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## **Government Requires New Skills Test For Candidates Seeking To Teach In Public Schools; Initial Results Not Encouraging**

*by LADB Staff*

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The Mexican government found itself in the midst of a mild scandal after the Secretaria de Educacion Publica (SEP) revealed that seven of 10 candidates who applied for new openings for teachers in Mexican public schools did not obtain an acceptable score on a test on basic skills and knowledge about education. The test, the Examen Nacional de Conocimientos y Habilidades Docentes, was administered in its current form for the first time this year, thanks to an agreement between President Felipe Calderon's administration and the teachers union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educacion (SNTE). Some observers say the exam results reveal longstanding flaws in the Mexican education system, in which the SNTE has had a disproportionate influence on the selection of educators to fill open slots in the public schools.

### *One-fourth of applicants attain acceptable score*

The SEP dropped the bombshell in late August, just before the start of the school year, when it announced that only 31,000 of the nearly 124,000 applicants for slots in the public-school system attained an acceptable score on the test. That is roughly 25% of those who took the test. Another 87,000 applicants fell into a middle category indicating that they needed more training. The remaining 5,000 failed the test entirely. The test, which determined competence in four areas of teaching, was administered nationwide, with only Oaxaca and Michoacan states opting out of the process.

In Guerrero and Zacatecas states, the test was only one of the criteria used to hire new teachers. The number of applications around the country was much larger than the 24,000 slots available in the public schools this year. In some years, there can be as many as 45,000 slots available. "With 31,000 applicants attaining an acceptable score, we have 7,000 more teachers than we need," said Education Secretary Alonso Lujambio Irazabal. Still, the test results caused strong reactions in some quarters.

The daily newspaper Vanguardia, based in Saltillo, Coahuila state, ran an editorial with a headline that read, Education: A National Embarrassment. The newspaper called the results "revealing and worrisome." "There is something wrong with the mechanisms we have in place to train teachers, and we bear some of the responsibility with our [deficient] higher-education systems and training methods," said Florentino Castro Lopez, education secretary in Sinaloa state. Lujambio acknowledged that the results are not encouraging on the surface but suggested that critics were overreacting. The SEP head said the exam was not intended merely as a tool to pass and fail applicants but as a system to select the best candidates for the public schools. Another problem, said Lujambio, is that education schools are turning out more teachers than the educational system can absorb.

## *Test creates new system of accountability*

Other observers noted that the exam creates a new system of accountability that will eventually help improve the Mexican educational system. At present, Mexico ranks 29 of 30 in an index created by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for its member countries. The index measures reading, math, and science skills of 15-year-olds. "For the first time, Mexico has begun to demand that all teachers who apply for new openings at public schools undergo a nationwide test," wrote US syndicated columnist Andres Oppenheimer. "And the dismal results of the first such exam...have led the country to come to grips with the depth of its educational crisis." Oppenheimer said the powerful SNTE for decades had a major say in how teachers were appointed, often taking into account political loyalties or accepting bribes. Mexican teachers obtained their jobs "by virtue of almost anything but their academic knowledge or teaching skills," said the columnist.

Still, implementation of the new system would not have been possible without the collaboration of the SNTE, which agreed to the changes after extended negotiations with President Felipe Calderon's administration, which wanted to try teacher-certification systems already in place in Chile and other countries in Latin America. Under the agreement, Alianza por la Calidad de Educacion, the SNTE agreed to cede power over the process in exchange for an administration promise to rebuild or repair some 30,000 schools around the country that have structural problems or lack such basic things as blackboards or chairs. SEP officials said applicants who did not attain an acceptable score but did not fail the test would have an opportunity for further training. "We are proposing to give remedial courses to existing teachers and that they pass a certification process in the next few years," said SEP official Jorge Santibanez. The SEP hopes to retrain about 15,000 teachers each year. "Adding together the newly hired and the re-trained teachers, we hope to renew the country's teaching work force within the next seven years," said Santibanez.

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