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An Analysis of the Education Systems in Mexico and the United States from
Pre-kinder to 12 Grade

Luis A. Rosado, Marisa Hellowell, and Ezequiel Benedicto Zamora

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the public school system in Mexico from early childhood to high school, and compares it with the American education system. It also identifies educational terminology and concepts unique to the Mexican system that can become possible sources of conflict and confusion for American educators.

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Mexico and the United States have had a long history of cultural, economic and educational interdependence. This economic interdependence has created a demand for Mexican labor, and it has resulted in a steady flow of Mexican immigrants to the United States. This immigration pattern has brought large numbers of Mexican children to the American school system. These students enter the U.S. school system at various points along the PK-12 grade continuum. Some of these students remain in the country and graduate from high school, while others return to Mexico or spend their school years switching from one system to the other.

This educational interdependence between Mexico and the United States requires educators and policy makers to develop an understanding of the organizational structure, concepts and educational terminology used in both countries. To support educators from both countries, this article will provide an overview of the Mexican public school education system from early childhood to high school, and will compare it with key components and terminology used in the American education system.

The Public School System in Mexico

Public education is a constitutional mandate in Mexico. Article three of the Mexican Constitution provides for the organization and implementation of a national education system (Rev. 6/1/2009).¹ The federal government through the *Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP)* regulates and implements education in the country. The

government provides free and compulsory public education for students from ages three to 15, which covers pre-kinder-kinder (educación preescolar), grades 1-6 (elementary), and grades 7-9 (secundaria) (LGE, 1993, Chap. 1, Art 4). The “educación media superior” (high school) is not compulsory in Mexico, and it encompasses grades 10, 11 and 12.

The Mexican education system has traditionally been centralized. The curricula and textbooks are common to all public schools in the nation. The central government through the SEP sets the standards, the subjects required and the scope and sequence of the content for each grade level. The SEP also produces and distributes free textbooks for schools in the nation. However, the delivery of educational services to a country of more than 106 million people, with over 23 million students in pre-kinder to 9th grade alone, (U.S.D.E., 2005) has been a challenge for the central government. Consequently, decentralization has become the focal point in the transformation of the education system in Mexico in the last three decades.

The movement to begin modernization and decentralization of the education services in the country began in the early eighties. The plan was to shift part of the education responsibilities from the central government to the state governments in an effort to eliminate bureaucracy and improve services. Legislation to initiate decentralization began during the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), and it has continued with each of the four presidents that have followed—Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (1994-2000), Vicente Fox Quesada

(2000-2006), and the current president, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (Aguilar Morales, 2009).

The process of transferring education responsibilities to the states officially began in 1992 with an agreement between state education agencies and the Mexican National Education Teachers Union to begin the reorganization of the basic education (EC-9th grade) (Zorrilla, 2004). The reorganization process was further supported with the enactment of the General Education Law of 1993—"Ley General de Educación" (LGE), under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. As a result of decentralization efforts, the federal government transferred responsibilities for the preparation of teachers, and the administration and delivery of basic education to the 31 state governments in the nation (Zorrilla, 2004). Moreover, in 2007 the current president, Felipe Calderón, instituted his own plan to improve education and to enforce decentralization—"Programa Sectorial de Educación" (SEP, 2007-2012). The overall goal of the federal government is to improve access to education, prepare Mexicans to become more competitive and to promote the participation of state governments in the decision-making process.

For the last 18 years (1992-2010) Mexican authorities have made a concerted effort to restructure and modernize the education system; however, this process is still evolving. After all the changes in the last two decades, the Mexican education system still needs major modifications and funding to modernize and improve services. The greatest challenges the educational system of Mexico face are the high variances between mainstream groups and marginalized populations, population growth and

movement, and the limited resources available for education. All these challenges have made the modernization and improvement of the Mexican public school system more difficult.

Structure of the Mexican Public School System

The Mexican educational system is organized into four levels—"Educación Inicial o maternal" (daycare and Prek), "La Educación Básica" (preschool, elementary and "secundaria"), and "Nivel Medio Superior" (high school).²

Educación Inicial o Maternal (Daycare)

The "Educación Inicial" addresses the needs of children, from infants (45 days) to four-year olds (Ley General de Educación (LGE), 2009, Chap IV, and Art. 40). Education at this level is not compulsory, and it is designed to meet the educational needs of children from working parents, in a similar fashion as the American Early Head Start and Head Start programs available for low income families (ACF, 2009), and the compensatory programs offered through Title I of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) for three to five-year old children. The main goal of "educación inicial" in Mexico is to prepare children for elementary school, and to provide a safe and productive learning environment for children while parents work. The program is available to children of working-class Mexicans from the public and private sectors, as part of the system of fringe benefits or "prestaciones".³

The program for "educación inicial" is administered and partially funded through two government agencies. For government employees, the "Instituto de Seguridad y

Servicios Sociales para los Trabajadores del Estado" (ISSSTE) offers services to children in the multiple public and private "Centros de Desarrollo Infantil" (CENDI) available in the nation. The same program is available for working parents in the private sector. The "Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social" (IMSS)—a government entity similar to the American Social Security Administration—offers these services to employees in the private sector. These education services are also delivered through public and private CENDI centers in the nation. The type and quality of the CENDI determines the cost of the program. The price might be lower for poor working class families in government sponsored CENDIs, but the openings available in these programs are highly competitive.

La Educación Básica (Pre-kinder to 9th grade)

La "Educación Básica" is compulsory and comprises "educación preescolar (Pre-kinder and kinder), "primaria" (1st to 6th grade), and "secundaria" (7th to 9th grade). Traditionally, the school day for "La Educación Básica" is divided into two 4 ½ hour sessions, from 8:00-12:30 for the morning session (turno matutino) and from 2:00-6:30 for the afternoon session (turno vespertino). Students are assigned to attend either the morning or afternoon session. This format is necessary to accommodate the large number of students in public schools, and to reduce the high student-teacher ratio (Aguilar Morales, 2009). It is very common for teachers to have two different appointments (plazas) to teach both the morning and afternoon sessions. However, teaching classes with large number of students from 8:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. with limited instructional resources can definitely affect the delivery of instruction and consequently

can affect students' achievement. The delivery of quality and equity education (*calidad con equidad*) for all children is one of the challenges facing the basic education in Mexico (Vázquez Mota, 2007-2010).

Educación Preescolar (Preschool Education)

Preschool education is offered to children ages three, four and five in a similar fashion as "educación inicial". In addition to the traditional education for native Spanish speakers offered through the CENDIs, preschool education is also available for non-Spanish-speaking indigenous populations through community-based programs for children in isolated communities. In this program, educators fluent in Spanish and the native language of the group deliver dual language instruction to children in preschool education.

In isolated communities without formal schools, the programs for preschool and primary education are offered through community-based programs. The programs are organized in communities with at least 35 school-age children. One unique feature of this program is the type of instructors hired to deliver instruction. Some of these programs use young students from the community who have graduated from "la secundaria"—equivalent to a 9th grade education—to teach in these isolated communities (CONAFE, 2009). The communities in conjunction with "el Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo" (CONAFE)—an autonomous organism from the SEP—conduct the hiring and training for these young teachers. Due to the limited number of teachers available to teach in rural communities, a single teacher might be teaching 35

children in self-contained multi-age classroom format. The working conditions of these teachers and their limited academic preparation can have an impact on the quality of instruction presented and the achievement of these students. Many of the students arriving to the United States schools come from these community-based programs, and they generally lack the basic skills in Spanish to compete with American-born peers or immigrants with strong academic foundation in the first language.

La Primaria (Elementary Education)

Elementary education is available for six to 12 years olds (first to six grade). The concept of elementary education in Mexico differs slightly from elementary Education programs in the United States. In the American system, most elementary education programs traditionally cover grades first to fifth; sixth grade students are housed in middle school campuses (5 or 6-8th grades).

The curriculum of the Mexican "primaria" includes five core subjects—Spanish, mathematics, natural sciences, history and geography. They also teach civics, art and physical education as ancillaries (SEP-DGRI, n.d.). The American system has similar curriculum requirements. The main difference is that in the United States the emphasis is placed on reading, language arts and mathematics; while in the Mexican system, the emphasis is on Spanish, mathematics, geography, and history. Additionally, in the American system the areas of civics, geography, and history are delivered in a more integrated fashion through the social studies program.

La Secundaria (grades 6th to 9th)

“La secundaria” is offered to 12 to 15 year-old children, and it comprises grades 7th, 8th, and 9th. “La secundaria” is similar to the junior high school concept in the United States. However, in most schools in the United States, 9th grade is part of the high school program. The terminology used to describe grade levels in the Mexican “secundaria” can also present a challenge for American educators. Ordinal numbers beginning with “primero” are used to describe the three grades levels in “la secundaria”. That is, “primero de secundaria” is equivalent to 7th grade; “segundo de secundaria” is equivalent to 8th grade; and “tercero de secundaria” is equivalent to 9th grade.

The core curriculum of the Mexican *secundaria* is similar to the American system. A list of requirements for the Mexican “secundaria” is presented in table 1 (SEP-DGRI, n.d.).

Table 1 Course Requirement for “La *Secundaria*” in Mexico

Credits	Subjects
3	Spanish
3	Mathematics
3	Natural sciences (biology, physics and chemistry)
1	Geography of Mexico and world geography
3	Foreign languages
3	Technology
3	Physical education

3	Fine arts (music, dance, theater, visual arts)
1	Art education
1	Civic and Ethics
2	History
2	Orientation and tutoring

Programs to Deliver the Basic Education Program

Basic Education (Preschool, elementary and “secundaria”) is delivered through four different programs—general education, bilingual-bicultural, community-based education, and basic education for adults.

General Education

General education is the program of study for the Spanish-speaking mainstream school population. The SEP and the government of the states deliver general education in Spanish in urban and rural communities in the nation. The SEP designs and implements the curriculum, provides books, delivers and assesses instruction in these schools.

Bilingual and bicultural education.

Bilingual and bicultural education is offered to the large number of children from indigenous communities whose first language is other than Spanish.⁴ The preferred model of language implementation is what in the United States is called transitional

bilingual education (TBE). Instruction is delivered in two languages using the native language as a foundation for teaching the second language—Spanish.

Contrary to the American TBE model, programs for indigenous populations in Mexico are not designed to replace their native languages for Spanish. Instead, the system allows for the teaching of Spanish as the national language and for the maintenance of both languages and cultures. The position of the government in favor of the preservation of indigenous languages is summarized in Chapter I, Article 7th, Sect. IV of the Mexican Education Law (La Ley General de Educación). The Mexican educational law stipulates that the government should promote:

“... la pluralidad lingüística de la Nación y el respeto a los derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas. Los hablantes de lenguas indígenas, tendrán acceso a la educación obligatoria en su propia lengua y español”. [...linguistic pluralism in the nation and respect for the rights of indigenous people. Speakers of indigenous languages will have access to compulsory education in their native language and in Spanish.]

Despite the official position of the government, the preservation of indigenous languages presents serious challenges to the Mexican authorities. Additional funding and better prepared teachers are required if the Mexican government is going to succeed in the implementation of the legal mandate.

Community-based Programs

Community-based programs are offered under the guidance of CONAFE to serve the needs of children from isolated communities. Traditionally, the program is delivered

using a self-contained multiage grouping format. That is, one teacher might provide instruction to children from grades one through six in the same classroom. The curriculum is generally restricted to the five basic subjects—mathematics, Spanish, natural sciences, history and geography.

Basic Education for Adults

Basic Education for Adults is offered through the “Instituto Nacional de Educación para Adultos” (INEA), “Centros de Educación Básica para Adultos” (CEBA), and evening schools programs. Adult education is available for individuals ages 15 and up, and it covers literacy, basic education and vocational training. (LGE, Chap.I, Art. 43, Sect. 1).

Technology has been the main media of communication and delivery of services to adults in Mexico. Since the late 60s, Mexico has used the system of telesecundaria (instructional television) to help improve educational levels for students with no access to traditional schools. Although these instructional media are limited to areas with electricity and network availability, when successfully implemented, this and other forms of distance education can serve the needs of children and adults from isolated communities.

Basic adult education and the community-based programs are also available through distance education for Mexican adults living abroad. The Mexican Abroad Program (Instituto de Mexicanos en el Exterior) offers opportunities to complete the basic education, high school and even higher education. The programs are offered

through the Institute for Mexicans Abroad in collaboration with local community-based organizations in the United States.⁵

Educación Medio Superior—Preparatoria (High school)

Contrary to high school programs in the United States, preparatory schools in Mexico are linked and administered by universities, and admission to the programs is highly competitive.⁶ Following the university format, Mexican students seeking admission to preparatory schools comply with rigorous admission criteria for the limited number of vacancies available. Results of the competition for the vacancies are widely publicized through the printed and electronic media. Students admitted to preparatory programs in public universities are required to pay a minimal fee to enroll in these programs. Students unable to get admitted to public education programs have the option of attending more expensive private programs.⁷ Nevertheless, students unable to be admitted to one of these programs will not be able to finish high school, nor attend college in Mexico.

Programs for High School (La Preparatoria)

High school education is delivered through three programs—"Bachillerato General", "Bachillerato Tecnológico", and "Educación Profesional Técnica".

See Table 3 for an overview of these programs.

Bachillerato general (General high school program).

The curriculum for the "bachillerato general" covers basic academic areas, and it is designed to prepare students for higher education. This type of program is similar to

the college-bound plan available in the United States. Under this program, students in high school can select one of two specializations or academic programs—the humanities, or physics and mathematics. The humanities program is for students planning to pursue a college degree in the areas of social sciences and education. While the physics and mathematics program is designed for students who are going to pursue a college degree in the areas of science, engineering, architecture, or medicine. A list of the basic courses for the program of study is presented in Table 2 (SEMS, 2008).

Table 2

Course Requirements for "Bachillerato General" in Mexico

<i>Courses</i>	<i>Subjects</i>
2	Chemistry
4	Mathematics
2	Ethics and values
2	Reading and Writing (lectura y redaction)
4	Foreign Languages
2	Computer Science or technology (Informática)
2	Physics
1	Geography
2	Biology
1	Socio-Economic Structure of Mexico
2	History of Mexico and Universal History
1	Philosophy
1	Ecology—Environmental Sciences
1	Research Methods
2	Literature

Bachillerato tecnológico (Technology program).

This technology-oriented degree provides students with the basic preparation to pursue higher education and a technical training in areas of high demand, in a similar

fashion to the vocational education programs in the United States (Levesque, et al., 2000). Upon completion of this degree, students can begin practicing their trade or continue in higher education. Students can specialize in a range of areas: Maintenance of electronic equipment and systems, tourism services, port services, business administration, food processing, computer science, agriculture and cattle, communication systems, marine sciences, and forestry (CSNET, 2004).

Educación profesional técnica (Vocational technology program).

The degree in "Educación Profesional Técnica" (EPT) offers a more specialized technical or vocational preparation than the "bachillerato tecnológico". However, it is not equivalent to a high school diploma, and it is not designed to prepare students for higher education. Instead, the program prepares students to work in the industry, agriculture, marine sciences, and forestry services. Graduates from the Mexican "Educación Profesional Técnica" program interested a getting a high school diploma can take an equivalency examination available from the "Centro Nacional de Evaluación" (*CENEVAL*). Upon completion of this examination, students receive the high school diploma and can pursue college education.

The EPT vocational program does not have an equivalent in public schools in the United States. It resembles a special program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor for low income youth ages 16 to 24—Job Corps (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). The Job Corps program in the United States teaches young students a trade,

and prepares them to take the test for the General Education Development (GED) diploma.

Table 3 presents an overview and compares the PK-12 Mexican and the American education system.

Table 3

Comparison of K-12 Programs in Mexico and in the U.S.

Levels	Programs in México	Programs in the U.S.
Educación inicial (Initial Education) Ages: 0 to 3	Public and private daycare programs	Private daycare, and Pre kinder 3 or Head Start Programs
Educación Básica (Basic Education) Ages: 4 to 15	1.Preschool education Grades: Pre-kinder/Kinder	1.Kindergarten Grades: Pre-Kinder/Kinder
	2 Educación Primaria Grades: 1 st to 6 th	2.Elementary Education Grades: 1 st to 5 th
	3.Educación Secundaria	3. Junior High/Middle School/Intermediate
	Grades (6th grade is part of elementary in Mexico)	Grades 6 th grade
	Primero de secundaria (7 th)	7 th grade
	Segundo de secundaria (8 th)	8 th Grade
	Tercero de secundaria (9 th)	(9 th grade is part of the high school program in the U.S.)

Educación Media	Preparatoria	High School
Superior (High School)	Bachillerato General and Bachillerato Tecnológico	College Bound Program Basic High School Diploma, and vocational schools
Ages: 15 to 18	Educación Profesional Técnica	No equivalent in the U.S.
	Grades (9 th is part of the “secundaria”)	Grades 9 th (First year in the high school program)
	Primero de preparatoria (10 th)	10 th (Sophomore in the high school program)
	Segundo de preparatoria(11th)	11 th (Junior in the high school program)
	Tercero de preparatoria (12th)	12 th (Senior in the high school program)

Grading System

The grading system used in Mexico differs slightly from the system used in the United States. Mexico uses a grading system based on a 10-point scale, while schools in the United States use a system of percentages and letters to represent grade equivalent. Report cards in Mexico shows a grade of 1-10, while in the United States, the grades can be shown as percentages from 1% to 100%, or through a five-letter grade system (A, B, C, D, or F). In Mexico a grade of 6 or 7 is traditionally required to

pass a course, while in the United States, a score of 70% or a grade of **C** is generally required for passing an examination.

Conclusions

This article provided an overview of the Mexican public education system and compared it with counterpart institutions in the United States. The parallels provided in this article are intended to empower educators from both countries to make appropriate programmatic and instructional decisions affecting the schooling of immigrant children. The article identified educational terminology and concepts unique to the Mexican system that can become possible sources of conflict and confusion for American educators.

The articles suggests that it is crucial for school administrators to understand the types of programs used to serve student populations, the names of the different grades levels as well as the system used to report grades. With this kind of understanding, educators from both countries will be best equipped to make appropriate placement and instructional decisions.

Moreover, educators can use the ideas presented in this article as a starting point to initiate communications between the countries and to expand their knowledge of the two educational systems. With this kind of knowledge, educators will be best prepared to address the needs not only of the large number of Mexican students that come to the United States, but those that return to Mexico to complete their education.

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6. Lylyana Olivares, U.S. Educator, White Settlement Independent School District. Fort Worth, Texas.

Footnotes

¹ The Mexican education system is centralized, while in the United States it is decentralized. In Mexico, education is a constitutional right, while in the United States it is not. The Tenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution delegates the responsibility for education to individual states. The American decentralization system allows for the creation of a complex system of state education agencies (SEA) and independent school

districts with the power to implement the curricula and the selection and distribution of textbooks.

² Most schools in the United States follow one of two basic formats:

1. Elementary (K-5), middle school (5 or 6-8), high school (9-12);
2. Elementary (K-6), junior high school (7-8), senior high school (9-12).

³ The term “prestaciones”—as opposed to the term “benefits”— is used in Mexico to imply that the system of “guarderías” it is not a free service. In this system, the employee and the employers (private or state) contribute to a common fund administered by two state agencies—ISSSTE for government employees and the IMSS for the private sector—to pay the CENDIs for the services.

⁴ In 2005, the government estimated the Mexican indigenous population in 10,103,571 (CDI, 2000-2005), representing 62 different language groups (Navarrete Linares, 2008). The largest language groups are the Nahuatl and the Mayan. It is estimated that 719,645 of the total indigenous population in Mexico do not speak Spanish (Navarrete Linares, 2008) and qualify for bilingual/bicultural education.

⁵ Information about the Mexican Abroad Program is available in the official website of the Instituto de Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME):

http://www.ime.gob.mx/ime2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=166&Itemid=65

⁶ Programs for high school are generally ranked based on their program offerings and the standing of the university that sponsors or administers the program. For

example, the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria (National Preparatory School) and the various high schools linked to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) are considered the top programs in the nation. At the regional level, the *Preparatoria Federal #1* in Cuernavaca is highly ranked in the State because it is part of the *Universidad Autónoma* of the state of Morelos.

⁷ The public and private schools in Mexico differ from the American system. An important overlapping concept that can mislead American educators is the understanding of the characteristics of public and private schools in Mexico. Public schools in Mexico face multiple challenges, and they are traditionally considered of less quality than private schools. The public school system serves mostly poor Spanish-speaking children and indigenous populations in less than ideal physical and instructional conditions. The discrepancy between public and private institution is so broad that even low-income families make an effort to send their children to private schools. However, private schools do not necessary imply wealthy and better equipped schools. These private schools range drastically quality and status, but even a poor private school is often perceived as better than the traditional public school. As a result, a large number of children in Mexico attend private schools, unlike the U.S. where private school attendance is popular but most often is most common for wealthier populations.

About the Authors

1. Dr. Luis A. Rosado is a Professor of Bilingual Education and Director of the Center for Bilingual Education in the College of Education and Human Performance at the University of Texas at Arlington.
2. Ms. Marisa Hellowell is the Coordinator of a Title III bilingual teacher preparation program and an instructor in the College of Education and Human Performance at the University of Texas at Arlington. She is also a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in K-16 program at the University of Texas at Arlington in Arlington Texas.
3. Psic. Ezequiel Benedicto Zamora is an educator and psychologist in Cuernavaca, Mexico. He, Coordinates a seminar in Social Psychology at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos (UAEM) Cuernavaca, México.