

States of the Union

TALES OUT OF SCHOOLS IN COLORADO

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

UNTIL a few years ago Alyse Dominguez, a quiet-spoken housewife who lives in the little town of Del Norte, Colorado, paid no special attention to the local school system that was daily shaping the lives of her three children. She had attended the same system herself for 12 years while she was growing up in Del Norte.

"I did wonder about some things," she now recalls. "Like why the books my children brought home were so old and worn, and why so many Chicano kids got suspended for breaking rules, while the Anglo kids never seemed to get punished, and also why there were only two Chicano teachers out of 48 in the whole district, even though half the students had Spanish surnames. But I never did anything. You see, my friends and I were raised to think the school knew best."

Then, as Mrs. Dominguez puts it, "Bill and Gil came along"—and suddenly it was no longer self-evident that the school system knew best. "Those two men educated us about the law," she remembers. "They took us to school board meetings and encouraged us to speak up. For the first time we

realized that we had something to say."

"Bill and Gil" are William Rosser and Gilberto Cisneros, the young, energetic codirectors of the Chicano Education Project (CEP), an organization they started on a hunch and a shoestring in 1973. The project has grown rapidly and generated much light and heat throughout rural Colorado, nowadays it is both an inspiration to its friends and an outrage to its foes. Not least among the latter's resentments has been the CEP's ability to attract financial support from outside the state. The program's annual budget now hovers around a half-million dollars, and its current funding roster includes six-figure grants from the Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations, a threesome Cisneros and Rosser refer to reverently as "the holy trinity."

The long-range purpose of these dollars and efforts has been to assure equitable treatment of Chicano students at the hands of local public school systems, many of which have for generations practiced a brand of discrimination at once so complete and complacent that residents on both sides of the tracks have tended to close

their eyes to the double standard of education that pervades their communities. The double standard not only distinguishes between Anglos and Chicanos, it also sifts the affluent from the poor, in the distribution of state funds for education, it sorts out rural schools from metropolitan schools, with the cities and suburbs getting by far the larger share of dollars.

Whatever their mode, these inequities have caused widespread educational misery among the 83,000 Spanish-speaking children in Colorado's public school (about 15 per cent of the total statewide enrollment). Reliable statistics are hard to come by—in itself a sign that something may be amiss—but state education officials concede that Chicano students generally score lower on achievement tests, repeat grades more often and drop out sooner and in greater numbers than do their Anglo classmates.

State-compiled figures on dropouts among Chicano high school students put the total at approximately 15 per cent, double the comparable rate for Anglos. But those figures do not tell the whole unhappy story. The discontented student, who flees his or her school by moving in with relatives living in another school district, for instance, is labelled merely a "transfer," in Chicano parlance, however, many such transfers are actually "pushouts"—that is, students who have been made to feel so wretched in school that flight becomes irresistible. Some tabulations made by the CEP and its local allies in Del Norte, Montrose and elsewhere suggest that the pushout rate for Chicano students from junior high school on is now approaching the 75 per cent mark.

Thoreau observed that "it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things." Why are so many Chicano teenagers rendered so unwise and so desperate? Apparently the reason is that the schools' assaults on the children's sense of selfhood are legion, and their onset often occurs with the very first step a Chicano child takes inside his first classroom. Because he is likely to have a "language problem"

—he may speak Spanish more fluently than he speaks English—he is frequently consigned to a “Special Education” class, there perhaps to languish for the remainder of his elementary school career. In too many schools these special classes are mere dumping grounds for Chicano children suffering from a form of culture shock as they struggle in an ambience that is peculiarly Anglo. Their instant segregation becomes an official certification of their presumed academic inferiority, and the judgment often turns out to be self-fulfilling. As a Chicano sixth-grader remarked to his mother recently, “The teacher, she makes me feel dumb.”

Teachers can be exasperatingly resourceful in finding ways to remind Chicano children—especially those from poverty-stricken families—that their souls, their brains and even their bodies do not meet school standards. A few examples, noted by this writer while traveling through CEP-land, may help clarify what many Chicano schoolchildren are up against.

Item: A teacher stands at the classroom door each morning and sprays entering Chicano children with perfume—“because they smell,” she explains to a visitor.

Item: A girl in the first grade is made to stand in a corner for saying something in Spanish to the teacher. What she said was, “I don’t understand.”

Item. Little Federico is told that from now on in school he will be called “Fred,” because “it’s more American.”

Item. The assignment in class is to draw a picture, but Jacinta tells her teacher she has no crayons. “If your father got off Welfare and went to work,” says the teacher, “you’d have crayons.”

Such small affronts can eventually add up to large humiliations. It doesn’t take long for the Spanish-speaking child to get the message, and then to internalize it. Whatever else these schools may teach, the lesson they frequently drive home to the Chicano student is one of predetermined self-disgrace.

ACCORDINGLY, in some 20 Colorado towns with mixed Anglo-Chicano populations, the CEP staff has been prodding Chicano parents to speak out rather than give in. Depending upon the occasion, project workers have shown parents how to organize committees and mount protests, lent them the courage to confront school bureaucracies, joined them in various efforts at litigation, taught them to monitor key school programs, encouraged them to defend their children’s civil rights, cheered



them up when they are sad and calmed them down when they are mad, and, perhaps most important, initiated them into the mysteries of school budgets, state codes, the electoral process, and other arcane matters that bear directly on their children’s welfare.

The CEP’s headquarters are in a suburb near Denver, but the organization’s heart is in the hinterlands, in villages like Del Norte, where the educational drama unfolds day by day, with attendant joys and heartaches. Alyse Dominguez’ story, to which we now return, typifies that ongoing drama.

After several visits to Del Norte by Cisneros and Rosser, the Chicano parents there began to gain confidence in

their ability to win friends and influence people, and it wasn’t long before their new-found poise began to pay off politically. First, Mrs. Dominguez and some of her friends won control of a joint parent-teacher committee that was supposed to supervise the school system’s new, state-mandated bilingual-bicultural program. Then, after a painfully strident campaign, they engineered the electoral recall of the school board president, an Anglo who for years had been dismissing Chicano complaints and resisting their pleas for reform. Finally, in the spring of 1977, the Spanish-speaking community succeeded in getting Mrs. Dominguez elected to the school board, the first Chicano in Del Norte’s history to serve in that capacity (Her father had run for the same office 10 years before—and had lost by one vote!).

In snail-like response to these triumphs, the Del Norte schools appear to be inching toward a more sensible position vis-à-vis their Chicano constituency. The two Spanish-speaking teachers whom Mrs. Dominguez silently counted and deplored in 1974 have grown to six in 1979, Chicano parents these days regularly attend school board meetings, and time is routinely set aside for them to be heard, a Chicano principal—another “first”—now reigns over the high school, and, thanks mainly to Alyse Dominguez’ persistence, a newly drafted school disciplinary and dress code makes it less likely that Chicano students will be punished for wearing their hair long, or suspended for committing minor infractions.

It would be pleasant, in summing up, to report that both ethnic factions in Del Norte have lived happily ever after. Alas, the level of conflict there seems to keep escalating, and there is no rest for the righteous. “If I was a man, they’d probably punch me out,” says Mrs. Dominguez of her fellow board members. “I come home from those meetings with my stomach in knots. I scream at my kids—but I think they understand. I tell them I’m doing all this not because I love them less, but because I love them more.”