



FROM MEASUREMENT TO GOVERNANCE: RETHINKING EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION IN MEXICO

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Introduction

Across the world and in virtually every sphere of society, the collection, processing, and analysis of data have become strategic inputs for public decision-making across all levels of government. Systematically collecting high-quality data not only helps deepen our understanding of social phenomena but also enhances policymakers' knowledge and awareness, enabling them to design more effective and transparent interventions (Reimers, 2025). Yet Mexico's education authorities routinely disregard this function, neglecting several responsibilities established in the Mexican Constitution, including the mandate to "conduct studies, specialized research, and evaluations of the National Education System (SEN, for the Spanish acronym), and establish indicators to measure progress in the continuous improvement of education" (Congreso de la Unión, 2019).

Although the evaluation systems developed over previous decades were far from flawless, the elimination of the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (INEE, for the Spanish acronym) represented a significant technical and democratic setback. INEE produced independent and comparable evidence that was essential for informing policy, identifying educational gaps, and sustaining an informed public debate on improving the education system (Sánchez-Restrepo, 2018, 2022, 2023; Martínez Rizo, 2023, 2024). Its disappearance not only weakened the State's analytical capacity but also removed a critical institutional counterweight for accountability.

Educational evaluation in Mexico gradually evolved, making a modest contribution to understanding certain dimensions of the country's education system, informing public decision-making, and sustaining public debate and scrutiny of education policy. However, the elimination of the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (INEE), followed by the unsuccessful creation of a replacement institution, dismantled this institutional framework, leading to increasing fragmentation, the disarticulation of evaluation processes, and growing distrust of—or discomfort with—the use of evidence among various stakeholders, a trend driven primarily by education authorities.

Rebuilding this institutional architecture as a single project now appears unlikely. Yet a viable alternative may exist: recognizing that the education system does not operate as a linear hierarchical structure but rather as a complex, dynamic, and interdependent network. Such a perspective makes it possible to rethink evaluation beyond measurement by leveraging Mexico's federal structure to advance a broader evaluation ecosystem—one that is horizontally distributed and coordinated through an interinstitutional network bringing together universities, research centers, civil society organizations, and state education authorities as its primary beneficiaries. This ecosystem should be grounded in the principle of technical autonomy with social responsibility and aimed at improving education while reshaping governance and political leadership through evidence-informed decision-making.



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The Institute made it possible to compare outcomes, diagnose systemic challenges, and design evidence-based policy responses, while fostering academic debate on the ongoing challenge of improving teaching and learning, as well as other key dimensions of education.

This information vacuum has encouraged poorly grounded policymaking and the enthusiastic adoption of improvised initiatives. It has also pushed Mexico's states to develop their own evaluation exercises with highly uneven technical capacities and quality standards, turning what should be a fundamental component of educational practice into a concept shaped by prejudice, bias, and conflicting interpretations. As a result, public debate and scrutiny of government decisions have become increasingly fragmented, undermining a core principle of democratic governance: the ability to engage in informed public discussion about government action.

1. The Persistent Shortsightedness of Reward and Punishment

Since its origins in the mid-twentieth century, educational evaluation in Mexico has gone through several phases and institutional arrangements. What began as a marginal practice of measurement and analysis carried out by independent academic researchers gradually became—albeit never without instability—a strategic component of education

policy. The creation of INEE in 2002 marked a turning point in this process of institutionalization, culminating in the Institute's constitutional autonomy in 2013. That period of independence, however, was short-lived, ending with its elimination in 2019 amid a political environment that prioritized dismantling autonomous institutions rather than engaging in a technical discussion about their functions. To this day, the arguments offered to justify its elimination remain no more coherent than the campaign promises made during that presidential election. Nevertheless, the dissolution of INEE and the loss of its institutional archives also revealed long-standing problems in the way educational evaluation has been conceived and used in Mexico (INEE, 2018; Martínez Rizo, 2023). From an analytical perspective, at least four historical distortions—further aggravated by the elimination of INEE—help explain the current state of educational evaluation:

- i. **From a diagnostic tool to an instrument of control:** Evaluation has remained subordinate to systems of rewards and sanctions, functioning more as a mechanism of political and administrative control than as a source of information for improvement.
- ii. **From a systemic phenomenon to individual judgment:** Evaluation results are commonly interpreted as evidence of the merit or failure of individual teachers and schools, obscuring the fact that they primarily reflect structural conditions within the education system that must be addressed.



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iii. From structural inequality to its

normalization: Rather than explaining how differences in students' social, cultural, economic, territorial, and other background conditions are reflected in educational outcomes—and therefore require policy attention—evaluation results and the actions derived from them have often reinforced and legitimized existing inequalities through comparisons that lack sufficient contextualization (INEE, 2018).

iv. From formative incentives to perverse

incentives: By attaching high-stakes consequences to evaluation results, policymakers have encouraged practices that, sooner or later, undermine the integrity and credibility of both evaluation processes and the broader education system.

From a systems perspective, these distortions share a common underlying problem: the disproportionate importance assigned to the consequences attached to evaluation results. The false dichotomy between evaluation "with" or "without" consequences—and the ongoing debate over the intensity of rewards and sanctions—has distracted attention from the central issue: **the quality, limitations, and appropriate use of evidence** to support the continuous improvement of educational processes. In practice, even when authorities rhetorically acknowledge this misguided debate, most education officials at every level continue to celebrate or penalize individuals based on evaluation results. This weakens trust among stakeholders and erodes the conditions necessary for rigorous interpretation and effective pedagogical action.

Not surprisingly, these distortions have also fueled the discourse of those who oppose educational evaluation altogether. Evaluation has increasingly been portrayed as an inherently undesirable tool, burdened with simplifications and stereotypes that equate it with punitive consequences, usually directed at teachers and, in some cases, students themselves. This evolution has not been accidental. It largely reflects the deliberate actions of multiple stakeholders who have favored opacity and the political instrumentalization of evaluation, contributing both to its excessive use and, ultimately, to its loss of legitimacy—depending on the position they occupy and the political circumstances of the moment.

2. The Alternative of Evaluating Without Standards, Without Communication, and Without Action

The unsuccessful attempt to replace INEE with the National Commission for the Continuous Improvement of Education (Widely known as Mejoredu) revealed the magnitude of Mexico's institutional loss. At a time when the country faced the urgent educational consequences of prolonged school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutional response was not to strengthen evaluation instruments, processes, or policies, but rather to dismantle them and to avoid those operating outside direct government control.

Although Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution establishes that education "shall be based on the



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outcomes of scientific progress and shall combat ignorance, its effects, servitude, fanaticism, and prejudice" (Congreso de la Unión, 2019), the systematic devaluation of educational evaluation and the limited capacity to incorporate evidence into decision-making have produced a persistent paradox: a system that formally recognizes the value of knowledge while marginalizing it in everyday practice. This contradiction has deepened the structural challenges the education system seeks to address and has normalized precariousness and mediocrity in educational policymaking.

At the time, Mejoredu's authorities not only sought to postpone evaluation exercises but were also highly active in discouraging a wide range of public and private initiatives, as well as censoring state, national, and international projects involving educational assessment¹. Documented accounts even describe attempts at censorship, intimidation, unfulfilled promises, and misleading cooperation agreements based on guidelines and manuals drafted by and for the institution itself². One striking example of this regulatory overreach appears in Article 27 of the *Guidelines for Diagnostic Evaluation*, which established that "...under no circumstances may comparisons be made among schools, students, or states" (Mejoredu, 2022), foreshadowing both the official narrative and the regulatory control over the potential use of evaluation results.

Another illustrative example of the conceptual inconsistencies inherited from Mejoredu—and still present today—can be found in the *Guidelines for Learning Assessment* (2025).

From its very table of contents, the document assigns to assessment the purpose of "improving learning rather than merely grading it" (SEP, 2025, p. 10), revealing a basic conceptual misunderstanding: attributing to the assessment instrument a transformative capacity that exceeds its very nature. As widely recognized in the literature and by most education stakeholders, assessment does not, by itself, produce better learning outcomes; its contribution lies in providing valid and useful information that enables teachers, school leaders, and policymakers to act accordingly. Shifting responsibility for learning onto the assessment instrument is not only a fundamental analytical error but also weakens its legitimacy and diminishes its practical value as a tool for decision-making aimed at improving student learning.

By accepting a secondary role in shaping education policy and the broader educational agenda—even while enjoying substantial financial resources and significant technical capacity—Mejoredu prioritized the production of discourse over the strategic and operational design of data systems and the subsequent generation of information and knowledge, despite receiving considerable public funding that proved inconsistent with its limited results.

1 In pursuit of this objective, they ultimately led Mexico to cease fulfilling the commitments and responsibilities it had officially assumed as a founding member of UNESCO's Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE). As a result, the country lost—without justification—the detailed data from the 2019 Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (ERCE) and effectively withdrew from the initiative without offering any explanation.

2 Documented by some officials from state-level evaluation agencies.



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3. The Need for a New National Project

Mexico's educational history offers clear guidance regarding the purpose of educational evaluation. From the earliest initiatives of the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, SEP), figures such as José Vasconcelos and Jaime Torres Bodet conceived schools as central spaces for cultural formation and civic development, where evaluation was intended to play an instrumental role in guiding instruction and ensuring the acquisition of essential learning. Within this tradition, evaluation is neither an administrative end in itself nor a mechanism of control, but rather a means of guaranteeing the right to learn and continuously improving educational practice. Its primary function is to generate evidence that helps explain teaching and learning processes, identify educational gaps, and inform public policy. Yet a significant gap has persisted between this conceptual consensus and institutional practice. Part of this disconnect can be explained by the incentives embedded in the political system: translating evidence into effective decisions requires technically demanding, medium-term processes with uncertain political returns, often reducing their priority on the government's agenda.

From the perspective of legal theory, fundamental rights require institutional mechanisms capable of guaranteeing their

fulfillment. Rights are not made effective merely by being declared; they must also be protected through legal and organizational arrangements that hold the State accountable for ensuring them (Ferrajoli, 2016). In the field of education, the existence of independent evaluation systems is therefore a necessary condition for fulfilling the State's educational obligations. In this sense, the production of evidence is not a complementary activity but a substantive guarantee of the right to learn.

Guaranteeing the rights to and within education requires—but is not limited to—the existence of a large-scale evaluation project embedded in the everyday functioning of the education system. The absence of reliable and timely educational information has shifted public debate into the realm of speculation, where evidence is replaced by narratives, anecdotes, or ideological positions that often confuse outcomes with initiatives or resource allocations precisely because evidence is lacking. After so many years under these conditions, the consequences of this distortion are far from trivial. The absence of technical criteria to guide decision-making has weakened the rationality of public spending and encouraged discretionary decisions and practices in one of the country's most socially and financially significant sectors. In this context, controlling information—particularly by withholding unfavorable data—has become a political resource that has not only enabled but also incentivized persistent practices of opacity, eroding institutional trust and undermining accountability.



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The discontinuity in the production of evidence across all areas has fragmented the spaces for dialogue among education stakeholders. One of its most visible consequences is that the right to learn increasingly appears to be irrelevant, as reflected in the growing disconnect between measurement, analysis, and decision-making by education authorities. As a result, society has also lost much of its collective capacity to define priorities and build informed consensus on how to improve educational conditions and foster the holistic development of children and young people, beyond official indicators or large-scale certification initiatives.

4. Building the Foundations of a New Evaluation Ecosystem

The persistence of weak evaluation practices and fragmented regulatory frameworks is not merely a technical problem; it reflects a deeper crisis in the way the education system is conceived and governed. Recent attempts at institutional reconstruction have largely reproduced the shortcomings of the past—fragile institutional arrangements, outdated procedures, and limited conceptual coherence—without responding to the scale or complexity of today's challenges. Ultimately, this situation reveals the fragility of a long-term educational project in which the relationship between evidence and public decision-making has become virtually nonexistent, making the system increasingly vulnerable to political shifts and improvised policymaking.

Part of this fragility stems from persistent narratives that have succeeded in portraying evaluation as an unnecessary tool—criticized for its technical limitations because it does not provide all the answers, and dismissed as disconnected from decision-making because it is perceived as insensitive. Combined with implementation processes that have often been cumbersome, costly, and inefficient, these narratives have shifted the debate away from how evidence should be used and toward disputes over institutional control of highly specialized personnel and public budgets. The result has been a disproportionate emphasis on organizational architecture—who conducts evaluations and from where—rather than on the substantive questions: why evaluate, what information should be produced, and how it should be used to improve education.

Overcoming this impasse requires recognizing that the education system does not function as a linear hierarchical structure but rather as a complex, dynamic, and interdependent network. Within this network, students, teachers, schools, authorities, technologies, and civil society organizations interact continuously, generating multiple flows of information and feedback. While this complexity increases uncertainty, it also creates opportunities for innovation, provided that appropriate mechanisms exist to capture, interpret, and use evidence in ways that are distributed, contextualized, and useful for all those engaged in education.

Operating an education system without reliable information means, in practice, making complex



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decisions blindly. This not only limits the effectiveness of public policy but also contributes to perpetuating inequality by preventing the timely identification of the most vulnerable populations and the targeted allocation of resources. Against this backdrop, it is essential to move beyond the traditional model of federal institutional autonomy and abandon rigid political and bureaucratic approaches to creating yet another national evaluation agency. In light of this complexity, the evaluation ecosystem itself must be reimaged. Both national and regional experience suggest that the solution is not to build stronger institutions in the traditional sense—centralized, rigid, and politically exposed—but rather to develop more flexible, adaptive structures embedded within the educational ecosystem, capable of learning, adapting, and strengthening themselves in the face of uncertainty, change, and political pressures³.

Achieving this requires, as a *sine qua non* condition, the design of a distributed governance model that enables broader and more collaborative participation among different stakeholders, beginning with state governments as the primary beneficiaries of generating, sharing, and communicating evidence about the evaluation of different components of their education systems in clearer, more agile, and more effective ways, with particular—though not exclusive—attention to student learning. Rather than strengthening a single institutional node, this approach would build an interinstitutional network integrating universities, research centers, civil society organizations, and state education authorities under the principle of

technical autonomy combined with a high degree of shared social responsibility.

By embracing this logic of antifragility, the new evaluation ecosystem could become not only more resilient to external pressures but also capable of learning from them and emerging stronger in contexts of uncertainty and change. In education, this implies diversifying and integrating multiple sources and types of information. For example, learning outcomes could be combined with contextual variables collected by other institutions, promoting broader use of evidence while reducing bureaucratic burdens and minimizing discretionary decision-making. Likewise, implementation could proceed gradually, taking into account the capacities of individual states in order to decentralize the interpretation of results while ensuring that methodological standards guaranteeing the validity and comparability of evidence become part of an effective process of continuous improvement at both the system and school levels.

An evaluation ecosystem built along these lines would make it possible to establish a public value chain describing how evidence is collected, processed, and produced, thereby creating stronger opportunities to transform data into contextualized information, generate knowledge useful for teaching practice, and translate that knowledge into more transparent and effective

3 Nassim Nicholas Taleb offers a comprehensive account of what he terms antifragile systems.



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public policy decisions. At the same time, such an ecosystem would help identify not only persistent educational gaps but also encourage the emergence of self-organized networks capable of sharing successful practices and highlighting sources of resilience that arise under adverse conditions, thereby expanding the range of solutions available to address specific educational challenges.

From a normative perspective, this redesign is fully consistent with the mandate established in Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution, which calls for an education system grounded in scientific knowledge and committed to the "pursuit of excellence in education, understood as the continuous and comprehensive improvement that promotes the highest possible learning achievement for students" (Congress of the Union, 2019b). Fulfilling this mandate also requires aligning the governance of the education system with the principles of simplicity, efficiency, and sustainability: parsimonious institutional arrangements, streamlined processes, and organizational capacities capable of enduring and adapting over time without losing coherence.

Within this framework, the governance of the new evaluation ecosystem should be understood as a combination of state capacity and public trust (Cerna, 2014). This entails designing institutional arrangements that avoid both rigid bureaucracy and political capture while prioritizing transparency, collaboration, and accountability. Ultimately, the central challenge is not to create yet another organization but to build a system of more symmetrical relationships capable of granting social legitimacy to the planning, production, and use of evidence, with greater fairness and fewer prejudices and stereotypes.

Ultimately, the success of this new project will depend less on its formal institutional design than on its ability to become embedded within the educational ecosystem and generate value for its users. To achieve this, the production of valid and reliable information must be recognized as both a public good and an educational right, relevant not only to government authorities but also to teachers, school communities, and society as a whole. Only then will it be possible to rebuild trust and design a new evaluation system capable of effectively contributing to the realization of the right to learn for everyone in Mexico.



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FINAL REFLECTIONS

1. Without evidence, there can be no sustainable public policy. The erosion of educational evaluation has weakened the State's capacity by replacing reality with political narratives, giving rise to increasingly simplistic education policies that are ever more detached from accountability. Recovering valid, contextualized evidence is an essential condition for guaranteeing the right to learn and for supporting effective, legitimate public decision-making.
2. Subordinating evaluation to systems of rewards and sanctions distorts its purpose and erodes trust; yet relegating evaluation or failing to act on its findings is no alternative. Reorienting evaluation requires moving beyond punitive approaches toward institutional learning: understanding and engaging with the educational ecosystem in ways that strengthen teaching and improve the pedagogical quality of educational initiatives.
3. Evaluation should serve to observe, not to be observed, because evaluating means recognizing the value of what is being observed. The complexity of Mexico's National Education System (Sistema Educativo Mexicano, SEM), viewed through the lens of the country's federal arrangement, requires acknowledging that complexity, learning from it, and building adaptive mechanisms capable of sustaining a flexible, distributed evaluation ecosystem with strong technical capacity. The challenge is not to recreate another cumbersome institutional structure, but to design sustainable institutional arrangements capable of producing evidence that is useful, reliable, timely, and broadly valued by state governments and society over time.

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MEXICANOS PRIMERO is a civil society organization that advocates for ensuring the right to learn for children and youth by driving improvements in Mexico's education policy.



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