
33. Presentation to the Board of Education by Frank B. Snyder, executive secretary, LAASSA, September 25, 1968, SUSF, 683.
34. "Negro Militant Strike Closes 2 L.A. Schools, Disrupts 16," *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1969, 1, 16. Most of the discussion of this event is drawn from "All Schools in Black Community Open as Carver Classes Resume," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1969, 1, 25; "Attendance Climbs as School Tensions Ease," *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1969, pt. 2:1, 10; "Black Alliance and School Aide Differ on Boycott Support," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1969, 3, 26; "Confrontation: Black Parents—Black Militants," *Herald-Dispatch*, March 29, 1969, 1, 9; "Disorder Spreads: Schools Strife," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 1969, 1, 3; "Disruptions Fail to Close Schools," *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1969, 1, 3, 33; "Thomas Bradley Victim of Planned School Riot," *Herald-Dispatch*, March 22, 1969, 1, 7. See also Mauller (1976), 109–45.
35. Memorandum from the Los Angeles City School District's Public Information Office to all schools and offices, March 11, 1969, SUSF, 684.
36. "City Schools Adopt 'Get Tough' Policy against Disruptions," Los Angeles City Schools Public Information Office, March 19, 1969, SUSF, 684. The organizations that were mentioned as being subject to such action, although they were not named specifically in the final motion, were Students for Democratic Society, Black Students Union, UMAS, and Third World Liberation Front. School Board Minutes, March 13, 1969; Statement by J. C. Chambers, Board of Education Member, March 13, 1969, SUSF, 684.
37. "Mexican-American Students Unit Banned at Roosevelt High," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1969, 3; memo to Roosevelt High School teachers from Dr. Dyer (school principal) and the administrative staff, reproduced in *Inside Eastside*, March 24–April 6, 1969, 6.
38. "All Schools in Black Community Open as Carver Classes Resume," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1969, 1, 25. Assemblyman Bill Greene had critiqued the board for refusing to hold a meeting at Fremont High School the previous December, when he noted that the board had held a meeting in East Los Angeles the previous spring to hear from the Mexican American community. School Board Minutes, December 19, 1968.
39. Letters located in SUSF, 682. Max Rafferty, quoted in "Rafferty Calls on State Board to Punish Students in Walkouts," *Los Angeles Times*, March 15, 1968, 3.
40. An editorial in the *Herald-Examiner*, May 22, 1969, cited in Mazzoni (1971); "Conservatives and Liberals in Battle for School Board," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1969, 1.
41. See testimony of Richard Green, in California Legislature (1977), 48.
42. Similarly, many years later, following a U.S. Supreme Court decision ruling

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corporal punishment permissible, the board agreed in the context of negotiating a contract with the teachers’ union to reinstate the practice in Los Angeles city schools. School Board Minutes, October 9, 1978.

43. Even in instances in which the courts were directly involved in the centralization of school discipline, local actors often played instrumental roles as well. In Detroit, e.g., a federal judge ordered the implementation of a districtwide discipline code in the context of a desegregation case, but he did so at the urging of local teachers, who used the courts to successfully push through a policy that the district administration and many local political leaders opposed (*Bradley v. Milliken*, 402 F. Supp. 1096 [E.D. Mich., S.D., 1975]; Kafka 2004; Mirel 1993). Several years later in Louisville, Kentucky, community activists and local educators came to a consensus around a new centralized discipline policy in the context of metropolitan desegregation, although some community groups later sought further protections for black students through the courts (Kafka 2004; Russell 1985).

44. These reported percentages combine respondents who indicated “strong support” with those who indicated that they “somewhat” supported or agreed with a statement. In addition, 82 percent of teachers and 78 percent of parents supported limiting lawsuits regarding school disciplinary decisions.

45. For example, minority families and their advocates pursued curricular reforms, greater equity in funding and access to resources, and changes in school governance through lawsuits and state and city legislation. Meanwhile educators increasingly sought greater institutional authority by creating curricular standards through associations like the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and by creating professional hierarchies through innovations such as national board certification.

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