



## Education in Mexico

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### DESCRIPTION OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN MEXICO:

Primary (primaria) or elementary school is from first through sixth grades in rural areas, where kindergarten is not available. Most children start school when they are 6. In the cities, there is kindergarten, so most children start school when they are 5.

In the cities, there is at least one teacher per grade level. In the rural areas, there are many one-room schools where one teacher teaches multiple grades.

Since 1964, the Mexican government has provided free textbooks to every student in the primary grades.

Primary schools have big celebrations called “Kermes.” These occur on Mother’s Day, Independence Day, and Day of the Dead. Students prepare fancy costumes and rehearse dances. These are big celebrations for the parents to attend.

Many children, especially those in rural areas, stop going to school when they finish elementary school, either because they cannot afford secondary schools or because the family needs them to work. They are between 10-12 years old when they complete elementary school.

Secondary (Secundaria) school consists of grades 7-9. Secondary schools are most often in the urban areas. These schools are similar to junior highs or middle schools in the United States. Students must pay for their own textbooks and uniforms as well as provide their own transportation. Most students cannot afford these costs so they drop out of school.

There is no ability grouping in secondary schools.

High Schools (Bachillerato) are grades 9-12 and are for college-bound youth. Students take classes such as math, biology, economics, and humanities. They pay for their own textbooks and all other expenses unless they get a scholarship. High schools are found mostly in urban areas.

Technical Schools (Tecnico Profesional) provide vocational training for non-college-bound students. They are trade schools, and are usually only in urban areas. These



programs are two to four years long. Students pay all of their expenses to attend.

There are AA, BA, and Graduate and Ph.D. programs which are 4-5 years long. When a person graduates from these programs, he/she receives a professional degree called *Licenciatura*. These programs are very expensive.

School is four (4) hours a day from 7:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m. Some urban schools offer late afternoon classes so students can work in the morning and attend school in the afternoon. There is no school during the summer. Children go to school 200 days a year instead of the 180 required in Iowa.

Classroom life is more informal than in the United States. There is a lot of group work, student interaction, and movement. In primary schools, there is a mid-morning recess break to eat snacks and play outside. Most of the kids jump rope, play tag, and participate in many other made-up games. During recess they have snacks called *molletes*, a split bread roll with beans and cheese. They bring these from home.

Every Monday there is a patriotic exercise. Children display the flag, sing the national anthem, and listen to adults exhort them to be respectful and conscientious students.

Parents do not have many expectations about school or about their children's progress in school. This is because they often do not have an education. Some do not read Spanish or English. Parents just hope that their child will make it through at least 6<sup>th</sup> grade so that the child can help the parents read important documents.

Teachers do not expect parents to do much other than make sure homework is done. Parents and teachers are very strict when it comes to homework. In the cities, parents make sure their children do their studies. In poor rural towns, often parents do not help with the homework because they cannot read. They still make the children do the homework and rely on them to tell the parents when they are finished.

Families in Mexico have a great deal of respect for teachers, administrators, and anyone who works at the school. Parents expect the schools to do everything and trust that they will. It is not the norm for parents to intervene in school matters unless asked. They do not approach teachers except at the festivals—those may be the only times they see the teachers. Even then, they will usually not approach the teachers because they have so much respect for them.

Teachers do not contact parents if their child has an academic problem. They will sometimes contact parents if there are behavior problems. This is easier for teachers to do in the cities than in the rural areas. If students are failing in school, no one does much. There are no interventions except to make the student repeat the grade. There are no special education services or alternative schools for the children to attend.



## OTHER FACTS ABOUT THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN MEXICO:

Students are expected to show respect to the teacher.

Principals are called *Director/a* and teachers are called *Maestra*.

Each student, starting in first (1<sup>st</sup>) grade, takes five exams per year. Students must pass these exams in order to be promoted to the next grade. If they do not pass the exam, they must repeat the grade. Students in grades 7-12<sup>th</sup> take a national exam each year.

The grading system for public and private schools on homework assignments or projects is:

- 0 - 5.9 - failing
- 6 -10 - passing with 10 being an A, or perfect score.

If the student's overall grade for the course is 6 or lower, he/she is held back.

Report cards are sent home several times during the year. There are no formal parent-teacher conferences like there are in Iowa.

There are some private schools in the cities. Anyone can go to them if they have money to do so.

Many parents in Mexico, especially those who live in the rural areas, have not had an education.

Many, but not all, students in rural communities are isolated and poor. They are often unable to attend school due to impossible roads, family responsibilities, or the need for children to work. Some families cannot afford to pay for travel, textbooks, uniforms and other costs after 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The same is true for poor urban students, although there are more school choices where they live.

More students struggle with education in the rural areas. They do not have academic support from parents because most parents do not have an education themselves, so the parents do not know how to help. They do understand that education is valuable. In many cases, students in rural areas work after school for many hours picking cotton or whatever crop is in season, so they can be tired and unable to focus while at school because they have not had enough time to rest. Kids rarely eat well balanced meals; usually their meals consist of rice, beans, bread and/or potatoes.

Teachers sometimes pay bribes to be in the national educational workers union and teach in urban areas, leaving rural areas with teachers who are not always prepared to teach.



## COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS:

Because parents in Mexico were not expected to get involved, the parents now residing in the United States do not always know *how* to get involved unless they are told/shown how to do so. This writer believes that as long as you contact the family, the family will want to be involved. Families in Mexico have great respect for school teachers, but also can feel very intimidated by them.

The best way to communicate with parents is to go to their homes and visit. If that isn't possible, telephone them. They like to be contacted and welcome visits or phone calls. Be sure to have a bi-lingual person make the phone calls or go on the home visits. Letters do not work well even if they are written in Spanish because some of the parents cannot read or do not read well.

Like other parents in the Iowa, these parents do want their children to have an education. They want the best for their children.

Parents will cooperate and do what the teacher asks them to do. They will come to school for conferences, if asked, but they will probably not be very comfortable doing so. To make them feel more welcomed at school, have an interpreter available. Also, take time to do some small talk. Talk about your own family and things you like to do. Families will feel more comfortable talking with you if they feel they have a relationship with you.

Sometimes, no matter what you do, families will not feel comfortable at school or talking with educators because they are intimidated by them. Other reasons they may feel uncomfortable are because they don't understand English well, and because they do not have a social security card.

Sometimes, when the children are 16 or 17, they want to quit school and go to work. Most parents will let them. They hope their children like school and will go on to college, but they do not make them do so.

If there is a father in the family, he will usually be the decision maker regarding school. Thus, it is best to have both parents come to the conferences or at least the father. Most mothers will not make a decision unless they talk with him. If there is a dad in the family, it is important to remember that he may not be the dad of all the children in the family. If this is the case, he will probably only be involved with his own children.

Sometimes teachers inappropriately place Latino students in special education programs and in low reading and math ability groups instead of assessing how speaking a different language may be part of the problem.



Teachers from any ethnic background can act as cultural brokers who help Latino children to succeed in schools and to achieve their dreams. Teachers can encourage the dreams and goals of Latino children. For example, at a school in California, fourth graders wrote a children's book in English and Spanish discussing the links between career dreams and going to college, high grade points, and scholarships. In Arizona, teachers encourage Latino parents to come into the schools as sources of valued expertise. Latino staff can act as *comadres* and *compadres* (godfathers, godmothers) and help parents who may have had little to no schooling in Mexico. They can act as a guide to the children in school and in life. They can be mentors and positive role models who share the same heritage and culture. They can have supportive attitudes toward children similar to those of family members but can offer them a broader view of schools, college etc. They can link their worlds of family, school, street, and community with their personal dreams and fears for the future.