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Schooling in Mexico: A Brief Guide for U.S. Educators. ERIC Digest.

Most educators agree that it is important to take into account their students' prior academic learning and experiences when planning lessons and delivering instruction. For this reason, teachers in U.S. schools currently affected by Mexican immigration need a basic understanding of schooling in Mexico. This Digest offers a brief overview of Mexican education and a description of life in primary and secondary schools. It includes practical notes based on this information for teachers in the United States. A bibliography at the end of the Digest lists sources for the information, which readers can consult to learn much more about the educational experiences of Mexican immigrant students and their families.

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.

Practical note. Mexican students coming from primary schools have not been ability grouped. This U.S. practice may confuse parents and students alike.

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.

Practical note. Because of cultural and educational norms, Mexican students are accustomed to seeing and producing art. For example, the 2001-2006 national educational plan encourages a connection of the arts and language teaching. A focus on the arts may help U.S. teachers engage immigrant students, but those students should not be tracked into art and vocational classes at the expense of academic skills. In fact, Mexican students often have strong math and language backgrounds, which may exceed the expectations they face when entering a school in the United States.

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.

Practical note. Be aware that Mexican immigrant children are not accustomed to the long hours, the decreased time for social interaction, and the more rule-driven culture of

most U.S. schools.

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.

Practical note. Despite these problems, rural students should not be viewed as deprived. A lack of computers, telephones, and even electricity does not equate with a lack of culture. Also, urban youth and some rural youth have access to Internet cafes, which are booming, especially in the cities. Although most rural schools do not have computers, it would be a mistake to assume that Mexican students are technologically illiterate.

MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH MEXICAN EDUCATION

There are many ways to learn more about Mexican education. Educators should be aware of ongoing efforts to connect Mexican and U.S. educators, and to create innovative professional development experiences:

* The Binational Program, which involves dozens of states on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, has developed a Binational Transfer Document. This document allows students who migrate between the two countries to provide information about their academic achievements, including their grades, and helps school authorities on both sides of the border make more informed grade-level and subject-area placements.

* In 1990 the Mexican government initiated the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad. Through this program, U.S. school personnel may request copies of Mexican school textbooks for the preschool and primary grades. Educators also can view descriptions of university course syllabi in Mexico, to see how content area subjects are supposed to be taught in Mexican schools. For more information about these programs and others, visit http://www.Mexico-info.com/communities/

* The Fulbright Program offers opportunities for U.S. teachers to live in Mexico as part of a teacher exchange, as does the Binational Teacher Exchange. Some university programs immerse educators in Mexican life by having them live with families and visit schools.

Whatever the program or approach, learning more about the educational experiences of Mexican immigrant students can help us make more informed decisions about their coursework and better plans for teaching them.

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