**Schooling in Mexico**

**HISTORY**

The first important law related to education, passed under the leadership of Benito Juarez in 1867, declared that primary education would be nonreligious, free, and obligatory. Later, Article 3 of the 1917 Constitution gave the federal government great powers over education and made all private schools subject to government supervision.

A 1992 federal initiative changed Articles 30 and 31 of the Constitution and related new policies required secondary education (through grade 9) for all students; a re-emphasis of subject areas in the curriculum; and the decentralization of preschool, primary, and secondary education administration. Today, Mexico has nearly reached its goal of providing facilities for all school-age children.

Yet, despite historical advancements and heroic efforts by educators, Mexico continues to struggle with "rezago," or educational failure. Millions of students are retained or drop out after primary school and secondary school. Rural communities--especially those of Indigenous people where millions of citizens speak Spanish as a second language--have high rates of poverty. In these settings, many children drop out of school to work and support their families, which contributes to a higher rate of illiteracy.

**ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES**

Mexican schools are organized as shown below:

Preschool and Primary

Pre-escolar: Federally Funded programs for children ages 4-5.

Primaria: Schools with grades 1-6 and at aleast one teacher per grade.

Multigrados: One-room schools with one teacher for grades 1-6 or multigrade schools with several teachers, each teaching more that one grade.

Middle Grades (Grades 7-9)

Secundarias: Schools that enroll most nonrural students, including those who are college-bound.

Tecnicas: Schools that provide vocational training for noncollege-bound students.

Telesecundarias: Rural schools offering a televised curriculum, which enroll a majority of rural students.

High School (Grades 10-12)

Preparatorias and Bachilleratos: Schools for college-bound youth, where students must choose one of 4 professional areas: physical-mathematics, chemical-biological, economic-administrative, or humanities.

Tecnnologicas and Comercios: Schools for students who have a particular vocational career in mind.

**CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

Mexican schools abide by federal policy and nationalized curriculum mandates. Each year since 1964, the federal government has provided free textbooks to every Mexican student in primary schools; students in grades 7-12 pay for their texts. Texts in grades 1-2 use the "global method," which combines social sciences and environmental studies. Throughout primary school the teachers and texts emphasize Spanish and mathematics, and also include geographic and ecological knowledge. Even in primary schools, Mexican texts include a straightforward, in-depth curriculum about health and human sexuality.

The grading scale in Mexico is commonly 1 to 10, and teachers give examinations 5 times a year in each grade. The tests must cover the national curriculum, but are developed locally. There is a national examination at the end of the school year. Students who score less than a 6 on the test are retained in the same grade level for the coming year.

Since 1992, the secondary school curriculum has been divided into separate content areas. In grades 7-8, mathematics is integrated to include topics in geometry and algebra each year. In grade 9, all students take trigonometry. Students are required to study a foreign language each year (3 hours/week). Science is also required, although the lack of laboratory facilities in many schools limits possibilities for experiential learning. All students take courses in the arts (2 hours/week) and technology (3 hours/week), which may be hampered by inadequate equipment such as computers. By the time they enter high school, Mexican students must choose among schools that will lead them to college study, a technical career, or a business track.

**LIFE IN SCHOOLS**

Mexican schools have much in common with one another across the country. Every Monday there are patriotic exercises in which the children display the flag, sing the national anthem, and listen as adults exhort them to be respectful and conscientious students. Mid-morning there is a "recreo," a break to eat snacks and play outside. The sense of time and pacing can differ greatly from U.S. schools, where time is tightly scheduled and recreational activity is closely monitored. In Mexico, children are in school for 4 hours a day, and some urban students work in the morning and attend school in the late afternoon.

Classroom life tends to be more informal than in U.S. schools. In many schools, students engage in frequent group work, often involving a great deal of student interaction and movement. At the same time, Mexican students are expected to show respect to the "maestro/a" (the teacher). Parents usually assume that teachers will make the best decisions for their children, and it is not the norm for parents to intervene in school matters unless asked.

There can be a vast difference between the educational experiences of urban and rural children. Even as the population of Mexico becomes more urban, the number of small communities increases. These communities are isolated and economically poor, and they have many daunting educational problems: the difficulty of finding teachers willing to travel long distances to teach there, students' inability to attend school due to impassable roads or family responsibilities, and the need for children to work. Rural students may have to leave their communities after elementary school to attend school in a nearby town, and some families cannot afford to pay for travel, textbooks, uniforms, and other school costs after sixth grade. The same is true of poor urban students, although they have more school choices where they live.