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Report Ranks Mexico's Education System Last Among OECD Members

by LADB Staff

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Mexico continues to lag behind other semi-industrialized and industrialized nations in the quality of its education, a factor that some analysts say has contributed to the country's stunted economic development. In a report published in mid-September, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) ranked Mexico's educational system last among 28 member countries in the quality of education.

All OECD countries except Mexico made advances in improving their educational systems between 1995 and 2003. The report noted that South Korea, a country that had rankings similar to Mexico a generation ago, has vaulted to the top because of the reforms to education implemented in that country. South Korea has been able to develop a highly skilled work force, which produces some of the world's most popular cars and electronics.

In contrast, Mexico's work force is made up largely of assembly workers and other manual laborers. The report acknowledged that Mexico has boosted educational expenditures since 1995 by 36% at the primary and secondary levels and by 22% for higher education. Even with these increases, the amount spent by the Mexican government for each student has declined by 10%.

The OECD said the Mexican government spends about US\$1,357 per student at the primary level, roughly one-fourth of the average expenditure for all OECD members for the same purpose. "If Mexico uses itself as a point of reference, then educational expenditures have indeed increased since 1995," said Andreas Schleicher, who heads the OECD's education-monitoring division. "At the international level, the picture is radically different."

About 97% of the new money spent by the government on education since 1995 has been devoted to increasing teacher salaries, a testament to the strength of Mexico's teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion, SNTE).

While experts agree that improving the quality and the number of teachers is a crucial element of education, the government has failed to take other actions that would enhance education, such as constructing new schools and improving infrastructure, curriculum development, and student retention. "The trend in Mexico's education expenditures is not typical of the other OECD member countries," said the report.

Expenditures low on infrastructure, student retention

The lack of expenditures on infrastructure is also affecting the quality of public education. Some communities do not have enough school buildings to accommodate the number of students who

want an education, forcing local educational authorities to use split schedules. This limits the day at public elementary schools to four hours, compared with six or more hours at private institutions.

In some rural and inner-city communities, students have to attend school in crumbling buildings that often lack basic plumbing and leak during heavy rains. In many cases, public-school students have to pay extra fees to cover the cost of paper, pencils, and other supplies. To cover the cost of paper, one school in Mexico state was charging students 4 pesos (US\$0.35) to take a monthly exam.

President Vicente Fox's administration has sought to address the problem partially by expanding an anti-poverty program that pays some parents every month they keep their children in school. But this only benefits a handful of families, since many do not meet the poverty qualifications for participation in the program. The Mexican government on occasion receives grants or loans from multilateral organizations to improve education.

In July of this year, the World Bank approved a US\$300 million loan to support Mexico's basic-education-development program, which provides extra support to education for disadvantaged groups, such as children living in rural or marginal urban areas, and handicapped, migrant, and indigenous children. The loan is the third and final phase of the Basic Education Development Program, which the World Bank has been supporting in Mexico since its inception in 1991.

Mexican students fare poorly in aptitude tests

One measure of Mexico's progress or lack of progress in education is the aptitude levels of students. In a standardized global evaluation test called the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Mexican ninth graders placed 34th among the 41 nations participating in the exam and last among the 28 OECD member nations.

The same OECD study ranked Mexico last among member countries on the reading ability of 15-year-old youths. Only 6.9% of Mexican students surveyed had a high reading ability, compared with the median of 31.2% for the OECD members. The poor ranking in education has been an embarrassment for Mexico, which is attempting to portray itself as an emerging industrialized country.

The reality is that Mexican education still displays patterns of many lesser-developed countries, such as a high dropout rate at the primary level, particularly in rural areas. About 10% of students drop out of the educational system before completing middle school to take an unskilled job to help support their families. "There is a bottleneck in the system," Eduardo Velez Bustillo, education section manager for Latin America for the World Bank, told the Los Angeles Times. "Quality is bad at every level, but middle school is a crisis point because that's where the demand is highest."

Mexico's poor educational results have brought an outcry from the business community. It is urging President Fox's government to overhaul the entire system, which offers students little more than basic skills like reading, writing, and arithmetic. Business leaders say Mexico is still unable to compete with better-trained work forces in other countries and has to settle for low-skilled assembly jobs. On average, Mexicans attain only a seventh-grade education, and just two of every 10 students receive a college education. "A country without education is a country that won't develop,

and our system is even worse than people say," said Isaac Katz, an economics professor at the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). "No one is responsible for quality, results aren't measured, and parents have no voice."

Poor educational system hurts Mexico's competitive position

Some analysts worry that the lack of an educated work force in the long run will keep Mexico from attracting the type of high-value foreign investment that the economy needs. "I see a significant deterioration in competitiveness in Mexico's future," said Eduardo Andere, a professor of international studies at the ITAM. "In social terms, that means more poverty, more insecurity, and more inequality."

Despite the pleas from experts and business leaders, the Fox government has failed to produce any innovative plans for education and has proposed meager increases in expenditures for primary and secondary education in 2005. In its budget proposal for 2005, the Fox government requested about 300.6 billion pesos (US\$26.3 billion) for primary and secondary education, an increase of only 1.1% from the amount approved in the 2004 budget.

"Once again, the executive branch fails to comply with a mandate from Congress to increase resources for education, with the goal of eventually reaching funding equivalent to 8% of GDP in 2006," said a statement from the education committee (Comisión de Educación) in the Chamber of Deputies.

Furthermore, the committee criticized the Fox government for proposing to channel some of the increased expenditures in education to "unnecessary bureaucratic costs," such as a higher budget for public relations for the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). The full Chamber of Deputies is expected to consider an increase in funding for education, but even the legislative branch may not be able to boost federal allocations by the 87 billion pesos (US\$7.6 billion) needed this year to comply with the goals established by Congress to meet the target of 8% of GDP.

Education funding will be competing with other social programs, even though Mexico continues to enjoy a windfall from higher-than-expected oil-export revenues. Those additional revenues have been earmarked for allocation to state governments and payments of the domestic and foreign debt.

Responding to the criticisms, Public Education Secretary Reyes Tamez Guerra said the Fox government is not in a position to meet the congressional goals unless the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate approve comprehensive tax reforms to allow the government to increase revenues. He said the lack of revenues also blocked Mexico from matching the expenditures of other developing countries like South Korea, Chile, Poland, and Hungary. "We have to continue efforts to boost investment [in education]," said Tamez Guerra. "But we will not be able to catch up to the other countries as long as our GDP remains stagnant and as long as we lack structural reforms to allow us to boost revenues."

Expenditures also lag for higher education

The debate about funding levels also extends to higher education, where Mexico devotes less than half the average funding levels for OECD countries. OECD statistics show the government's

funding for public higher education amounts to about US\$4,000 per student, compared with the average of US\$10,000 for OECD countries. This is despite the heavily subsidized college tuition at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) and other public universities.

A government effort to raise tuition and fees slightly in 1999 was met with a massive demonstration (see SourceMex, 1999-06-02 and 2000-01-26). In its 2005 budget plan, the Fox government has proposed minor reductions in expenditures for higher education. The plan would reduce funding to public colleges and universities to the equivalent of 0.48% of GDP, compared with about 0.50% of GDP in 2004.

Expenditures for research in science and technology, which are separate from the higher-education budget, would decline to 0.35% of GDP, compared with 0.38% of GDP last year. "I cannot remain silent when the government each year reduces rather than increases the budgets for research and development and science and technology," UNAM rector Juan Ramon de la Fuente said during a meeting with Tamez Guerra and Public Health Secretary Julio Frenk Mora.

The UNAM rector has received the support of the Instituto Politecnico Nacional (IPN) and the Asociacion Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educacion Superior (ANUIES). ANUIES president Jorge Luis Ibarra Mendivil said the government has to increase expenditures for higher education by about 55 billion pesos (US\$4.8 billion) this year to meet the needs of colleges and universities. "The federal budget lacks resources to expand enrollment or to improve the quality of education," said Ibarra Mendivil. "The lack of funding also affects our strategy to implement structural changes to pensions and retirements [for university employees]," he added. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sept. 22, reported at 11.40 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The Dallas Morning News, 11/19/02; Reforma, 09/17/03; The Washington Post, 11/24/03; World Bank press release, 07/01/04; El Financiero, Agencia de noticias Proceso, 09/14/04, 09/21/04; Notimex, Los Angeles Times, 09/21/04; La Jornada, 09/15/04, 09/22/04; El Universal, 09/15/04, 09/21/04, 09/22/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 09/22/04)

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