

# ***WALKOUT***

Jere Mendelsohn, M.Ed.  
jsmendelsohn@charter.net

## **SECTION ONE: SYNOPSIS OF PLOT**

*WALKOUT* is the true story of a young, charismatic Mexican-American high school teacher, Sal Castro, who becomes the mentor for a group of high school students in East Los Angeles when they decide to stage a peaceful walkout against the injustices of the public school system. In 1967, Latino students at East LA High schools were being denied such privileges as using the bathroom facility during lunchtime or speaking Spanish in the classroom. In addition, many Latino youth were programmed into non-college prep courses and were not encouraged or counseled to attend college. Tired of being mistreated as second-class citizens in their own schools, the high school students, along with a group of politicized college students, decide to take their future into their own hands. Castro's role is to inspire his students to believe in their own potential and educates them about the proud history of their heritage.

The main protagonist is Paula Crisostomo, a 17-year-old college-bound senior, who is one of the best and brightest students in Castro's class. Paula, along with classmates Yoli and Bobby Verdugo, undergoes a political transformation, which results in her becoming an instrumental leader of the infamous East LA walkouts. With the newfound inspiration of "Chicano power," Paula and the other student leaders begin their fight to improve the quality of their education. The students decide to take drastic measures after their demands are ultimately ignored by the school administration and the LA school board. A student walkout strike in all five Eastside high schools is organized. After Sal Castro warns school authorities about the seriousness of the students' demands and is ignored, he decides to join the students in their planning. His goal is a safe walkout where no students are harmed. The walkouts become a highly publicized cause and last for several days, including a day marked by extreme violence. Outraged by the violence, community leaders and parents come to the aid of their children, who have led the way in the fight for justice.

United at last, Sal, the high school students, their parents and members of the community and the Brown Berets occupy the school board meeting room until the board finally grants a hearing to review the demands of the students. Sal and the Brown Berets are later arrested for conspiring to incite the walkouts and disrupt school, which is a felony. Paula organizes a writing campaign on their behalf. They are later freed on bail and return to the community as heroes in the struggle for justice. Four years later, the case against the East LA 13 is thrown out of court on appeal. With the help of Sal, Paula, the Brown Berets and all of the other courageous students, the doors for higher education are opened for all Chicanos in Los Angeles.

## **SECTION TWO: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

### **General Historical Context**

Generally encompassing the land east of the Los Angeles River, "East Los Angeles" (East LA) is a populous area that for many years has been anchored by communities such as Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights. Home to the Gabrielino Indians for more than two thousand years, the area fell into the hands of the Spanish in the late eighteenth century, with Mexican and American ranchers taking control of the land for much of the nineteenth century. Farmers eventually used portions to grow vegetables and fruit and raise dairy cattle, but agriculture took up only temporary residence, ultimately pushed aside as urban society rapidly expanded.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, East Los Angeles became a popular immigrant destination. In the early 1900s, Russians, Jews, Japanese, and Mexicans all had a significant presence in the area. Living east of the river and working in nearby factories, or traveling by electric rail into downtown Los Angeles, immigrants and their children helped fuel the prosperity of the growing metropolis. By the onset of World War II, East Los Angeles was a nearly exclusively Latino community, soon reinforced by Mexican workers who arrived to man the machines in the area's burgeoning war industries. Although the face of the city of Los Angeles and its surrounding communities has changed considerably, East Los Angeles has maintained this basic character throughout the last sixty years. As a result of its history as a long-standing Mexican American community, the area of East Los Angeles continues to be studied and documented by scholars from around the world.

### **Ethnic Conflict**

East LA has a long history of immigrant settlement, and with it, the conflicts that often accompany shifting demographics and a changing economy. For centuries Native Americans made their homes near the Los Angeles River. The late 1700s ushered in Spanish explorers and missionaries who often enslaved or killed those indigenous people who resisted conversion to Christianity. Ultimately, ranchers and, later, farmers replaced the soldiers and missionaries as the colonial economy grew. With the blossoming of a local rail system and a maturing economy, tract housing began edging out the farmers early in the twentieth century. In particular, many recent immigrants settled in East Los Angeles. Russians fleeing war and religious persecution joined Japanese, Mexicans, Italians, and Poles in Boyle Heights. By the mid 1920s, moreover, one third of the 65,000 Jews living in Los Angeles lived in Boyle Heights. Eventually, the European immigrants moved on to suburbs further away. However, the Mexican community continued to expand. In the 1920s, increased immigration spurred by employment opportunities, the encroachment of industry and commerce on downtown Los Angeles neighborhoods inhabited by earlier immigrants, and the accessibility of electrified commuter rail systems to carry workers to their jobs led to a swelling of the Mexican population of East Los Angeles. By 1930, some 30,000 residents of the community of Belvedere alone were of Mexican descent. Over time, the individual communities on the east side of the river melded into a large Mexican-American community. World War II

brought turmoil and tensions with those outside of the community, and in the 1950s and 1960s, massive freeways began to criss-cross the area, bringing with them problems of division and pollution. Community contours were further changed as neighboring cities, including Monterey Park, Commerce, and Los Angeles, annexed pieces of East Los Angeles. Attempts by residents of East Los Angeles to incorporate as an independent city were unsuccessful. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the uneasy co-habitation of the Latinos of East Los Angeles with their frequently discriminatory neighbors helped ignite the activism of the Chicano movement. The Chicano movement was spawned and in part by long-simmering ethnic tensions within the city, manifested by the "Zoot Suit" riots in the early 1940s, the building of the Southern Pacific Railway through the heart of many Latino barrios, and the annexation of Chavez Ravine (a long-standing barrio) to build Dodger Stadium. The Chicano movement, also known as "Brown Power" and "The Movimiento," was also inspired by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, wherein African-American citizens fought for the repeal of Jim Crow laws and full inclusion into society.

### **The Chicano Movement**

In the mid 1960s, with blacks demanding their rights, the war in Vietnam heating up, and President Lyndon Johnson pressing ahead with his War on Poverty, Mexican Americans in the United States began to think more about their own social, economic, and political oppression. The Chicano movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s stressed the unique identity of Mexican Americans and encouraged cultural self-awareness and expression. Political and social activism to correct injustices and defeat discrimination were a natural outgrowth of that awareness and a major feature of the movement. Key issues involved inadequate education, police brutality and the high rate of Chicano incarceration, inadequate services, political gerrymandering and lack of political representation, and the high number of Chicanos dying in the war in Vietnam. The Chicano movement took up many of the demands seen in the Black civil rights movement, such as self-determination and ethnic pride. East Los Angeles, because of its ethnic composition, became the center for Chicano art, literature, expression, and intellectual activity.

### **The Chicano Walkouts**

In the late 1960s, as was happening with teens across the country, Mexican American teens were breaking out of accepted roles and trying to take charge of their education and futures. Many took on the label of "Chicano" or "Chicana" in spite of the fears and concerns of parents and other adults that they were being too radical or even communist. Over the course of several months, students at Lincoln High School became politicized and increasingly aware of the inadequacies in educational funding, programs, Chicano and Mexican culture in the curriculum, and of Chicanos on the faculties of the East Los Angeles high schools. They began organizing themselves and educating their peers in the surrounding schools. Feeling the Board of Education was not listening, these students organized a walkout or "blowout" that gained momentum. One day in early March 1968, hundreds of East Los Angeles high school students walked out of their classes.

Over the course of the next several days, hundreds more students from fifteen different schools followed suit. Eventually, police arrested thirteen people on conspiracy charges—though nothing ever came of these. At the heart of the student protests were concerns and frustrations regarding educational conditions in public schools attended almost exclusively by Chicanos where dropout rates were astronomical and graduates who went on to college were rare. The students resented the poor physical condition of their schools and the fact that most of their teachers pushed students towards shop courses rather than towards college. They wanted bilingual education, more Chicano teachers and administrators, and courses relevant to their Mexican heritage, not to mention improved cafeteria food and open restrooms! In the end, city education officials did little to meet the student demands, and some twenty years later those who participated, while showing evidence that the demonstrations had significantly impacted their own lives, were still lamenting the problems plaguing the schools of East Los Angeles. East LA today remains home to thousands of working families. However, while many conditions in the schools have improved over time, parts of East LA continue to be challenged by high rates of crime, poverty, and multi-generational gang activity.

### **SECTION THREE: EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS**

Information and student activities related to this film are based on the following national educational standards from Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (MCREL). Additional information on MCREL can be found at <http://www.mcrel.org/>

#### **Behavioral Studies**

**Topics:** 3, 8, 9, 11, 19, 20, 23, 24, 29, 33, 34, 35, 39

**Standard 1.** Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior

**Standard 2.** Understands various meanings of social group, general implications of group membership, and different ways that groups function

**Standard 4.** Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions

#### **Civics**

**Topics:** 13, 19, 34, 35, 60, 61, 70, 74

**Standard 9.** Understands the importance of Americans sharing and supporting certain values, beliefs, and principles of American constitutional democracy

**Standard 11.** Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society

**Standard 13.** Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity

**Standard 14:** Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life

**Standard 18.** Understands the role and importance of law in the American constitutional system and issues regarding the judicial protection of individual rights

### **Geography**

**Standard 3.** Uses map grids (e.g., latitude and longitude or alphanumeric system) to plot absolute location

**Standard 6.** Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions

**Standard 7.** Knows the characteristics and purposes of geographic databases (e.g., databases containing census data, land-use data, topographic information)

### **Historical Understanding**

**Topics:** 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14

**Standard 1.** Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns

**Standard 2.** Understands the historical perspective

### **Language Arts**

**Topics:** 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 16, 23, 24, 28, 32, 37

**Standard 1.** Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

**Standard 4.** Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

**Standard 8:** Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

**Standard 9:** Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

### **Life Skills/ Working With Others**

**Topics:** 1, 3, 4, 8, 10

**Standard 5.** Demonstrates leadership skills.

### **U.S. History**

**Topics:** 133, 134, 135, 136

**Standard 29.** Understands the struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

## SECTION FOUR: PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

### Vocabulary and Key Terminology

**Directions:** Students should research the definitions of the following terms and be familiar with their relevance before watching the film. (Definitions are provided if time is limited and the instructor wishes to prepare students for a critical viewing of *Walkout* without the research component).

- 1) **ADA (average daily attendance):** The amount of money per student paid by the state to the school each day for attendance in homeroom. Important in maintaining a school's budget.
- 2) **barrio:** Spanish term meaning "neighborhood," with the added deep feelings of great territorial and sentimental loyalty.
- 3) **Chicano/Chicana:** Political/sociological term used by Mexican-Americans born in the United States to define themselves. Often preferred to the generic term "Hispanic," which was initially used by the US Census Bureau during the Nixon Administration.
- 4) **corporal punishment:** physical punishment meted out to students in the form of paddling or spanking.
- 5) **ethnicity:** One's culture as manifested by such markers as language, dress, food, rituals, customs, etc. Ethnicity is *taught and learned*, as opposed to race, which consists of certain physical characteristics.
- 5) **Latino:** Political/sociological term often used in place of Hispanic by people in the Western Hemisphere who share a common culture that is a blend of indigenous and European cultures and use the Spanish language as a primary means of communication.
- 6) **mediocre:** Moderate to inferior in quality; ordinary
- 7) **nonviolent/passive resistance:** Peaceful resistance to a government or other authority by fasting or refusing to cooperate by persons seeking change; resisting by passive, rather than violent means
- 8) **race:** A large body of persons who may be thought of as a unit because of common characteristics. In the traditional biological and anthropological systems of classification race refers to a group of persons who share such genetically transmitted traits as skin color, hair texture, and eye shape or color; term is sometimes in dispute among modern biologists and anthropologists. Some feel that the term has no biological validity; others use it to specify only a partially isolated reproductive population whose members share a considerable degree of genetic similarity.

**8) Raza/ La Raza:** Literally “The Race”; Spanish term for Mexicans or Mexican Americans considered as a group, sometimes extending to all Spanish-speaking people of the Americas; used to connote pride in one’s culture.

**9) revolution:** A radical and pervasive change in society and the social structure, especially one made suddenly and often accompanied by violence; a radical shift in thought or procedure.

**10) tawdry:** Gaudy; showy and cheap

### **Geographical/Sociological Research Question**

**Using an atlas, map, or online resource, locate the following information about the city of Los Angeles:**

- 1) Latitude and longitude coordinates
- 2) Important landmarks and bodies of water
- 3) Surrounding states
- 4) General yearly climate
- 5) Population demographics, especially ethnicity and language

### **Anticipatory Activities: Journal/Discussion Questions**

**Directions:** Use the following generalized questions to get students thinking about specific issues and themes *before or during* the viewing of the film. They may be used daily for journal writing topics, or all at once (*they are also included in a reproducible, worksheet form on the next page*).

1. Do you identify with a particular ethnic, racial, social and/or religious group or groups? If so, which one(s)? If not, why not?
2. Have you had the opportunity to study the history and/or contributions of your particular group(s)? If so, where have you learned about them? If not, is it due to lack of interest or lack of information?
3. Are there any outstanding or notable historical or political members of your group(s)? If so, identify who they are and briefly describe what each did.
4. Are graduating from high school and attending college important to you? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. From whom do you receive the most encouragement to succeed in school: parents, teachers, friends, the community, other relatives? (You may use more than one example). Briefly explain how and why each supports you.
6. On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being the worst and 10 being the best), how would you rate your school academically and socially? Briefly explain your answers.

7. Have you personally experienced any forms of prejudice (racism, sexism, age, height, weight, etc.) at school? If so, describe how you dealt with it. If not, are you aware of any?
8. Have you personally witnessed other students at school expressing or demonstrating prejudice towards another student or group of students? If so, briefly describe the situation?
9. Do you feel that your school has any inequalities that need to be addressed by the students? If so, identify them and briefly explain why.
10. Do you consider yourself more of a leader or follower at your school? Describe and give a specific example.
11. Give an historical example (or examples) of nonviolent or passive resistance. In your opinion, is it more effective than using violence to initiate social change? Briefly explain why or why not.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ PERIOD: \_\_\_\_\_

## ***WALKOUT***

### **Short-Answer Study Questions**

**Directions:** On your own paper, answer the following questions in preparation for watching the film *Walkout*. Be as specific as you can! Use blue or black ink, or word process your answers, and observe the standards for written English.

1. Do you identify with a particular ethnic, racial, social and/or religious group or groups? If so, which one(s)? If not, why not?
2. Have you had the opportunity to study the history and/or contributions of your particular group(s)? If so, where have you learned about them? If not, is it due to lack of interest or lack of information?
3. Are there any outstanding or notable historical or political members of your group(s)? If so, identify who they are and briefly describe what each did.
4. Are graduating from high school and attending college important to you? If so, why? If not, why not?
5. From whom do you receive the most encouragement to succeed in school: parents, teachers, friends, the community, other relatives? (You may use more than one example). Briefly explain how and why each supports you.
6. On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being the worst and 10 being the best), how would you rate your school academically and socially? Briefly explain your answers.
7. Have you personally experienced any forms of prejudice (racism, sexism, age, height, weight, etc.) at school? If so, describe how you dealt with it. If not, are you aware of any?
8. Have you personally witnessed other students at school expressing or demonstrating prejudice towards another student or group of students? If so, briefly describe the situation?
9. Do you feel that your school has any inequalities that need to be addressed by the students? If so, identify them and briefly explain why.
10. Do you consider yourself more of a leader or follower at your school? Describe and give a specific example.
11. Give an historical example (or examples) of nonviolent or passive resistance. In your opinion, is it more effective than using violence to initiate social change? Briefly explain why or why not.

## **SECTION FIVE: VIEWING THE FILM**

## **SECTION SIX: POST-VIEWING AND ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES**

### **Web Links**

The following Internet links will help students broaden their understanding of the history and impact of the film's events before, during, and after their viewing of *Walkout*.

### **History and Demographics of East LA**

**<http://www.colapublib.org/history/eastla/>**

This website, sponsored by the Los Angeles County Library, provides information on Native Americans who lived in the East LA area in prehistoric times, local missions, the early history of the community, as well as other historical topics. It also contains images of historic community photographs and other documents, and links and citations to additional community history resources.

**<http://www.pbs.org/americanfamily/eastla.html>**

This website is home to the PBS show "American Family," which is set in East LA. It contains an abundance of narrative and pictorial information about the social and political history of the region, plus some great interactive cultural maps and tours/

**<http://www.city-data.com/city/East-Los-Angeles-California.html>**

This website contains a wealth of demographic and economic data about current-day East Los Angeles and links to other relevant sites for student research.

**<http://www.hometownlocator.com/City/East-Los-Angeles-California.cfm>**

This website contains additional demographic and economic data about current-day East Los Angeles and links to other relevant sites for student research. A map also shows the relative size of the Los Angeles county area for comparison with students' geographical location.

**<http://www.panam.edu/orgs/MEChA/nat.html>**

The homepage of MEChA, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, which is a school and university based organization organized by Chicano/Chicana students after the 70s political protests. A direct descendent of the Brown Power movement, MEChA is a valuable resource in understanding the cultural identity of Mexican Americans.

### **Latino Arts and Culture**

**<http://www.lamurals.org/>**

L.A. is often singled out as the Mural Capital of the World because of the number, variety and quality of murals here. Not to mention the Southern California weather, which lets

muralists create pretty much year round. During the 60s and 70s, young Latino artists began to look at the early-century Mexican mural movement. Today upwards of a thousand murals have been produced in L.A., with new ones appearing on a regular basis.

**<http://www.plazadelaraza.org/Redone/Plaza.html>**

The Plaza de la Raza (“The Plaza of The Race”) is the pre-eminent Chicano arts center in Los Angeles. Active in both the schools and the community, the mission of the Plaza is to bridge the “geographic, social, artistic, and cultural boundaries of Los Angeles and beyond.” A great resource for students who live in a relatively homogeneous setting.

### **Nonviolent Resistance**

**<http://www.gandhiinstitute.org/>**

The MK Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence carries on the work of the famed leader of resistance against the British and liberator of India. Explains the history and principles of nonviolent resistance and contains articles on current world events.

**<http://www.thekingcenter.org/>**

The Martin Luther King Center website has an abundance of information on the historical importance of nonviolent resistance in the Civil Rights movement, and offers students a way to involve themselves locally in just a matter of seconds by filling out a simple form.