MEXICANOS PRIMERO
MARCH 2025 / NUM 1
EN CORTO
EDUCATIONAL POLICY BRIEF

THE RIGHT TO LEARN:

The Challenge of the Mexican Educational System

Carlos Ornelas

The establishment of the Secretariat of Public Education just over a century ago gave rise to an impressive school system: millions of students and teachers, hundreds of thousands of schools, and equity programs. There are many reasons to be proud of the development of the Mexican educational system. However, it suffers from severe deficiencies, which worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic and the erratic educational policies of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's government. Student learning has never been satisfactory; although coverage is extensive, school dropout rates are rising. Bureaucratic centralism plagues the system's administration. This situation exacerbates teachers' initial training deficiencies, with no effective professional development programs. The administration of the Mexican Educational System (SEM) is complex due to the influence of factions within the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), which have taken over much of the governance of basic education. Although several governments have made efforts to reform the system, the lack of financial resources has always been a major barrier to significant progress. Criminal violence and government failure to offer viable alternatives have bogged educational politics. Such alternatives do exist, but they require long-term commitment and the active participation of civil society organizations.

The Mexican educational system (SEM) is a large-scale enterprise that, in just over 100 years since the founding of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), has achieved impressive milestones: more than two million teachers serve nearly 35 million students in over 260,000 schools. It includes the National Council for Educational Development (Conafe), which serves vulnerable and dispersed populations through community instructors. Mexico was one of the first countries where the state produced free textbooks for primary education students, and, with attention to cultural diversity, the National Commission for Free Textbooks (Conaliteg) produced teaching materials in 56 indigenous languages. There are many reasons to be proud of the development of the Mexican educational system (SEM).

Despite this progress, the SEM suffers from deficiencies that hinder its full development and plague it with increasingly difficult challenges. Mexican educational research has documented these shortcomings in countless books and articles. Here, I summarize those that are the most significant.

Learning and School Absenteeism

The primary mission of any school system is to establish and expand students' knowledge, fostering the learning of concepts, intellectual tools, and practical skills. All known national and international tests indicate that the understanding of Mexican students is low or of insufficient quality, with only small percentages achieving notable performance. The exams also reflect significant social inequality. Wealthier middle-class segments send their children to private schools offering better services. At the same time, those in vulnerable areas rely on Conafe, many of whose centers are of excellent quality. However, given the prevailing context, only some community and multigrade schools enable poor children to learn the basics.

Over a century, the SEM promoted upward mobility for certain social segments, particularly urban ones. However, it did not provide meaningful learning for all. The covid-19 pandemic worsened existing conditions and increased school dropout rates, which were already severe. The two-year school closures and lockdowns caused tens of thousands of students to miss out on necessary learning, even forgetting essential knowledge, and many did not return to school. The SEP made efforts, albeit perhaps not fervently, to encourage more children and youth to return to classrooms but did little to help them recover lost learning.

Bureaucratic centralism

The main cause of these failures lies in a centralized and slow administration that hinders the functioning of the SEM, leaving state governments with little autonomy. Bureaucratic centralism operates through four control mechanisms from the top of the SEP: normative, technical, financial, and political. José Vasconcelos argued that, given the country's conditions and economic hardship after the Mexican Revolution, municipalities could not take charge of public education. Mexico needed a strong central institution, funded by the federal government, to educate the people, eradicate illiteracy, and create and disseminate culture.

The 1934 reform of Article 3, the "socialist education," granted the federal government the sole authority to determine the curriculum and authorize textbooks so that students could acquire "the exact truth about the universe and social life." The laws of 1941 and 1973 regulated the portion administered by the federal government. Normative centralism emerged with the National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education and the General Education Law (LGE) approval in 1993. States had to replicate it in their local regulations. The technical control exercised by the central authority lies in the national curriculum and textbooks, which are unique and mandatory. Financial control is the lever of centralist power. The federal government and Congress determine the allocation of over 80% of spending on basic education, even specifying how much state governments must contribute. Political control is twofold: the SEP oversees local authorities, while the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) leadership controls teachers.

A key pillar of bureaucratic centralism is controlling who enters and advances in the teaching profession.

Teacher Training and Development

The factions of the SNTE, the majority or institutional faction, and the National Coordination of Education Workers (CNTE) decide who enters normal schools and who teaches in them, each group in its respective territories. The former administers a teacher-centric narrative that mixes labor relations with "the defense of public schools and their teachers." It is not interested in pedagogical matters or the learning of normal school students but in increasing its membership. Leaders accept plans and programs designed by the federal government. The CNTE introduces texts and promotes ideas from radical educators to "raise awareness" among future teachers, though it is more concerned with recruiting them into its ranks upon graduation.

These dynamics have harmed the initial training of teachers and hindered their professional development. Several governments designed reforms for normal schools, some relevant for better training, but tradition and bureaucratic habits prevailed, and these schools and improvement programs did not flourish. There were protests by students and future teachers, but they failed because SNTE leaders administered a powerful incentive: teaching positions (the plaza). The SNTE's control over jobs in the Mexican educational system stems from its colonization of basic education administration.

SNTE-SEP: Colonization

The SNTE is a corporate institution with compulsory membership. It was established by the government in 1943, later incorporated into the Party of the Mexican Revolution, and then the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), under the tutelage of the sitting president. It was a homogeneous institution for decades, but in the 1970s, the CNTE emerged. Its declared aim was to democratize the SNTE's political life, but it soon acquired the same vices it criticized in its adversaries. The institutional faction controls the National Executive Committee and, in exchange for privileges, subordinates itself to the government. The CNTE operates as an opposition; both factions benefit, especially in determining who gets teaching positions, promotions, and, since 2019, permanent positions for interim workers. The SNTE gained degrees of political autonomy that allowed it to obtain concessions. The greatest benefit is that the state tolerated SNTE leaders co-governing basic education in the country—an illegitimate but institutionalized arrangement.

In 1946, President Ávila Camacho granted the union the authority to appoint school principals (they ceased to be positions of trust). With this incentive, the leadership at the time designed a strategy to appoint inspectors (now supervisors), and after decades of pacts and struggles, SNTE loyalists controlled the lower bureaucracy of the educational sector, both at the federal and state levels. The main characteristic of this colonization was the dominance of patriarchy, clientelism, and corruption. The perversion reached such a degree that the inheritance and sale of teaching positions and improper payroll charges, including payments to "ghost" teachers and even the deceased, became institutionalized.

Educational Reforms

The government of Lázaro Cárdenas promoted the first reform of the SEM, "the socialist education," which glorified class struggle as the engine of history. It was short-lived but cemented greater centralization of education. Jaime Torres Bodet pushed for educational reform for national unity during Manuel Ávila Camacho's government. He asserted that the primary criterion for education would be to strengthen democracy and that it "should aim to harmoniously develop all human faculties." This wellspring remains in Article 3 of the Constitution to this day. During his second term as Secretary of Public Education, Torres Bodet promoted the Eleven-Year Plan, school construction, free textbooks, and an unprecedented expansion of primary education enrollment. He also advocated for adult education. The downside: it accentuated curricular centralism, ended full-day schools, and promoted "double shifts" for thousands of teachers.

The government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari signed the decentralization agreement, National Agreement for the Modernization of Basic Education, with SNTE leader Elba Esther Gordillo in 1992. It transferred the administration of teacher labor relations to the states and portions of school administration and allocated significant financial resources (during the first 25 years of the agreement). However, it strengthened central control, albeit shared with SNTE factions. With that agreement and political pressure, the SNTE ensured that states replicated the SEP's work conditions regulations and that the National Executive Committee oversaw them: more centralism and corruption.

The government of Felipe Calderón signed the Alliance for Quality Education with Elba Esther Gordillo, which expanded the power of her faction and enabled it to colonize other areas of public administration. The educational reform under Enrique Peña Nieto's government attempted to change the balance of power in the SEM. The directive was to "recover the leadership of education." However, resistance from SNTE leadership, distrust among rank-and-file teachers, and the weight of tradition prevented progress. However, the government stopped payments to deceased individuals and "ghost" teachers. It also cut off payments to state officials receiving salaries from the education payroll. More importantly, it outlawed the inheritance and sale of teaching positions but failed to consolidate the Professional Teaching Service.

Covid-19 and the New Mexican School

While the SEM already faced severe problems, the covid-19 pandemic and the educational policies of the Fourth Transformation (4T) worsened them. AMLO fulfilled his commitment to teacher groups that supported him, dismantling the National Institute for Educational Evaluation and eliminating the meritocratic approach of the Professional Teaching Service, labeling them as products of "neoliberalism." The government decided to close schools starting in March 2020 to prevent infections and implemented distance education to salvage the school year. While the "Learn at Home I and II" programs provided valuable services, they were insufficient to ensure student learning. Confinement education allowed wealthy families

to access various platforms. However, it was limited to television lessons (where available) and little else for poor children. In vast rural areas, there was no support.

The first Secretary of Public Education, Esteban Moctezuma Barragán, designed the New Mexican School (NEM) as an allegory to build an uplifting narrative and later as a government program. Five chapters of the 2019 LGE institutionalized it. Later, the NEM became a dead letter, but the SEP revived it to justify the introduction of new free textbooks and a curriculum in August 2022. These books entered the SEM simultaneously, without pilot testing or a didactic structure, and with an ideological bias against mestizaje and a communalist approach that equates traditional knowledge with scientific knowledge. There is no evidence that this curriculum and textbooks are useful for students to recover learning lost to covid-19 or to improve teaching quality.

The government "permanentized" nearly one million interim workers. It ignored the mandate in Article 3 that entry into the teaching profession must be through public, transparent, equitable, and impartial means. Under the argument of republican austerity, it closed daycare centers and ended full-time schools. Additionally, as documented by Mexicanos Primero in various investigations, funding for education was reduced. Thousands of schools lack water and electricity, let alone internet connectivity. Most of these are in vulnerable or depressed areas—schools for the poor.

The Challenge

President Claudia Sheinbaum's government has a diagnosis of the ills inherited by the SEM. It seeks to reduce school dropout rates with scholarships. The Secretary of Public Education, Mario Delgado, proclaims the validity of the NEM and does not announce changes to textbooks or curricula but has increased the autonomy of school technical councils to decide which materials to use and maintains the 2017 reform textbooks on the Conaliteg platform. With the announced changes to the Unit for the Teaching Career, SNTE factions will likely colonize this strategic area again, especially with the announcement of the institutional faction's electoral alliance with Morena. It will affiliate hundreds of thousands of teachers with the party. There are also no signs of increasing education funding or projects to improve teacher training and development.

Mexico is at a critical crossroads. Criminal violence, allowed to grow under AMLO's government, and threats of intervention from the Donald Trump administration, which could impose tariffs on Mexican exports, risk pushing the economy into recession. Consequently, the financial hardship of the SEM will worsen. There are long-term solutions, but they require an educational policy of a different nature, with strategic vision, determination, and openness to civil society organizations.
Time is running out. It is desirable for the government to correct its course to prevent further misfortune for the Mexican educational system.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

1 Bureaucratic centralism limits the capacity of states to innovate and adapt educational policies to their local contexts and perpetuates inequalities between regions. However, a well-planned decentralization is necessary to avoid fragmentation and lack of coordination. It is crucial to find a balance that allows states to make autonomous decisions within a national framework that guarantees minimum standards of quality and equity.

2 The COVID-19 pandemic widened learning gaps and highlighted the SEM's lack of preparedness to respond to educational crises. The most vulnerable students, especially in rural and indigenous areas, were the most affected. It is imperative to prioritize learning recovery with an educational justice approach, compensating for what was lost and addressing the structural causes of inequality.

3 The quality of education depends largely on the preparation and commitment of teachers. However, the current system of teacher training and professional development is plagued by problems such as politicization, lack of pedagogical focus, and absence of incentives for continuous improvement. A comprehensive reform must address initial training, working conditions, and opportunities for professional growth.

Carlos Ornelas

Is a Professor of Education and Communication at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. He was the first Mexican to earn a Ph.D. in Education from Stanford University.

He has been a visiting professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Hiroshima University, Nagoya University in Japan, and other institutions.

He has authored seven books, compiled fifteen edited volumes, and published ninety-nine peer-reviewed research articles in specialized journals and collective books. Additionally, he has written ninety-eight bibliographic essays, reviews, and outreach articles. He is also a columnist for *Excélsior*. His most recent publication is *Globalisation and Education Futures: PISA: Ideology or Paradigm Shift, included in the Fourth International Handbook of Globalisation, Education and Policy Research*.

He is an Emeritus Member of Mexico's National System of Researchers (SNI). In 2015, his colleagues at the Mexican Council of Educational Research (COMIE) awarded him the Pablo Latapí Distinguished Achievement Recognition.

E mail: carlos.ornelas@icloud.com
ORCID: t.ly/6JIW-