



# Mothers United: An Immigrant Struggle for Socially Just Education

*Andrea Dyrness*

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In urban American school systems, the children of recent immigrants and low-income parents of color disproportionately suffer from overcrowded classrooms, lack of access to educational resources, and underqualified teachers. The challenges posed by these problems demand creative solutions that must often begin with parental intervention. But how can parents without college educations, American citizenship, English literacy skills, or economic stability organize to initiate change on behalf of their children and their community?

In *Mothers United*, Andrea Dyrness chronicles the experiences of five Latina immigrant mothers in Oakland, California—one of the most troubled urban school districts in the country—as they become informed and engaged advocates for their children’s education. These women, who called themselves “Madres Unidas” (“Mothers United”), joined a neighborhood group of teachers and parents to plan a new, small, and autonomous neighborhood-based school to replace the overcrowded Whitman School. Collaborating with the author, among others, to conduct interviews and focus groups with teachers, parents, and students, these mothers moved from isolation and marginality to take on unfamiliar roles as researchers and community activists while facing resistance from within the local school district.

*Mothers United* illuminates the mothers’ journey to create their own space—centered around the kitchen table—that enhanced their capacity to improve their children’s lives. At the same time, Dyrness critiques how community organizers, teachers, and educational policy makers, despite their democratic rhetoric, repeatedly asserted their right as “experts,” reproducing the injustice they hoped to overcome. A powerful, inspiring story about self-learning, consciousness-raising, and empowerment, *Mothers United* offers important lessons for school reform movements everywhere.

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