

## **What is real and what is rhetoric in the Mexico's 2013 Education Reform?**

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For you to get a clearer view of the polemical Education Reform in Mexico you ought to have some facts about education and education policy in the country.

Education policy and education curricula from kindergarten to 18 is ruled, directed or ordered by the national federal government. By constitutional law education in Mexico is a federal matter. States or local authorities implement the national policy; they are local CIOs as compared to the national CEOs, so to speak.

Under Mexican law, education is compulsory from K to 12. Kindergarten or preschool education runs from age three to five and children start a six-year long elementary school at six. Middle school or lower secondary school runs from grade 7 to 9; and upper secondary school from grade 10 to 12, although there are two-year long high school programs.

Student-wise, the size of the whole student population from K to university is around 40 million; all of them under the national law, and a national authority called the Secretary of Public Education (SEP). In this sense SEP is much more powerful than the U.S. Department of Education. Mexico is probably the most centralized OECD educational system. It is probably as centralized as the Singapore's high performing country, but in sheer numbers Singapore is a small city-state-nation of 5 million people compared to 118 million people in México.

Nobody knows for certain the real number of teachers hired by SEP or other sub-systems of education; and nobody knows for certain how many of the hired teachers are really sitting for class or doing "commissioned-type" work for special, some times no-transparent activities, for both the government or the union. Many constituencies have complained about this situation. They say that for starters this is a proof of corruption between the governments and the union. Official statistics number around 2 million teachers in the whole system of which 1.2 millions are teaching at basic education (K to 9).

There are several unions of teachers in Mexico, but by law, the union with the highest registered number of teachers is the one with the right to negotiate annual contractual agreements with the government. Union membership is mandatory in Mexico. Teachers have no way to opt out and the government retains a compulsory union's fee from their salary pay. This fee is transferred to the unions.

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The largest teacher union in Mexico is the SNTE (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación or Workers of Education National Union). Of course, over the years there have been some democratization efforts that have given rise to dissenters within the national union. One of these attempts gave rise to a “separatist” group that operates *de facto* rather than *de jure* called CNTE (Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación; or Workers of Education National Coordination Group). This group has been the one making all the street noise against the education reform.

What about the much more powerful in terms of members SNTE? Most of the teachers are SNTE’s main track teachers, and most of them are quiet. Dissenters are the minority. But here as well there are some contextual facts that you need to know before I continue the story behind the education reform.

The SNTE was born in 1943. Over the years as education became massive the education union grew in members and power. By the 1980s the union leader became very powerful and by government and media accounts very corrupt and anti-governmental. In 1989, and under the government of President Salinas, (influenced by a public sector modernization movement from around the world, sometimes called New Public Administration) many public policy reforms were launched. Well, in the late 1980s the Salinas’ government tried to pave its way for the new reforms by removing a couple of very powerful, and again, perceived, very corrupt union leaders. One of those leaders was the SNTE leader. A teacher, who later became known as “La Maestra” (“The woman teacher”), replaced him. For years she was wooed and lured by the national government to implement modernization projects or keep teachers in the classrooms and peaceful. The government and the union developed a close corporatist relationship that lasted until late 2012. One of those projects was the 1992-1993’s education reform. Since then, La Maestra and her union became very powerful, not only in union matters but also in policy and political matters.

Under the former President of Mexico, Felipe Calderón’s regime, La Maestra became very influential. She was even able to place her son-in-law as assistant secretary of basic education at SEP, the second most important and influential position in national school education in Mexico. But not only that, for decades she managed to get annual real salary increases for teachers who for decades earned very low salaries. But most importantly, her union became co-signer in all relevant national new policies of education. She was so powerful that some people would call her the *de facto* vice president of Mexico. Presidents came and went under her tenure but her power and influence in politics and policy became uncomfortable to policy makers and politicians. Since she was no shy at all in showing off her political muscle she became very unpopular. Her low charisma and extravagant way of life didn’t help either. She was shrewd but not smart enough to foresee her demise.

The same day that President Peña’s constitutional education reform was officially published she was arrested (at the writing of this post, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013 she is still in jail). The news became national level immediately, and the President’s popularity

skyrocketed among the media and the public opinion. Ever since the SNTE's leaders and most of teachers have been very quiet and accommodating to the education reform. That is not the case with the dissenters.

After the constitutional approval some secondary laws had to be passed by the national or Union Congress. During the last two weeks three new laws were passed pending only the presidential approval (promulgation) and the publication by the federal registrar.

What are some of the main issues with the education reform?

- 1) Evaluation and assessment of school education becomes a national state policy. A new national body of evaluation called the Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación (National Institute for the Evaluation of Education) has been established with federal state powers. This is an agency with a governing body of five prestigious former academic professors or researchers, La Junta, which will be able to set national assessment policies, practices and criteria that will influence national education policies as well. This Junta has the power to overrule or nullify any evaluation attempt or exercise against the federal wishes. This Institute (INEE) will set up binding policies for federal and local authorities of education and even set the rules for the assessment of teachers and students. La Junta will also be able to set the minimum criteria to become a, or remain as teacher from K to 12 grades. Indeed, a very powerful mandate.
- 2) A new civil career program for teachers is established with very precise rules and regulations. All teachers will have to be examined by law: if they fail to pass three rounds they will be ousted from the classroom. If failing teachers have tenure they will be given non-teaching jobs, positions or activities; no-tenure teachers will be fired. This is one of the outcries from dissenters and no-dissenters alike. Historically teachers' unions, with the acquaintance or acceptance of governments, were able to name, handle or manage the hiring and promotion of teachers, principals and supervisors. Some arrangements between the unions and governments even allowed the sale and inheritance of "plazas" or teachers' jobs. This was part of the explicit or implicit corporatist arrangement between the government and the unions. For years some academic experts and media observers regarded this practice as corrupt. Some local authorities on their own initiated changes in favor of some sort of open competition for assignments or promotions of plazas or jobs, but some kept the old system intact. Teachers who benefited from this "rare" arrangement of course don't like changes and bitterly oppose to the new rules. What the new authorities see as corrupt practices the union leaders and some teachers see it as a class-obtained gain after many years of work and negotiation. You have to know that historically teachers' salaries have been very low specially compared to the salary of the secretary and assistant secretaries of education. I once did research about the topic and the difference in the salary between an elementary school teacher and the high-ranking officers of national education

amounted to around 40 times without fringe and PR benefits for the latter. So, some dissenters and some main track teachers don't see these practices as necessarily corrupt but as a "well-deserved benefit" for teachers and their families after years of struggle. After all, the argument goes, many politicians and businesspeople have obtained law or governmental protections or benefits, sometimes monopoly-based, that have earned them much sizable assets to sell or inherent to their children. Changing the rules of the game in the middle of the game has made the big noise, and the problem does not have a clear-cut solution. Of course, no one wants a system of selling and inheriting jobs, but even as bad as it sounds, the full story has to be laid out.

- 3) Teachers, as deficient as they could be in their learning and teaching, have been selected, trained and placed by the government for decades. The national or state governments control the training of basic education teachers in Mexico. Universities are not allowed to train teachers for public or private basic school education, although many schools, especially private, have a way of gaming the system. There is no competition for training; there is a national curriculum set up and controlled by the national government; the newest curriculum dates from 1997; the national curriculum for basic education students dates from 2011. Quality is low. So, "what is the purpose of assessing teachers whose average cognitive quality is low and we know it already without tests?" Some say, this is a way of putting pressure on teachers. If the new assessment policy is criterial (i.e., what they should know) most of them will flunk; if it is normal-based (i.e., what they really know) most of them will pass. This is a dilemma: If most of them fail, where from are we going to find the new teachers? If most of them pass, we will keep the same low level of quality in teaching. The new laws-to-be have loopholes that could allow teachers to fence-off from the consequences of high stake assessments, however, they also grant authorities enough lee-way to apply strict measures of assessments and accountability to teachers, principals, supervisors and students.
- 4) There are some miscellaneous provisions like autonomy to schools, bans to junk food in schools and full-day schools that follow popular perceptions rather than academic recommendations.

Apparently, most of the teachers in the streets come from the poorer states of Oaxaca, Michoacán and Guerrero. They face one more strategic challenge: the more education policy is centralized the less bargaining power they have in education and labor matters. With decentralization they would negotiate at a local level, where they maximize their negotiating power; with centralization a group of local teachers, from one federal entity among 32 federal entities, has to negotiate with the national government.

At the end it is not clear how everything will change, my own perception is that the new government bought the wrong diagnosis of the causes of the low quality of education in Mexico. The new government fell into the spell of the corporations' view of education reform: more testing, more accountability, more pressure on

teachers, more standardization, and less unionization. Little is said about the real causes of education failure: poverty, segregation, inequality, low quality in selection, training and placement of teachers, and lack of family, school and community learning environments. Does this sound similar to the U.S. education reform pushed by big business and private donors?