Northern Sub-region State of Affairs:
Canada, United States and Mexico[π]

Mexico 2004

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides an account of education systems in the northern sub-region, which include Canada, the United States and Mexico, within the framework of the "Design of Policies and Strategies for the Prevention of School Failure" document of the Organization of American States (OAS) - Interamerican Agency for Cooperation and Development (IACD), aimed at gradually reducing repetition, overage, underachievement and drop-out.

Now, some questions must be raised in order to better understand educational backwardness in the continent: which are the main characteristics of educational policies aimed at fighting backwardness? Are institutional changes significant variables for obtaining results in this area?

Thus, we notice that educational backwardness is a problem present in the three countries. The differences between them are magnitude and causes. The programs to be developed and implemented will depend on the institutional framework (the rules of the game) and on the problems that originated them. Thus, while geographic dispersion is an explanation for backwardness in Canada and in the United States the issue is explained by immigration and the need of immigrants to learn English, in Mexico the reasons are poverty and racial discrimination.

The solutions also differ. Canada has a highly decentralized system, all regions take part in it and consensus is required. In the United States, educational policy is also highly decentralized, implemented through a federal administration that tries to compensate State and local policies. Mexico has a strong central agency and the regional agencies are mostly operational. That fact is evident when analyzing budgetary allocations and distribution.

In order to expand the above mentioned issues and to learn about the policies of the three countries, this document has been organized into five sections: 1) description of the general characteristics of the sub-region countries; 2) comparative analysis and description of their education systems; 3) comparison of educational indicators on educational backwardness; 4) comparative analysis and description of the main education programs aimed at fighting educational backwardness; and 5) final remarks.

1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

Great diversity is found among the three countries, as can be observed on Table 1. Important differences are population and economy size. Thus, the United States has 9.2 times more inhabitants than Canada and 2.8 times more than Mexico. Similarly, its economy is 11.9 and 11.6 times bigger, respectively, which explains why per capita income is higher in the United States (1.3 times vs. Canada and 4.2 times vs. Mexico).

Also, demographic growth differences are highlighted: Canada and the United States have a demographic growth rate lower than 1% while Mexico has 2.4%. This is an important indicator, since it will determine whether the installed capacity will be able to support education in the future.

As regards open unemployment rate, Mexico has the lowest one while Canada has the highest. It's expectable that under-employment indicators behave contrary to the previous, since the degree of formality in the Canadian and American economies is much greater that in Mexico.

As for the social and economic development indicators, it can be mentioned that Canada has the best performance: it has the lowest child mortality rate and the lowest income concentration (measured both by the Gini index and by quintiles). According to these two indicators, Mexico has the lowest performance. The same happens as regards poverty data, with Mexico with the highest proportion of people below the poverty line (Canada's data has not been supplied but it's supposed to be less than 40% of Mexico's).

Another important difference is public spending in education. While in Canada investment as a percentage of GDP is 5.7% and in the Unites States it is 5.2%, in Mexico it is only 4.4%. This is the first major difference to consider when analyzing the data.

Table 1. General statistics

	Canada	**United States**	**Mexico**
Population[1]	31,6 million	291,5 million	104,9 million
Percentage of population in urban areas[2]	79%	79%	75%
Population Growth[3]	0.3%	0.6%	2.4%
Gross Domestic Product[4]	US $838,4 billion	US $9,992,6 billion	US $864,4 billion
GDP per capita[5]	US $26,530	US $34,280	US $8,240
Child Death Rate (less than 1 year old)[6]	5.3	6.9	25
Adult schooling percentage[7]	11.6	12.0	7.2
Population below the poverty line[8]	N. A.	12.5%	40.0%
Open unemployment rate[9]	7.8%	6.0%	3.3%
Income distribution (Gini coefficient)[10]	0.315	0.464	0.454
Income Distribution (by quintiles)[11]	1st quintile: 5.2% 2nd quintile: 1.3% 3rd quintile: 6.7% 4th° quintile: 3.3% 5th° quintile: 3.6%	1st quintile: .4% 2nd quintile:8.7% 3rd quintile: 14.8% 4th quintile: 23.4% 5th quintile: 49.8%	1st quintile: 4.2% 2nd quintile: 8.2% 3rd quintile: 12.8% 4th quintile: 20.0% 5th quintile: 54.8%
Public Spending in Education as a percentage of GDP, total and basic[12]	5.7% 4.4%	5.2% 3.5%	4.4% 3.1%

Source: varied

1 Population Reference Bureau, 2004.

2 Population Reference Bureau, 2004.

3 Population Reference Bureau, 2004.

4 Population Reference Bureau, 2004.

5 Population Reference Bureau, 2004.

6 Population Reference Bureau, 2004.

[7] World Bank, 2004.

8 For Canada, the United States (2003) and Mexico (2003): CIA World Factbook, 2003. The data come from estimates for each country on an assumed percentage of population below the poverty line. The methodologies used by the different countries are not comparable.

99 Population Reference Bureau, 2004.

Canada, United States and Mexico: CIA World Factbook, 2003. The base year for all countries is 2003.

10 For Canada (1994), CIA World Factbook, 2003. For the United States: Census Bureau, 2003. For Mexico: INEGI, 2003d.

11 For Canada (2000): Minister of Industry, 2003. For the United States: Census Bureau, 2003. For México (2000): INEGI, 2000.

12 For Canada, United States and Mexico: OECD, 2002.

Given the size of its economy, the United States is the country with the highest per capita investment. On table 2 it can be seen that the difference is 1.2 and 1.3 times the Canadian investment and 4.9 and 4.7 times the Mexican investment. If the differences between basic per capita Public Spending on Education (GPE-according to its acronym in Spanish) and per capita GDP are analyzed, it can be seen that the United States and Canada have a similar figure (1.0 time) while the difference between the United States and Mexico is higher (1.1 times). This allows us to conclude that in absolute terms, normalized by economy size, the United States invests in education the same as Canada and 1.1 times more than Mexico[13].

Table 2. The United States compared to Canada and Mexico.

	Canada	Mexico
GPE per capita ratio (United States vs. the other two countries)	1.3 times	4.7 times
GDP per capita (Unites States vs. the other two countries)	1.3 times	4.2 times
GPE per capita / GDP per capita	1.0 time	1.1 times

Sources: calculated by the author based on Table 1.

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13 Taking into account the whole education system, the United States invests less than Canada (0.9 times) and more than Mexico (1.05 times).

2. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

In spite of the fact that the three countries in the sub-region have a federal system of territorial-political organization, their education systems differ significantly. There follows a comparative analysis of the three systems and brief description of each of the systems.

a. Comparative analysis

There is a significant difference in the competences and resources of each administration (federal, state or provincial –territorial-, district or municipality). This segregation of duties determines the degree of responsibility and autonomy of the different administrations, specifically the school administration.

The following table shows the main responsibilities of education systems. Canada has a minimum participation of the federal sphere. The systems are basically provincial or territorial and they, in turn, have the capacity of delegating functions to the districts and the schools. In other words, the system is highly decentralized. This organizational structure has its origins in the late 19th Century.

The United States also has a decentralized organization. While the federal government plays an important role, the states have a key participation in the system and they are the final authorities. In general, the states delegate many of its functions to the local school districts, including day-to-day school administration. The decentralized character of the education system has its roots in a tradition of local and territorial autonomy, existing in the country since its foundation.

Lastly, Mexico has the less decentralized structure. The system is organized under a federation in charge of pedagogical matters while the states look after the administrative aspects. This type of organization started in the early 20th Century and it was the result of the agreements signed after the Mexican revolution. Nevertheless, during the last decade of the 20th century an education reform was undertaken, which paved the way for more decentralized policies.

Table 3. Education competence distribution by countries.

Competences	Canada	United States	Mexico
National and international politics	Federation	Federation	Federation
Curricular	Provinces, districts and schools	States, districts and schools	Federation and states
Working teachers training	Provinces	States	Federation and states
Financing	Provinces	States, Districts and Federation	Federation and states
Administration	Provinces and districts (increasingly at schools)	States and districts	State
Equity	Federation and provinces	Federation, states and districts.	Federation and states

Source: different sources of the author.

The previous table demonstrates that Mexico is the less decentralized country and Canada the most decentralized. In a continuum of less decentralized to more decentralized we can place the countries according to the following chart.

Diagram 1. Location of each country in a decentralization continuum.

Mexico   United States   Canada
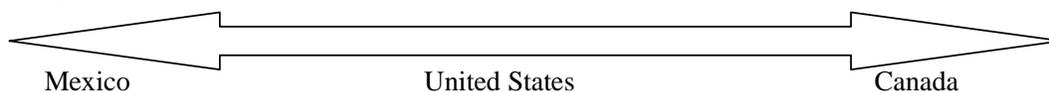
Another important aspect to take into account is the length of compulsory education in the three levels. In the United States, compulsory education varies in the different states, ranging from 9 to 13 years. Canada and Mexico have 12 years of mandatory education. The difference is that in the first two countries the regions themselves decide the length, while in the third country it is done centrally. However, there are differences in non-compulsory basic education, basically due to the fact that in Mexico there are three years of pre-school compulsory education.

The following chart shows how each country emphasizes the length of the different school levels, which has an impact on the starting age and maybe on the learning structure. Thus,

while in Canada compulsory education starts at 6 and in the United States that starting age varies between 5 and 8, in Mexico it starts at 3. Canada and the Unites States emphasize secondary education, while Mexico emphasizes pre-school and primary school.

Table 4. Number of school cycle years by country.

Competences	Canada (between 6 and 18)	United States (between 6 and 18)	Mexico (between 3 and 16)[14]
Pre-school	One	One	Three
Primary	Six	Six	Six
Secondary	Seven	Six	Six
Total	Thirteen	Thirteen	Fifteen
Total mandatory[15]	Twelve	Nine to thirteen (depending on the state)	Twelve

Source: different sources of the author.

These differences are important, the social dynamics implicit in mandatory education have an impact on societal learning structure. Pre-school (pre-primary) education is geared at building the bases for socializing; primary school, in turn, is aimed at structuring the basis of learning (in general the three countries have integrated or inter-subject curricula, which emphasize reading and writing and math); lastly, secondary school is, in general, oriented at strengthening knowledge with a propaedeutic process for post-secondary education (technical, vocational or professional) or the labor market, with special interest placed in specialized knowledge.

Regarding the length of the school year, it is between 180 and 200 days within 10 months in all three countries, with two vacation periods: one intermediate in the wintertime and another at the end of the cycle, for the summer.

Another similarity among the three systems is the certification of courses and levels. For the courses (school years) the responsibility is the school's, although teachers are in charge of it. In the case of repeating a school year, the parents play a very important role (that is the case in Mexico for the first year of primary school). Now, from pre-school to primary school the only requirement is to have finished pre-school education (recently this level has been made compulsory in Mexico). From primary to secondary school there is no examination (although some schools do have admission tests). In general, in order to

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[14] The school time and attendance years in the countries are due to the students backwardness margins (repetition, drop-out and mainly migration).
[15] Word Bank, 2004. Data for the 2001 year.

graduate from secondary school an exam must be taken, applied by different instances (according to the country). In the United States this varies from state to state.

Another important comparative indicator is the teacher/student ratio average. Important differences are observed among the countries. For example, the primary school rate for Canada is 17.4, in the United States it is 16.3 and in Mexico 27.3 (the difference in the latter is very important compared to the other two). The same ratio for secondary school shows a closer relation: 17.7 for Canada, 16.6 for the United States and 20.7 for Mexico.

Likewise, in the interior of the countries the difference in ratio between primary and secondary school is only relevant in Mexico. In Canada, the primary/secondary ratio indicates that the primary school rate is lower than the secondary school rate, in the United States the rate is higher for primary school and in both countries the relation is very close to one. Mexico has higher rates and ratios. The number of teachers per student is a very important figure to analyze. There are pedagogical methods that allow the implementation of educational strategies for many students (multi-grade), but the dynamics and materials are specifically designed for that aim. Learning in large groups is difficult, as well as the possibility of having a more personalized contact with the teacher, especially for underachieving students.

Table 5. Student / teacher rate, 2001

Competences	Canada	United States	Mexico
Primary	17.4	15.4	27.3
Secondary	17.7	15.2	20.7
Prim./sec. ratio.	0.98	1.01	1.32

Source: World Bank, 2004

b. Canada

The federal government does not have a central education agency. There is a Council of Ministers of Education– CMEC- that decides on national education policies and discusses regular education issues.

The CMEC ha a mechanism by which each minister consults and acts within a framework of mutual interest. It is also the instrument through which the ministers interact with national education organizations and the federal government. Additionally, the CMEC represents the educational interests of the provinces and territories on an international level.

Besides the CMEC, in the federal sphere there are only a few offices, mainly in charge of gathering statistical data (CMEC, 2004).

The federal government is responsible for funding higher education and technical schools. Post-secondary schooling is supplied by universities, colleges, community colleges, "*cépegs*" (general and professional education institutions) and technological institutes.

Another federal responsibility is the funding of education services for the indigenous population, Eskimos and the children of Armed Forces personnel. (Ungerleider Ch., 2002)

The basic education task falls under the responsibility of the provincial governments (ten) and territorial governments (three). Each has a state agency that coordinates the school system. The responsibilities of the departments (or ministries) are the following: drafting of legislation, policies and provincial priorities; financing, supervision of competences and teacher certification; evaluation of school's curricula, establishment of courses as well as the choosing or approval of textbooks; provision of financial aid; organization and regulation of financing trusts for districts and schools and determination of the duties of schoolmasters and teachers. (Ungerleider Ch., 2002: 3).

Educational legislation is passed by the provincial parliaments. Each province and territory has developed its structure and education institutions, reflecting its specific circumstances. The thirteen education systems have more similarities than differences. All the systems have a three-level structure: primary, secondary and post-secondary; and they have the obligation of providing universal and free education for the primary and secondary levels. (CMEC, 2003: 4).

The three northern territories (Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon) have been assigned the responsibility of providing education services to all its residents, including the indigenous population and Eskimos (except for three areas –Cree, Inuit and Naskapi in Quebec– that falls under that province's responsibility). The Canadian government provides funds for education in those territories and the three territorial governments have their own education departments to handle all matters related to educational services (CMEC, 2003: 4).

The provinces and territories have created local organizations for school administration, commonly known as "school boards". The school boards are made up of elected

community members with powers and duties delegated by the provinces. Their responsibilities are: local policy design; design and dissemination of the local curriculum; allocation of provincial resources and handling of local resources; distribution of funds to schools, construction and maintenance of schools; payment, promotion and recruitment of teachers. (Ungerleider Ch., 2002: 3). Also, professional educators (superintendents) are trained and certified. They are in charge of delegating duties to teachers. Thus, the provincial departments have delegated many of its administrative and curricular tasks to the districts.

In most provinces school boards are in charge of collecting taxes to complement provincial educational funds. Recently, though, their role has been changing. Since provincial governments are keeping a closer watch on their education systems, the number of school boards, as well as its control of economic affairs, has decreased. In 1997 in Ontario, for example, they went from 129 to 72. An effort is being made to have teachers participate more actively in the curriculum design. That is to say that the department delegates on the districts and these, in turn, delegate on the schools some sections of the curriculum; that delegation process goes from the general to the specific.

The school's responsibility is to implement federal policies and programs (planning and evaluation); to report academic achievements and the education programs implemented in the classroom.

Funding: funding for elementary education and secondary education is in the hands of the provincial governments; money comes largely from taxes. Provinces contribute 60%, the districts 20%, the federation 10% and the private sector the remaining 10% (Bedard G. and Ryall M., 1996: 34).

In seven provinces school boards get their funds from the provincial treasury, while other three provinces complement them with local taxes on property. (Ungerleider Ch., 2002: 9). The central government also transfers funds to the provinces to support education at colleges and official languages education programs (Alonso A., 2000: 3). That funding is mostly used to pay teacher's salaries, school maintenance and furnishing, school transport, etc.

Equality programs are funded through transfer formulas (at a district level). Given Canada's sprawling geography, one of the criteria taken into account is distance to school: (Bedard G. and Ryall M., 1996).

School Cycle: the school cycle covers 10 months a year, from 180 to 200 days, starting in August or September and ending in June of the following year. Some districts, however, have a large degree of autonomy in defining the start and end dates of the school year (which speaks of high district discretion). Also, the schools themselves define the length of the school day, but generally it varies between one and three hours for pre-school, five for primary school and six for secondary school. The same holidays are observed throughout the country. (Canadian Education Association, 1984: 16).

Compulsory education: education in Canada is compulsory for boys, girls and adolescents between 7 and 15 or 16 years of age, which generally covers the 1st to 10th grades (pre-school is not mandatory and it is designed for boys and girls aged 5 and 6). Free education is guaranteed until the age of 21, through public schools. There are some peculiarities in this regard, for example Quebec guarantees free education until the Cegep. (Alonso A., 2000: 5).

Certification: The Department or Ministry of Education grants certification powers to the schools, so that they can certify the student's advances from level to level. Some schools grant graduation diplomas to its graduate students. In other provinces, upon finishing secondary school, all students must sit for an exam that certifies the completion of basic education. (Alonso A., 2000: 4).

Pre-school education: most provinces offer non-compulsory pre-school education (kindergarten) aimed at preparing 4 and 5 year old children for 1st grade. Even though it is not compulsory, it is organized and monitored by the public system. There are many private education centers that provide these services, but the school system is responsible for monitoring its quality.

Elementary Education: depending on each province or territory, the school cycle begins at six (children between 6 and 11 or 13 years of age). Elementary education goes from grade 1 to 6, 7 or 8 according to the province, and upon finishing it students start secondary education. Some schools have continuity between elementary and secondary school. The

curriculum is inter-subject, based on reading, writing, computer skills, social and natural sciences, music and art. (Alonso A., 2000: 4-5).

Secondary Education: this level is for adolescents aged 12 through 18. In some parts of Canada it's divided into two: grades 7 to 9 (intermediate level) or "Junior Secondary Level" and grades 10 to 12, "Senior Secondary". In Quebec secondary ends in grade 11 and those students who wish to continue their education must obtain a diploma from the *Collage d'enseignement general et professionel* (Cegep) (Alonso A., 2000: 5).

The curriculum is designed to face different needs and skills, therefore it's organized in different academic and vocational modalities. The basic subjects are math, first language (English, French or the native tongue), alternative language (English for the francophone and French for the English-speaking), natural and social sciences, arts, physical education, religious or moral education and a broad scope of academic, technical and business courses (Bedard G. and Ryall M., 1996: 36-37).

In order to obtain a diploma, a number of credits are required, some of which are based on mandatory subjects and others on optional subjects. As mentioned above, in Quebec the education system has an intermediate level (Cegep), which lasts approximately two more years (Canadian Education Association, 1984; Bedard G. and Ryall M., 1996). In Ontario students must obtain the *Ontario Academic Credit,* (OAC), or grade 13 after grade 12 to gain admission to university.

In the year 2000 Canada had 6.1 million students in basic education, of which 8.5% were enrolled in pre-school (enrollment grew 0.6% in the 90's). Pre-primary education coverage is 45% for children aged 4 and 95% for children aged 5. For students between 6 and 15, coverage amounts to 97% (CMEC, 2004. Tables 2.1, 2.2 y 2.3)

c. United States[16]

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16 This article's information is based on the following texts sent by the United States Department of Education: U.S. Department of Education, 2004a; U.S. Department of Education, 2004b; and U.S. Department of Education, 2004c.

The United States has a federal education agency (the Department of Education), in charge of implementing federal education laws. Its mission is "to ensure equal access to education and encourage academic excellence throughout the Nation". Besides, the Department is responsible for collecting data and information on schools in order to disseminate it among educators and the public at large, so as to focus attention on the most relevant issues and problems and to reinforce laws preventing discrimination to minorities in all educational programs and activities. (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b: 29-31).

In the State sphere governments are responsible for educational administration and policy. Besides federal resources, the states allocate their own resources to finance education. At present there are 50 states, five territories and the District of Columbia.

State education agencies are generally in charge of the following: curriculum development and design of education standards; provision of technical assistance to school districts and schools; licensing schoolmasters and teachers; managing school achievement tests; planning and developing accounting strategies and reporting student development results to the Unites States Department of Education; defining the minimum requirements for graduation from secondary school, distributing federal and state funds among districts and establishing the minimum schooling days. The issue of educational standards became very important during the 90s, and by the year 2001 all states had developed a system of educational inputs and achievements. These benchmarks specify what students are supposed to know in the fields of math, language and social and natural science. (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b: 16-17).

Many states delegate administrative and educational tasks to local school districts, around 15 thousand throughout the country. Their functions may vary, but many have considerable discretion on budgetary and curricular issues. The following are the main and most usual functions of the districts: determining school budgets; distribution of money by school and program; hiring and payment of teachers and support personnel, preparing student's reports; implementing curricula; planning and managing working teacher's training programs; coordinating student's transport, construction and maintenance of schools and buying and supplying materials to schools.

Financing: public schools are financed by taxes and they are free for students and their families. Funding comes from the federal government, the states and school districts: on average, 50% comes from the states, 43% from the districts, 7% from the federation and other funds may come from private sources (NGOs, companies, etc.) (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b: 32-33).

School Cycle: the school cycle lasts 180 calendar days, starting in August or September and ending in June of the following year. In general there are three holiday periods: two weeks in December, one in March or April and a long vacation at the end of the school year. The timetable is from 8 am to 3 pm, but this may vary from school to school.

Ages: basic education is for children and adolescents aged 5 to 18, divided in three levels: pre-school, primary and secondary.

Certification: the validation of courses usually takes place in the classroom. Family members play an important role in this regard. Some states, however, have designed tests in order to validate secondary school. These tests may vary in content, format and level of difficulty.

Pre-school education: it exists in a variety of forms, including pre-school, day care centers, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Federal funds for this level are aimed at children from low income families. Pre-school age varies between 3 and 4 years old. Most 5-year-old children attend the public system. Many primary education establishments include kindergarten services (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b: 14).

Primary Education: in general it lasts from five to six years, the admission age is between 6 and 7 years of age. The average number of students per school is 477. In the year 2000-2001 there were around 64 thousand public schools and 16.5 thousand private schools. In general there is one single teacher for all subjects.

Secondary Education: the typical length is six years, and in general it is divided in two levels: middle school, that lasts for two years and high school, which is four years long. Students generally complete their secondary studies at the age of 17 or 18. Once graduated, they decide whether to join the labor force, to continue with technical or vocational studies or to continue with four years of college or university.

In average, secondary schools have a population of 714 students. There are 22 thousand public secondary schools and 2.5 thousand private schools. For the year 2000-2001 there were 5.1 thousand public primary and secondary schools and 8.2 thousand private schools.

Enrolment: for the year 2003 enrollment was of 53 million primary and secondary students, that is to say 98% of the population between 6 and 17 years old. The number of teachers is 3.4 million. (U.S. Department of Education, 2004b: 13 –Table 1).

d. Mexico[17]

This country has a <u>federal education agency</u> (the Secretariat of Public Education – SEP – Acronym in the Spanish version), that regulates the whole system. Its main functions are providing guidelines for all levels of the system (pre-school, basic, secondary and higher). This agency is also in charge of creating the elementary curriculum of basic education; implementing the initial training of teachers, designing teaching training strategies, approving the contents of the free textbooks; implementing a bicultural and bilingual education strategy for the indigenous population, providing tele-secondary services, fostering equality and quality in education, managing the Federal District's education centers, starting and promoting education innovation, designing educational policies for the disadvantaged population (street children, migrants, special education). During the last period of government special emphasis was placed on two important tools: performance standards (in different levels) and systematic evaluation.

The country is sub-divided in 31 states. Each state has a Secretariat of State for Education (SEE – Acronym in the Spanish version), that is in charge of the system's administration (the education system in the Federal District is directly managed by the SEP through the Under-secretariat for Education in the Federal District). They are in charge of providing pre-school education, designing regional curricular contents (history, geography and optional subjects); providing teacher training and updating services; licensing private establishments; supervising and advising schools and promoting education and research. The states act primarily as delegates of the federation in educational matters. States are

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17 The information in this section is based on Mejía F. , 2004.

organized in school districts, in charge of supervising and providing technical-pedagogical assistance.

Municipalities are in charge of: 1) editing books and other pedagogical materials, 2) providing library services and 3) promoting educational innovation research. At the institutions request, the municipality will take part in maintaining and providing basic equipment to public schools (Section 15, Law of Education). Their competences in education are limited to supporting the states, but they have little regulatory responsibility regarding direct support to schools. This is evidenced by the fact that education financing is concurrent on the Federal Executive and the federative institutions. Resources received by the municipalities will be used for implementing the three above mentioned activities. (Sections 25 and 26, Law of Education).

In this spillover of competences and resources, there are no specific regulations for schools. However, The National Education Plan 2001-2006 (PRONAE) specifically states that school reform is sought "....as the most appropriate means for generating a school environment leading to learning achievements, with the responsible participation of students, teachers, schoolmasters and parents"[18] (SEP, 2001: 139). The PRONAE also has other alternatives for changes, such as federal involvement in education, reform of educational contents and materials, information and communication technologies, a pre-school policy and teacher training services, among others.

Financing: financing is basically in the hands of the central government and the states. Financing from the municipalities is generally accomplished by means of transfers from the federation and the states. The federation accounts for a great deal of the general schooling funding, since a great deal of the schools competences are financed through transfers (teacher salaries and national programs such as Pronap or Quality Schooling).

School Cycle: education in Mexico has the same school cycle (between September and June), with 200 school days programmed and different schedules: three hours for pre-school, four for primary school and approximately six for secondary school.

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18 The concept of management should also be understood as lobbying: "The school community shall have the management capacity before the corresponding administration agencies to ensure a timely, adequate and sufficient allocation of resources and infrastructure for regular operation..." (126).

School ages: schooling in Mexico is compulsory from the age of 3 up to 15 or 16. There are three levels: pre-school, primary and secondary. There is a secondary education cycle that is not compulsory: preparatory school (preparation for University).

Certification: approval of all levels corresponds basically to the school. To promote from basic secondary school to preparatory, a mandatory exam must be given by the institution in charge of the preparation.

Pre-school Education: designed for children between three and five. As of the year 2004 this level became compulsory, therefore children that are to begin primary school (in the year 2007) must have finished this level first.

Primary education: is mandatory for children between the ages of six and fourteen, organized in six grades. It is also a requisite for entering secondary school. Primary curricula and programs emphasize mathematical logic, writing and reading comprehension. Thus, the curricula are organized in subjects with broad timetables for these competences, and a lower time allocation for the rest (natural science, history, geography, physical, civic and artistic education). The first three are integrated in one subject for the first and second grade, called "knowledge of the environment". This level has the following modalities: general, indigenous, community courses and adult education.

Secondary education: this level is also mandatory, and required to continue on to higher or professional education. It covers adolescents between twelve and sixteen years of age. It lasts three years. The different modalities are: general, technical for workers, adults and tele-secondary. Community education programs for the primary level and tele-secondary are two of the main alternatives implemented in order to reduce school backwardness in areas of scattered population.

3) EDUCATIONAL BACKWARDNESS INDICATORS

The following data describe the current schooling scenario by education level for Canada, the United States and Mexico, both from a statistical point of view and according to the definition of indicators included in the document preparation guidelines. Information comes from official sources. Enrollment, drop-out and failing rates were not taken into account due to two main reasons: one is that the different education systems have different dynamics regarding these specific characteristics: the Canadian and United States systems are highly decentralized and leave these issues in the hands of regional and local administrations; the second reason is that no database was found in order to perform a correct data comparison.

a) Pre-school

Chart 1 shows that Canada is the leader in net schooling rate, followed by the USA and Mexico; the last two have the same growth percentage for the period under observation. The United States went from 53% to 57% and Mexico from 48% to 52%. Regarding Canada, no data were submitted for the 2001-2002 period. [This figure is not considered important in statistical terms.]

Chart 1. Net Pre-schooling rate

Source: http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/html/Exceltables/education
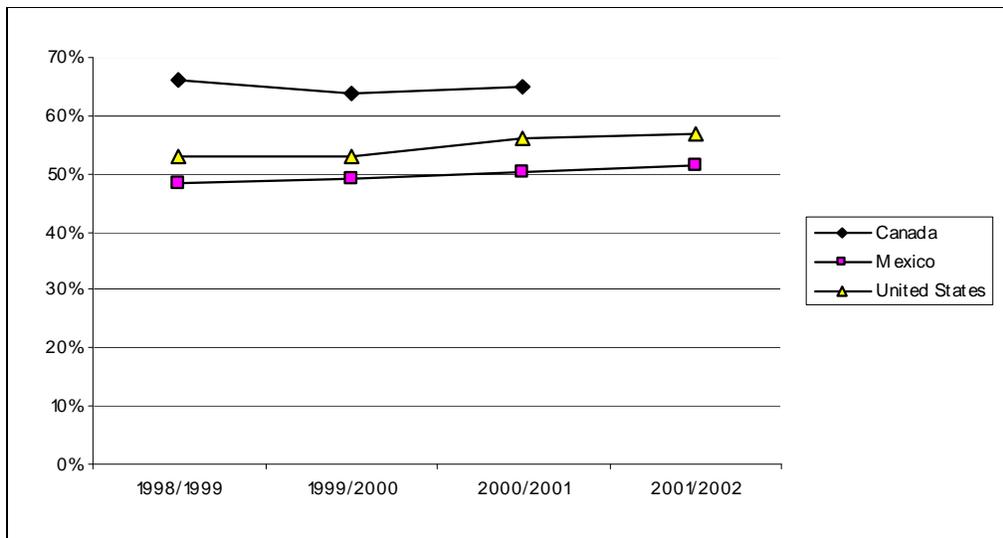
[De qué edades de tratan estas cifras?] Nota del T: comentario agregado al texto original.

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b) Primary

Canada shows an important increase in the schooling rate, with practically 100% coverage for the 2000-2001 period. The United States, on the other hand, shows a 1% decrease, going from 94% (1998-1999) to 93% (2001-2002). Mexico, in turn, remains stable at 93% for the period under observation.

Chart 2. Primary net schooling rate

Source: http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/html/Exceltables/education
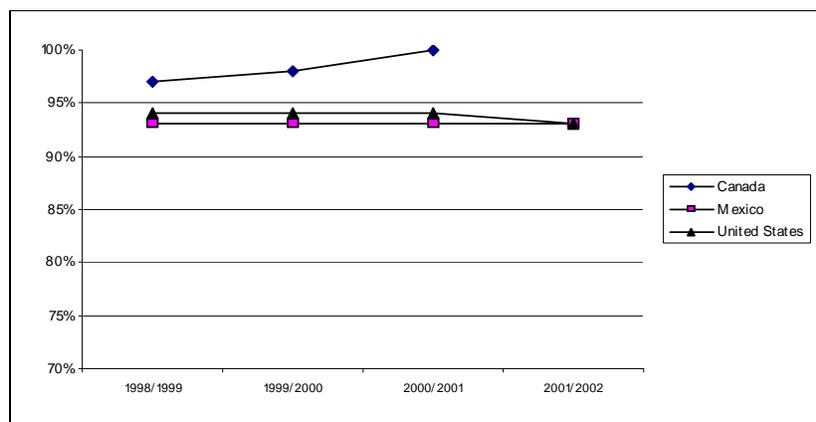
**c) Secondary**

Regarding coverage, in spite of showing a decrease the Unites States is still the leader with an 87% net schooling rate for the 1999-2000 period and 85% for 2001-2002. Both Mexico and Canada had a 5% increase, the former going from 78% general coverage (1998-1999) to 83% (2001-2002) and the latter from 55% (1998-1999) to 60% (2001-2002).

Chart 3. Net secondary schooling rate

Source: http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/html/Exceltables/education
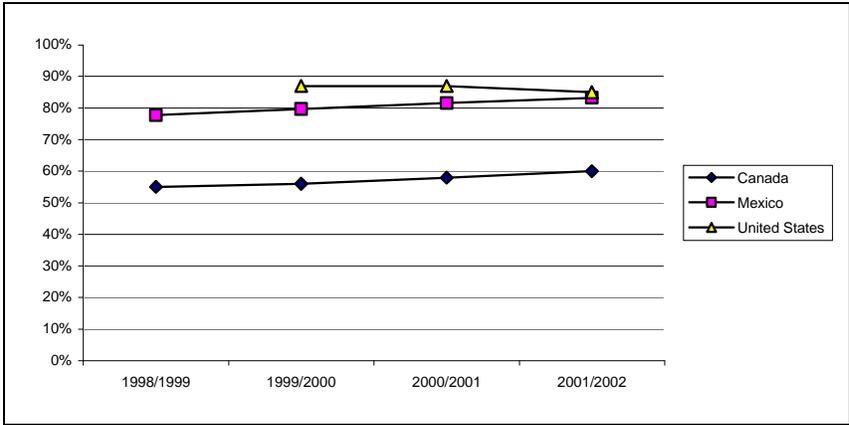
d) School-life expectancy

For the United States and Canada the school-life expectancy is 15 years. For Mexico, it is 11 years. None of the three countries showed any changes for the period under observation.

Chart 4. Schooling expectancy

Source: http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/html/Exceltables/education
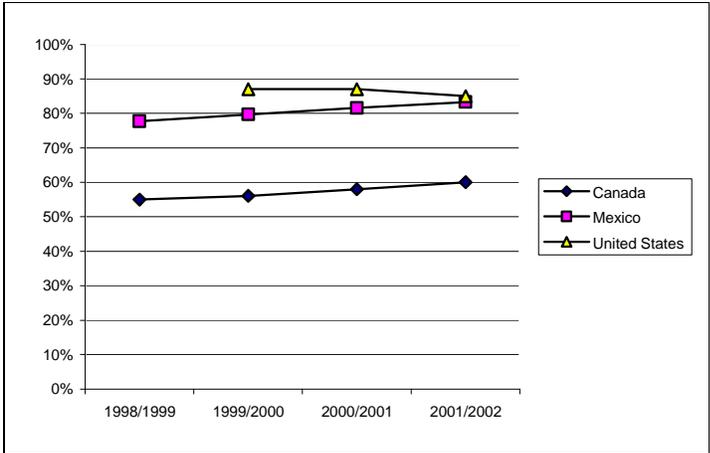
[Cuál el la fuente? No funcionó este sitio web.] Nota del T: este es un comentario agregado al original.

The previous indicators show that, in general, Canada is the country with the best performance while Mexico shows the lowest results. The United States is the leader in secondary schooling.

The results obtained so far show important differences among these three countries. Actually, it does not seem a homogeneous continental sub-region, since the three countries behave in a very different manner.

The variables analyzed so far must be considered very carefully. It cannot be said that a country's economic performance relies exclusively on its education system. It is understood that education is a factor associated to that, but not determined by it. There other factors, such as the country's history, that bear enormous importance to understand this development.

Also, development cannot be linked exclusively to institutional arrangement. Even if Canada has the most decentralized structure and also the best coverage results, this cannot be considered as the only reason. There are other factors such as poverty and wealth distribution that help explain this phenomenon. Investment and regional responsibility are also contextual elements.

Once the countries have been analyzed, the structure of its education systems and some indicators may help us understand educational backwardness. There follows a comparative analysis of the main programs that have been implemented to fight that problem.

4) PROGRAMS IMPLEMENTED TO FACE EDUCATIONAL BACKWARDNESS

The following are the main programs that each country in the North America Sub-region has designed and implemented to face educational backwardness. Data about the United States and Mexico has been taken from each country's State of Affairs Document, Canada's information stems from the Council of Ministers of Education's website[19].

The analysis undertaken considers school failure to be a problem stemming from complementary causes, which can be roughly divided into two: internal and external to the education system. The former refer to geographical, cultural, social, economic and family condition of students. The latter are related to characteristics of the schools they attend. A general policy intended to face school failure should contemplate both; that is to say that generating the conditions for the student to attend school is as important as the fact that the school should provide a high-quality education.

Thus, an integral policy in this regard must identify the problems and, specifically, its victims. Next we will present a summary of the main policies aimed at preventing school failure in Canada, the United States and Mexico, first in a compared manner and then country by country. A brief description is introduced for each, and where allowed by the available data, other characteristics are included, such as: responsible agency or agencies, problems to be faced, coverage, levels or cycles incorporated to the programs, some results and main challenges.

a. Comparative analysis

The characteristics of the programs that each country implements respond to two factors: the problem to be tackled and the institutional arrangements in place to do so. Thus, the description of each country's program shown below tries to evidence this in a detailed manner. This section includes an analytical model that tries to place the programs in such a way that their complexity and differences can be clearly viewed.

In general, Canadian education systems try to solve the most difficult variables: geographical dispersion of its population and cultural diversity among the indigenous

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[19] http://www.cmec.ca/index.htm

population, the francophone and the English-speaking. Other problems are also tackled, but the two mentioned above are priorities.

The American issue has more variables, since there are more factors at play: poverty, migration, violence, inequality in learning.

Lastly, the Mexican situation is closer to that of the United States, but that country has a weaker economic performance and a clearly different education system from the institutional point of view (in Annex 2 those differences are evidenced). In light of those two characteristics, this country's programs are designed to intensely address outside factors so that students attain the minimum conditions necessary that would allow them to attend classes.

The table below shows the programs and the two elements mentioned at the beginning of this section. It's important to bear in mind that many programs are not designed to face an exclusive problem, to its location is mainly due to emphasis.

Chart 6. Programs according to the environment where they have more influence.

Country	Programs aimed at exogenous factors	Programs aimed at endogenous factors
Canada	• Training, literacy and education for adults • Participation in international exams • Learning achievements measures	• Accountability • School improvement initiatives • Indigenous education • Students with special needs • The role of technology
United States	• Providing more information to parents about their children's progress. • Providing new options to parents whose children attend schools with improvements needs. • Allowing more flexibility and local monitoring • Even Start • Prevention and intervention programs for criminal children and adolescents, who lack care or are in a situation of risk.	• Identifying schools and districts with improvements needs. • Providing financial help to schools with a high number of poor students. (Title I) • Improving teaching and learning techniques to provide better information to teachers and parents. • Guaranteeing teacher's quality as a priority. • Actions to be emphasized. • Education for homeless children and adolescents, granted by the State and local activities. • Safe and drug-free schools. • Education for migrants.
Mexico	• Human Development Program. Opportunities. • Program for the Participation of	• Compensatory Programs • National Program for the Development of Indigenous Peoples

Comentario: Algunos programas, aquí tachados, tienen posibilidad de no ser continuados, bajo la solicitud presupuestaria 2006 del gobierno.

	Parent's Associations in School Management. • Free textbooks program • Secondary Education Program for Workers and Distance Education System (SEA – Acronym in the Spanish version)	2001-2006 • Education development program for street children. • Education services for the migrant child population. • Tele-secondary • Community Education Program • Quality School Program

Source: prepared by the authors

There are issues that are common to the three countries, especially those related to school management improvement, adult education, accountability, differences in cultural condition (migrant or indigenous) vs. the prevailing culture (English-speaking in Canada and in the United States and Spanish-speaking in Mexico).

There is a characteristic that is evidenced in Canada and in the United States and that is becoming increasingly relevant in Mexico: the evaluation and implementation of education system standards. As evidenced by Canada, a highly decentralized country, diversity does not prevent the implementation of standards.

b. Canada

Education is a priority in Canada. To be able to respond to an ever-changing situation and present-day education opportunities, the departments and ministries of the provinces and territories have developed, implemented and executed comprehensive plans for the betterment of education. These plans are focalized on Access, Inclusion and Achievement: "closing the gap". Access means granting the necessary conditions for attending school, inclusion means enabling access to all groups of people regardless of their education level; achievement refers to providing quality education to children that are in the school system, considering their access and inclusion conditions. Without a high education quality the first two objectives (access and inclusion) become meaningless.

With thirteen educational jurisdictions it is difficult to align best practices, innovations and changes. The examples included in this document illustrate the global services provided to communities that are being financed in order to expand access, broaden inclusion and attain higher achievements. For each revision, only a few provinces or territories can be included, but every educational jurisdiction in Canada has been working on "closing the gap" in a

direction that reflects the unique characteristics of its population. This is mainly due to the policies coordinated by the Council of Education Ministers of Canada.

1) Access

Given Canada's great size and economic dispersion – thirty million people in around ten million square kilometers – providing access to educational opportunities is one of Canada's greatest challenges. A large part of the population live in urban areas, but thousands have no direct access to roads and their means of transportation are ferries, boats or aircraft. This fact impacts heavily on equitable access to education.

Influence of geography on population trends.

In the northwestern territories geography has an enormous impact. The land surface is 1.2 million square km. and the population, 41,000, is scattered around 32 communities. As a result of that, 60% of students don't finish secondary education. Now, secondary courses for adults reach 95% of these small communities, making it possible for students to complete their education close to their families and home.

Migration from rural areas to urban centers is a phenomenon common to all jurisdictions. Authorities have responded with new projects, structures and funding. For example some regions in Quebec have witnessed the cumulative effects of the decrease in birthrate and migration to urban areas. In Ontario, it is expected that the school population decreases in all areas of the Greater Toronto by 2005. In some districts schools are operating at less than 50% of their capacity and in others only at 25%.

The role of technology

Amidst this scenario, technology is seen as a tool that may provide access to all jurisdictions. Towards the end of 2000 the *Saskatchewan Educational Technology Consortium* was created in order to provide guidelines on the use of technologies for achieving primary and secondary education goals. This initiative includes: working to connect teachers and students through a networked community; collaborating with school districts in order to develop web-bases of learning resources; supporting innovative teaching, face to face teaching and on-line classrooms, as well as providing on-line business opportunities in the education sector.

Alberta Learning is developing a Framework of Technological Policy and Teaching aimed at providing guidelines and coordination in the use of technology in learning systems in Alberta. This institution will report on ministerial decisions for establishing a context for assessing the trends, needs, best practices and new initiatives and ensuring that investment in technology is consistent with the objectives of learning systems, the priorities and optimum benefits for students.

Training, literacy and education for adults

Flexibility, collaboration and funding must be part of the "closing the gap" process in adult education. In 1994 New Brunswick launched a program called *Competitive, Recognized and Educated Workforce,* which established tax incentives and new government agencies with the objective of increasing employment. The project contemplates training in English or French at the worksite or adequate locations, as well as programs with intermediate academic degrees, computer training, skills development and other options such as classes to address employers' needs. Nova Scotia has introduced part-time courses, more flexible and accessible. All courses can be taken on the Internet, at a classroom or as a combination of both. In May 2002 Quebec announced its first State policy on adult education, accompanied by a 450 million budget for 5 year. Its goal is increasing the number of adult enrollment, providing support and counseling services, tools for recognizing new skills and a part-time study program.

2) Inclusion

This concept includes linguistic minorities groups, students with special needs and some students with disadvantages due to location, level of education, health and sex.

Indigenous education

Bearing in mind that Canada is one of the countries with the largest indigenous population, the inclusion of these peoples in education is a priority. Aborigines in Canada have one of the highest rates of poverty, school drop-out, poor performance and the worst group health indicators. Whenever education problems are discussed in Canada, the issue of aborigines takes center stage.

In April 1999, the Department of Education developed a mandate to produce bilingual graduates –Inuktitut (Eskimo language) and English – within a culturally relevant education system. In 2002 the *Language of Instruction Initiative* was launched and 6 million dollars per year for the following ten years were allocated for teacher training, resource production and curricular development. The remaining task is translating the whole curriculum into Inuktitut and developing resources including their own legends and oral traditions.

The Northwestern Territories have eight official languages. Within the guidelines of the Encouragement to Preserve Aboriginal Languages, a curriculum is provided in Inuktitut, there are immersion courses in languages and funds are destined to six different language groups in order to address the root of this issue. The *Yukon Native Language Centre* is a training and research facilitator providing language and education services to the public at large. The YNLC offers training and certification for Yukon aboriginal teachers; besides, it develops teaching materials for all Yukon aboriginal groups, including a curricular guide, video and audiotape language lessons and, more recently, interactive computer materials and a CD. The curriculum designed for the Yukon emphasizes language and culture and it includes fishing and art classes.

In a cooperative effort to support primary and secondary schools, the *Common Curriculum Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Program from Kindergarten to Grade 12* was developed as part of the Western Canada Protocol for basic education in the year 2000. The curricular guidelines are bases on aboriginal knowledge traditions and interaction with the world.

Students with special needs

There is a broad scope of programs for students with special needs throughout the country. In 1999 the Government of Alberta passed the *Student Health Initiative* (SHI) as part of the *Alberta Children and Youth Initiative,* aimed at enhancing access and improving the provision of integrated health services for children with special needs. *Alberta Learning* also works with agencies and other provinces in order to develop materials and guidelines for students with special learning needs, such as *Programming for Students with Special Needs* and *Teaching Students with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome*.

As part of the Province's new strategies to fight autism, Prince Edward Island has established model classes in school areas that are experiencing a high incidence of students with autism. This strategy gives teachers a chance to gain experience in the follow-up of children with this syndrome.

In order to face this problem, Newfoundland and Labrador hire consultants that provide professional developments and consulting services for teachers and other professionals. They offer programs, resources, ideas and training at work. The Department of Educations has published a document called *Teaching Students with Autism: A resource Guide*.

Language and literacy

Some studies show that the francophone minority in Canada between 13 and 16 have lower performance than their English-speaking counterparts. This requires special attention. Research has shown that these results are not attributable exclusively to education and learning. These students need to acquire the necessary skills to improve performance and effectively use French both as an instruction language and as a socio-cultural skill so that it can be used as a tool for learning, communication and self-realization.

Alberta supports a broad scope of programs of English as a Second Language for Adults. This State works jointly with the federal government and the states of British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia to support the implementation of English as a Second Language for Adults programs.

3) Achievements

According to the 2001 census, the number of Canadians aged 25 or more with university credentials grew 39% since 1996. The total percentage of adults with university studies was 20%, another 16% hold a college diploma and the percentage of holders of professional certificates was 12%. When these figures were compared among the OECD countries, Canada had the highest rate of university or college graduates. Notwithstanding that, ministers and departments of educations believe that it is still possible to improve these figures. A great deal of students can be encouraged to attend post-secondary education courses, the quality of education must be continuously monitored and tested, proven and

recognized knowledge can be expanded and schools and education must be assessed by the public.

Participation in international exams

International and pan-Canadian evaluation tools have helped define different levels of achievement. With special emphasis placed on reading, math and sciences, the reports of the latest OECD evaluations provide current results that can be internationally compared. Canada's position is generally high and its spread between the highest and lowest results is not very important. In a more detailed analysis, Pan-Canadian evaluation deals with other type of differences such as differences by region, sex and first language.

Public Accountability

The ministries of British Columbia and Quebec have developed strategies for adopting measurements that can help creating concrete actions for the improvement of primary and secondary education. Each school has identified the ways to measure results both from a qualitative and quantitative point of view. Plans cover a three-year period with annual intervals. Colleges have also prepared their own plans, including successful actions, strategies, measures, challenges and target groups.

Initiatives for school improvement

Alberta Learning has implemented the *Alberta Initiative for School Improvement*, which provides for the continuous improvement of education by encouraging teachers, parents and the community to work jointly, to introduce innovations and creative initiatives reflecting the needs and unique circumstances of each jurisdiction. Over UC $200 millions have been allocated to support this type of initiative.

Learning achievement measures

The methods and competences under which students are evaluated are under constant revision. *Quality Schools, High Results,* a section of the *Quality Learning Agenda,* is strongly focused on achievement and academic excellence by supplying quality teachers and ensuring a high degree of accountability of the school system with students and parents. Two of the main points of the *Nova Scotia Learning for Life* plan are quality and accountability.

Thanks to the *Aboriginal Learner Data Collection Initiative*, Alberta will be able to better measure how the education system satisfies the needs of aboriginal students regarding programs and services.

Newfoundland and Labrador use tests with reference criteria in languages, arts and math in grades three, six and nine. Success and the education gap are addressed with subsequent action plans developed in order to improve achievement through planning and professional development needs.

International recognition credentials

Achievement assessment is important for international recognition. For example the *Alberta International Qualifications Assessment Service* uses certificates that compare other countries' educational credentials with Canadian national and provincial credentials.

c. United States

1) Policies and strategies to prevent school failure

The "No Child Left Behind" Act (NCLB) is designed to improve the achievement of students with a history of low performance and to change the culture of American schools. This law is built on four main pillars: 1) accountability for results, 2) emphasis on scientifically-proven pedagogical strategies, 3) expanding options for parents and 4) expanding local control and flexibility.

Accountability for results

Identifying schools and districts with improvement needs.

The student's competences should be in line with the educational standard defined for each state. In order to achieve that, by the end of the 2013-2014 school period they must have developed benchmarks for measuring progress and ensuring learning. Each state must separate the student achievement data. The schools must take responsibility for all sub-groups so that no child is excluded. Data are analyzed in a differentiated manner: children belonging to different ethnic and racial groups, students with disabilities, students from economically disadvantaged homes and children who are learning English as a second

language. That data allows schools to identify groups of students in need of additional assistance to achieve the academic expectations of the state.

According to the "No Child Left Behind" Act, those schools that fail to fulfill the "adequate annual progress" definition for two consecutive years are labeled as "in need of improvement" and they receive special assistance toward that end. The measures taken by means of this Act help schools to identify areas and teaching methods in need of improvement.

Providing help to schools with improvement needs

Title I of the ESEA: *(Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged)* establishes rewards to states, local school districts and school with a large number of low-economic resources students, with the objective of improving the education of disadvantaged students, fighting low performance at school, improving the quality of teachers and increasing options for parents. The school's improvement plan must include strategies subject to scientifically-based research, which will strengthen the teaching of central academic issues, specially those identified by the schools as issues "with improvement needs". Those schools must also develop teacher training strategies and parental involvement in school management.

Improving teaching and learning and providing better information to schoolmasters and parents.

Teachers must provide an annual evaluation of the student's progress, with independent information about their strengths and weaknesses. This knowledge will help teachers develop lessons to ensure that students achieve or surpass standards. Schoolmasters can use this data to evaluate where schools must invest their resources.

Prioritizing teachers quality

The NCLB Act specifies the minimum qualifications required for teachers and other professional working as instructors in a classroom. This requires that the states develop plans to ensure that all teachers of central academic areas are highly qualified by the end of the 2005-2006 school year.

Providing more resources to schools

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States and local school districts presently receive more federal financing than before, thanks to the programs covered by the NCLB Act: $ 23.7 billion for the 2003-2004 school year, which represents a 59.8% increase from 2000 to 2003. This guarantees that schools with improvement needs have the necessary funds for optimizing education.

Scientifically Based Programs

What tasks to focus on

NCLB makes a special point on the implementation of educational practices and programs that have proved effective by means of thorough scientific research. Federal financing is used to sponsor such programs and we expect that schools will use this research and evidenced effectiveness to identify and select teaching resources and practices as well as professional development strategies.

More options for parents

Giving more information to parents on their children's progress

Under NCLB, each State must measure student progress in reading and mathematics in all grades from 3 to 8 and during grades 10 to 12. For the school year 2007-2008 there will be an additional science test. Such evaluations must be in line with academic contents and State achievement standards. These shall be given to parents jointly with objective data on their children's strengths and weaknesses.

Alert parents with important information regarding school performance

NCLB requires states and district schools to provide parents with detailed report cards that can be easily read and inform on current activities, their reasons and progress achieved. Report cards include data on the students' achievements. These are divided by race, ethnicity, sex, English language competence, immigration status, disability status and income status as well as important information on teachers' grades. In this way, NCLB ensures that parents have access to important information in a timely fashion on the schools their children attend and they are able to know if they are doing well or not in all of them despite their own background or condition.

Giving new options to parents whose children attend schools that need improvement.

In the first year when schools are considered as "in need of improvement", parents have the option of transferring their children to a better-performance public school within the same school district. Transport to the new school must also be provided. In the second year that the school is considered "in need of improvement" the school must continue to offer alternative public schools. Additionally, the school must give supplementary educational services such as free tutoring for low income bracket students who stay on at school, as an option.

Expanded flexibility and local control

Allowing for further flexibility

In exchange for strong accountability, NCLB gives States and school districts increased flexibility in the use of federal financing, giving more freedom regarding resource allocation. Directors and managers spend less time filling out forms and have more time to devote to students' needs.

Foster teacher development

NCLB gives States and districts the flexibility to find innovative ways in order to improve teacher quality. It also provides the flexibility necessary to choose the teachers' professional development strategies that will most help improve students' achievements.

2) Education Programs oriented to high-risk students in the US.

One of the objectives of the NCLB Act is to provide each of US's students with a top quality education degree, regardless of income or origin. The law redefines the federal role in education (K12) to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and minorities and their peers. Among these provisions, the law requires states to create standards so that a child will know what to do and what he will do in each grade. These standards must be developed as soon as possible for mathematics and reading as well as science in the school year 2005-2006.

(Title I, Part A) Improvement in academic achievements of programs for the disadvantaged).

Title I provides financial aid from the federal government through state education agencies to local school districts and public schools with a high percentage of poor children helping ensure that all children will succeed in learning the contents and standards of academic achievements corresponding to each state. Schools must concentrate these funds on children who are failing or that have a higher risk of failure regarding achievement of the state's standards of achievement.

Reading First

Built on a solid research basis, this program is designed to select, implement and provide professional development for teachers, using scientifically tested reading programs and to ensure accountability by means of a current, valid and trustworthy diagnosis and of a class-based assessment.

Even Start

Through this program, federal funds are directed to state education agencies to help improve the academic achievement of youngsters and their parents, especially in the reading field. Even Start provides family literacy services for parents with low literacy levels or for those who have limited abilities in English and to their children of less than seven years of age. This program has three objectives: helping parents improve their basic educational skills; help the poor get more involved regarding their children's education and try to help their children achieve their highest learning potential.

Prevention and intervention programs for criminal children and youths who are neglected or at risk

This program provides funds to States responsible for the education of children who are in state institutions due to neglect or children's delinquency, reformatory institutions for adults or volunteer programs.

School Drop-out Prevention Programs

This program assists schools with drop-out rates higher to the State's average in the implementation of effective efforts regarding prevention and re-entrance. The program is an answer to a drop-out rate 11% higher to last decade's and to the restricted labor market for people without high-school credentials.

The National Education Department has a national recognition program to identify the schools that have been successful in lowering the school drop-out rates. Sports and support activities such as professional development and a reduction in the teacher-student rate and school reform models implementations have been rewarded as part of this program.

Smaller Community Learning

Approximately 70% of High School students attend schools with a thousand or more students; around 50% of the students attend schools with a 1,500 student population. Research suggests that:

- Small learning environments are a condition to increase student's achievements (Williams, 1990).

- School size has positive effects on student's achievements. This fact can be evidenced in the attendance rate, disciplinary sanctions frequency, school loyalty, drug and alcohol consumption, school satisfaction and self-esteem (Raywid, 1995 y Klonsky, 1995);

- An effective size for secondary schools ranges between 400 and 800 students. (Williams, 1990);

- The total enrollment figure strongly affects learning in schools with high concentration of poor and minority children (Cotton, 1996).

NCHLB underscores the importance of small learning communities and the fact of creating a defined competitive offer structure to provide school districts with funds to plan, implement and expand learning communities in High Schools of 1000 students or more (the goal is to stay under the 600 student limit).

Comprehensive School Reform Program (CSR)

It is designed to increase the achievements of students attending public schools throughout the country, by means of the implementation of reforms based in scientific investigation and effective practices.

It is addressed to schools with high poverty and low achievement levels, especially those that receive funds for compensatory education.

Participating schools require the implementation of a school reform program that will:

- Employ scientifically based strategies and proven methods.

- Provide high-quality professional development for professors and clerks.

- Include measurable aims and standards for academic achievement.

- Have the backing of the school's professors and administrators.

- Grant support for teachers and administrators.

- Give importance to parents and involves the community in the planning, implementation and assessment of school improvement activities.

- Plan the evaluation of strategies for the implementation of school reforms and for the result of achievements annually made by students.

Education for homeless children and youths, granted by the State and Local Activities

This program supports an office for the coordination of homeless children's and young people's education in each State, which gathers information on the children and the hindrances for their regular school attendance. This information helps ensure that they will have equal access to public education.

States must support district schools to facilitate the enrollment, attendance and success of homeless children and youths. Such support includes transportation, residence, documentation and school certificates needs.

Safe and drug free schools office

This office manages programs designed to free schools from drugs and violence. To this end the office focuses its attention on:

- Granting financial support for drug and violence prevention activities and those that foster primary and secondary school students' health and welfare.

- Participating in the making and development of legislative proposals and policies related with the prevention of violence and drugs.

- Participating with other federal agencies in the investigation national agenda for drug and violence prevention.

- Managing departmental programs related with citizenship and civic education.

Education for migrants

Of the various student subgroups in the US, the children of migrant workers often have problems at school. The Office of Migrant Education provides support and academic services for the children of migrant families who find jobs in agriculture, the fishing industry and the manufacturing industry. These children are affected by the combined impact of poverty, cultural and language barriers and the migrant's way of life. This program aims at the following specific purposes:

- Support high quality and educational programs for migrant children to help reduce school drop-out and other problems arising from the constant mobility of these families.

- Ensure that migrant children, who have a high mobility level, are not penalized in any manner for the disparities between States regarding curriculum, graduation requirements, academic contents and standards.

- Ensure that migrant children are provided with the proper education services that match their special needs efficiently and in a coordinated way.

- Ensure that migrant children receive all the necessary opportunities that will allow them to achieve the academic standards expected from all children.

- Design programs that will help migrant children overcome school drop-out, cultural and language barriers, social isolation, health related problems and all those factors that hinder his/her skills to achieve a good academic performance and a successful entrance to post-secondary or work life.

- Ensure that migrant children enjoy the benefits of state and local reforms.

d. Mexico

1. Policies established to deal with school failure

Human Development Program. Opportunities.

The agencies in charge of operating the program are the Social Development Secretariat (SEDESOL - acronym in the Spanish version), the Public Education Secretariat (SEP – acronym in the Spanish version) and the Health Secretariat (SSP - acronym in the Spanish version), as well as the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS - acronym in the Spanish version). The program is coordinated by the first secretariat. This program is the continuation (with some changes) of the Solidarity programs (1988-1994) and of *Progresa* Programs (1994-2000)[20].

The main problem addressed by the program is the socio-economic inequality faced by the poorest families, specifically regarding school drop-out and regular non-attendance due to factors such as lack of health, malnutrition or of resources for living.
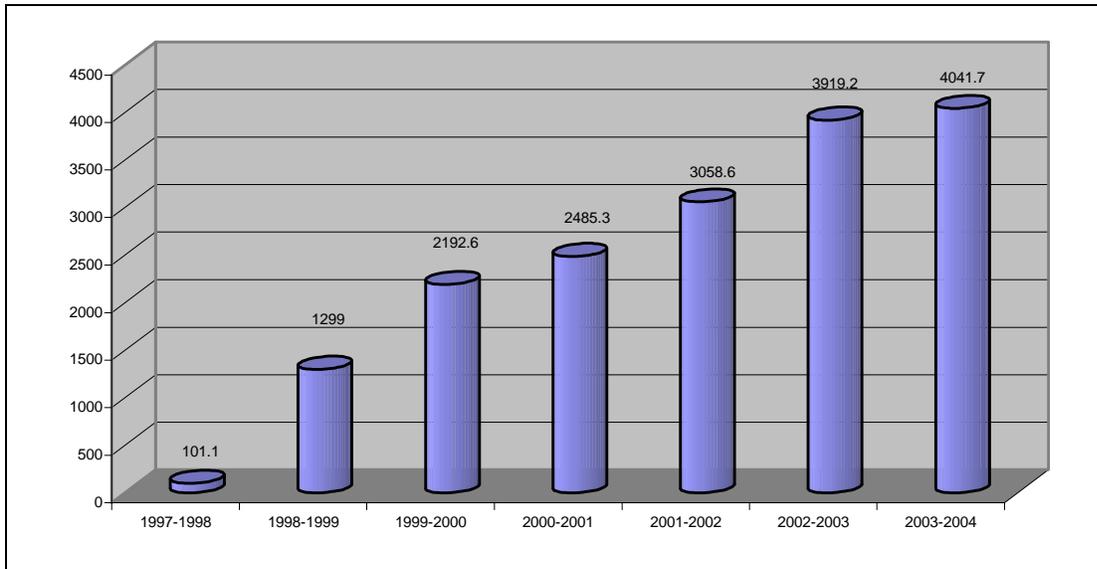
In answer to these problems, *Oportunidades* grants education scholarships and school materials (or monetary aid for their acquisition at the beginning of the school year to primary school students) to families whose children (are) under 18 and attending any grade between the third grade of primary school and the last semester of high secondary education. In this way it helps support school enrollment, permanence and regular attendance to school. During secondary and higher middle school fellows receive an annual money support at year start. (SEP, 2003: 16).

"During 2002, the Program benefited 3,919.2 thousand primary and secondary school fellows, 860,6 thousand more compared to the previous year. Of the total scholarships, 1,975,2 thousand were assigned to women and 1,944 thousand to men. For the period between January and December 2003, the number of scholarships is estimated to rise to 4,041.7 thousand, which is 3.1% higher than last year" (SEP, 2003: 16).

Figure 6. Scholarships granted by the *Oportunidades* Program, 1997-2003

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[20] For a further break-down of the general policy governing this program, consult the Social Security Secretariat (2004).+

Program for the Participation of Parents Associations in the School Management (AGE – acronym in the Spanish version).

This program was started in the school year 1996-1997, under the supervision of the CONAFE (Spanish language acronym for National Council for Education Development), and aims at strengthening the social participation of families surrounding school life, since family participation is an underdeveloped factor in the school culture. School management involves the main players so it calls for the active attendance of the community. However, there exist several factors that cohort the community from actively participating in schools, among them: apathy, ignorance, embarrassment, work issues (time), lack of opportunities created by the management and teachers, among others.

On the other hand, the participation of the school community, especially the parents, is reduced to economic contributions. According to the paper by Conde S., "It is common that parents are summoned to school to contribute school fees, school chores, or to be reprimanded for the children's low-performance." (1997: 175), but not to discuss pedagogical models, contents, curricular supplements and the like.

In general, this program addresses two basic elements: management and decisions made by families to support the schools their children attend. In this way, the program distributes around "…US $500 annually to enhance the staff, and provide training to manage this resource, regarding the acquisition of school materials, priority setting in the maintenance, rehabilitation of educational spaces, such as the repairing and purchasing school furniture." (Conde S.L., 2002: 160-161).

For the year 2002-2003 the AGE gave economic support to the Parents' Association of 12,009 kindergartens and 47 thousand primary schools. This effort turned out to support five thousand institutions more than the previous year.

One of the highlights of this program is that social participation by families in schools is understood as an approach to school infrastructure and staffing. The pedagogic dimension does not form part yet of the co-responsibility arena between families and school (something that can also happen within the system per se).

Free text books program

This is one of SEP's oldest ongoing programs. It aims at providing students with free text books. It seeks to provide all students attending basic education with studying material for their education. This text is also useful as working material for teachers because in general this is the material classes are based on. That is to say, the main focus of this program is pedagogical and as all use the same book, it seeks curriculum equality and homogeneity. The text book is provided to all primary and secondary levels. The production of these books implies that, once the SEP has finished the educational plans and programs, it will carry out a call for bids for the production or updating of the text books. From that call for bids, it chooses one and delivers it to the National Commission of Free Text Books (CONALITEG according to its acronym in Spanish) who will finally print it. For the 2002-2003 school year it produced a total of 178,5 million books (16% more than the previous year). 174,7 million were distributed out of which 18,4 million were handed to the federal high school.

Secondary School Program for Workmen and Distance Education System (SEA)

The *Secondary Education Program for Workers in three Semesters* and the *Distance Education System* (SEA) have been implemented as an alternative service to youngsters

who work and are willing to start or finish their secondary education. During the 2002-2003 period 3,490 youngsters were assisted with the program *in three semesters and* 126 with SEA.

Second Chance Programs

Second chance programs are coordinated by Conafe. They have had an interesting evolution, both in their form of work, scope and problems addressed (Conde S. L., 2002: 148-176). The latest have been called Program to Fight Basic Education Lag (PAREB – acronym in the Spanish version); Comprehensive Program to Fight Educational Lag (PIARE –acronym in the Spanish version); and Program to Fight Educational Lag in Pre-school and Basic Education (PAREIB – acronym in the Spanish version) (Conafe: 2004b); which is the one currently in operation.

PAREIB's main objective is to "enhance the quality of the offer in education and helping the population aged 0 to 14 years living in areas with high levels of social and educational lag remain and successfully finish basic education" (Conafe, 2004c: 15). With this program all basic education levels were assisted for the first time in the country's 31 states, by incorporating pre-school and secondary school in rural and urban-marginalized zones (Conde S. L., 2000:153).

4,5 million students were supplied with school material packs. Besides, "this component includes the granting of teacher aides to assist in primary and tele-secondary schools, aimed at strengthening teachers' work, helping reduce course failure and drop-out rates. In the year 2002-2003 16 thousand primary schools and around four thousand tele-secondary schools received teaching aids and IT equipment. Compared to the previous year, the objectives achieved in the delivery of school material packs increased by 4% (SEP, 2003: 11).

Through the *Red de Asesoría Técnica Pedagógica*[21] almost 40 thousand schools received advice, a fact that implied giving pedagogic orientation to over 122 thousand teachers.

Aimed at fostering settlement, diminishing high rotation and absenteeism rates of teachers working at rural schools located in isolated and scattered communities, through the

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[21] Translator's Note: Pedagogic Technical Consulting Network

Reconocimiento al Desempeño Docente[22] (REDES), 13,354 teachers were benefited. This figure was similar to that achieved during the school year 2001-2002. As part of the inter-institutional activities carried out by the SEP, the Conafe and the State Public Education secretariats, acknowledgements were made extensive to over 48 thousand teachers across the country (SEP, 2003: 12).

Infrastructure was strengthened by the construction of classrooms, sanitary services and annexes as well as by the development of maintenance tasks (either preventive or corrective) and the rehabilitation of spaces that due to use and passage of time had deteriorated. By the end of 2002, with the *Programa General de Obras*[23] 9,828 educational spaces were built and rehabilitated, a task that exceeded by 13.6% the original target. In 2003 7,543 infrastructure works have been carried out.

"The *External Pre-School Education* service serves children under four year old, by working with parents to foster the best upbringing practices in favor of children in their first years of age. In 2002 495,751 parents were assisted and this benefited 560 thousand children. This represented a 1% decrease compared to the year 2001 regarding attention to parents and of 6% in the minors benefited from this practice; from January to August 2003 more than 548 thousand parents have been assisted that resulted in the benefit of 658 thousand infants" (SEP, 2003: 12).

National Program for the Development of Indigenous Peoples

It seeks to favor the creation of educational answer that will foster the generation of social, administrative and pedagogic conditions that guarantee the access, permanence and achievement of indigenous children and adolescents old enough to attend initial and basic education. The Indigenous Education General Directorate (DGEI – according to its acronym in Spanish) of the Public Education Secretariat (SEP) is in charge of this initiative and within the program an enrollment of 1,142,421 indigenous students, who were assisted by 48,442 teachers in 18,326 schools, were registered. This coverage accounted for, compared to the previous school period, a growth of 2.5%, 2.6% and 1.7%, in the same order. The rendering of services goes hand in hand with an improvement in efficiency,

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[22] Translator's Note: Teacher Performance Acknowledgement
[23] Translator's Note: Works General Program.

dropout and failure to graduate from indigenous primary school rates. The ultimate efficiency indicator went from 73.28% in the school period 2001-2002 to 75.8% in 2002-2003 and it is expected to increase to 75.93% for the school year 2003-2004 (SEP, 2003: 14).

In order to encourage the development of professional leveling and improvement offers for bilingual teachers and managers, the second promotion of the Title "Intercultural Bilingual Education" was organized with the participation of 1,600 teachers in 77 academic facilities of the National Pedagogic University (UPN – acronym in the Spanish version) of the 25 entities of the country that offer indigenous education. The Pedagogic Technical Advisor Project (ATP– acronym in the Spanish version) arises as a figure of support to teacher formation in the work place. In 2003, 634 advisor-teachers participate in the country, one for every school zone, of the officially existing 894 supervision zones (SEP, 2003: 15).

Program for the development of minors living in the street

According to the data provided by the National System for Family Development (DIF-Acronym in the Spanish version) there are 130 thousand minors living in the street in the country. To assist the educational needs of this vulnerable sector of the population, it has been established that the SEP, in coordination with the Social Development Secretariat, the Conafe and the DIF, shall design a proposal to pay educational attention to the minors living in the streets. Two assessment studies have been concluded – one in the Federal District and the other in the city of Guadalajara – to evaluate the educational proposals addressed to minors living in the streets that have been developed in these cities aimed at issuing recommendations to design a national educational model. Study programs proposals aimed specifically at taking care of children in risk situations (preventive orientation) have been compiled and analyzed. Based on this studies and on the review of several programs it was decided to elaborate a pilot program proposal to look after the children living in the streets; staff from the Federal District Educational Services Secretariat participated in the elaboration of this program.

Educational attention to infant migrant population

This program is supervised by the Educational Research General Directorate (of the Basic and Normal Education Under secretariat – SEByN-Acronym in the Spanish version) in the

case of migrant boys and girls, and by the Conafe in the case of intercultural education. It aims at addressing the educational lag of those children whose parents migrate around different regions for work reasons.

As regards the curricular aspect, this program develops open accreditation curricula and systems, given the fact that it can not be determined, for any family, where they are in a specific season of the year.

It serves children and adolescents under 18, who amount to around 1.2 million in 1999, 60% of which are indigenous people who do not speak Spanish correctly (Conde S. L., 2002: 235). At present this program serves 379 communities of 22 states of the Republic, and around 5,209 students (Conafe, 2004c: 9).

Tele-secondary Education Program

This program is operated by the SEP and its main features are: "a) it combines elements of school modality with distance education aspects; b) there is only one teacher who is responsible for the teaching-learning process; and c) it uses electronic means and printed material" (Conde S. L., 2002: 236). Besides the previously mentioned features, "it suggests a close link with the community by means of productive, socio-cultural, sports and community developed activities" (Santos A. and Carvajal E., 2001: 69).

This program is addressed to rural communities with populations of less than 2,500 inhabitants and where the amount of primary school graduates does not justify the creation of a general secondary school.

The technical teams of the Tele-secondary Unit of the SEP elaborate and coordinate the indicated elements based on the curriculum designed for secondary school. Tele-secondary materials favor self-learning (Torres R. M. and Tenti E., 2000: 98).

The Tele-secondary proposal may be defined as an interactive, participative, democratic and formative process among students, groups, teachers, parents, authorities and members of the community[24] (Torres R. M. and Tenti E., 2000: 100).

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[24] "It is interactive because it establishes a dynamic among school and community members so as to integrate learning and experiences and takes advantage of them in the making of policies that allow for social, economic and cultural improvement. It is participative because each of the persons involved in the educational process of Tele-secondary works in coordination with the organization of school activities and

The Tele-secondary educational model "opposes of the transmitting, expositional model, dependent on the teachers' knowledge for, on the contrary, it is awarded the achievement of motivating students, developing studying habits and tuning into their concerns and interests, both in content and in method" (Carvajal E., 2003: 151).

Notwithstanding the coverage advantages mentioned that help to take the offer to out-of-the-way places, there are some observations of concern regarding the operation of the program and of the pedagogic model per se. According to Santos A. y Carvajal E., 2001, who provide information regarding the deficiencies (antenna, decoder, guides, among others), the model must be taken into consideration once more as a public policy that will allow to grant it the importance it deserves. Likewise, Carvajal E., 2003 states that a great deal of attention must be paid to the way in which the model is used in class, for, as she states, many different things are done that differ to what it has been stated (for example, the teacher strictly follows the guide, limiting him/herself to carrying out only the exercises therein (:154), and this goes against the model in the fact that it is just that – a guide).

Community Education Program

It is directed and managed by the Conafe. Its work is aimed at taking the educational offer to scattered rural and indigenous areas and where due to a lack of personnel a permanent teacher cannot be assigned. Its aim is to provide education that will attend to the heterogeneity of the population, with the intention of equating it to that offered in the rest of the country.

It assists the pre-school and primary school population and as from the year 2002 it assists and community secondary school as well. Its basic design is to combine open curricular strategies and that can be guided in the multi-level modality by a community instructor (who carries out the job for one or a maximum of two years in exchange of a scholarship to

social promotion. It is democratic because the individual learning of the student is integrated in a collective task where all help each other, motivated by an eagerness to learn. . All the participants take part of the decision making process and in the distribution of functions and activities. It is formative because students feel the solidary duty of staying in the community to contribute to improve the living conditions of its inhabitants, and because the interaction that takes place between those who receive the information through television programs, printed material and the teacher, as an effect of the educational activity, favors the acquisition of concepts, values, attitudes, habits and desirable skills" (Torres R. M. y Tenti E., 2000: 101).

go on with his middle high or high studies). The actions of these instructors are not limited to the subjects included in the curriculum, it goes beyond the school limits since they also carry out activities in the health and nutrition fields. Besides the abovementioned, the Conafe gives out material aids for all programmed educational activities (both to the students and the libraries).

At present it provides services to 272,451 students in the pre-school and primary educational levels through Differential Attention Modalities in 31,662 communities (Conafe: 2004a).

As the work carried out by Conafe seeks to be integral, it performs educational promotion to Community Instructors. Among them there are two substantial ones already programmed: educational continuity (educational funding scholarships) and teacher wholesome development (formation and training). In the year 2002-2003, for the former reached the 34,211 figure while for the latter it was of 52,802 (Conafe: 2004).

This program basically serves the educational coverage indicator, however, it is making great achievements in other aspects such as lowering costs (lower than average and than tele-secondary), and test results (Shapiro J. and Moreno J., 2004: 6-7).

One of the great difficulties this program faces (as well as the second chance and tele-secondary programs) is the existing discrimination against it. There are some attitudes by members of the educational system in regard to this program, especially in two senses: around the instructor's figure (because he/she is not a career professor), and because they are unitary schools (just one teacher for all school grades) (Torres R. M. y Tenti E., 2000: 31-32).

Quality Schools Program

The PEC is operated by the Educational Investigation General Secretariat (SEByN). The explicit intention of the Quality Schools Program (PEC) is equity. According to Álvarez J., "…the PEC is oriented at public schools that serve marginal socio-economic population,

especially in urban areas and that for this reason suffer from low educational indicators" (2002: 8)[25].

PEC aims at several goals "… freedom in the decision-making process, effective leadership of directors, teachers' experience, teaching support of supervising teams, co-responsible participation of teachers and parents, specialized technical assistance, and the training of the different educational process players" (Álvarez J., 2002: 11). In addition to the abovementioned, it fosters the creation of team work in schools, were the key actors are, besides the institutional participants (teachers and directors), the students' families and the neighboring community as a whole. According to the rules of operation, those players must "… in a collective manner undertake the responsibility for the learning results of all its students and commit to the ongoing improvement of school use; it is an integrated and committed educational community that guarantees that students will acquire knowledge and develop skills, attitudes and values necessary to achieve a full personal and family life, execute a competent, active and committed citizenship, participate in productive work and continue to learn throughout his/her lifetime" (SEP, 2002).

To achieve the abovementioned it is intended to impact three school areas: classroom activities, social participation and school management[26]. This program also refers to the transference of some resources that will be administered by the school facility, always strictly following a plan, that it is intended that it will be designed by the extended school community. The financial resources must be used in respect of pedagogic objectives, which will surely require materials, training and consulting sessions. They cannot be used to pay teachers salaries or bonuses.

Graph 7. Quality Schools Program, 2001-2002

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[25] Quotes are taken from an interview to Jesús Álvarez, PEC's Nacional Coordinator, Published by Educare magazine, print media of the same Program.
[26] Contents in the school and institutional performance standards (SEP, 2002).
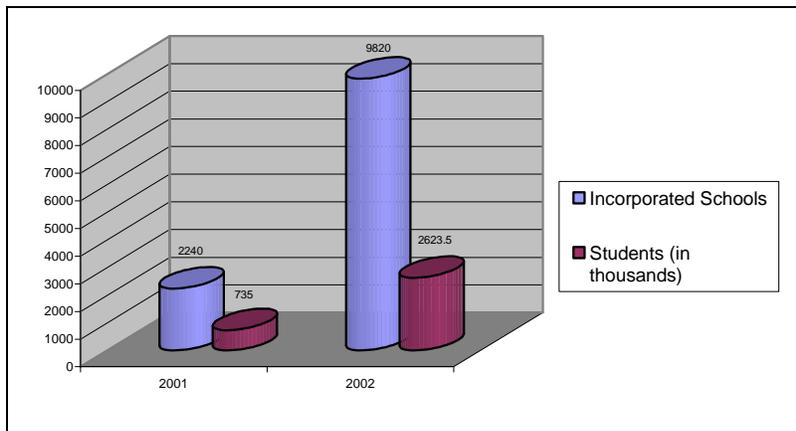
Source, SEP 2003.

Incorporated schools.

Students (in thousands).

Some of the main measures include: voluntary enrollment to the program (one of its most interesting components); the participative elaboration of a school project; the need, within the project, to look for co-funding sources to be able to access to resources of over $50,000 (that is the initial amount for staying enrolled to the program); the resources will be allotted exclusively to the concepts included in the project (training, acquisition of teaching materials and equipment, betterment of the infrastructure, among others); it is not possible to adapt curricula within the schools.

It tends towards the establishment of an evaluation culture and to this end it may advocate two points of view: i) external evaluation, and ii) self-evaluation. Both tend to be elements contributing to the social participation and accountability. External evaluation will happen around the indicators stipulated under number 16 of the operation rules. The self evaluation tends to an internal thought within the school, and not compared to or in competition against other schools (neither inside nor outside the program).

 PEC's funding system is not strictly a subsidy to demand. The focus of resources in the schools and not in the families of the students is a justification in itself. An additional element is that schools are not financed on the basis of its enrolment. According to the Loera A. evaluation, the size range of schools varies between 55 and 1,417 students (2003:

63). It would be important to include a population criterion in the resources issue (in a weighted manner), following the logic of more students, more requirements. What wouldn't apply here indeed would be to turn this question into *the* allotment criterion, and thus prevent the mounting of market logic (competition for "clients").

One of the PEC issues on this matter is the presence of a double participation in school management communities. On one hand, they participate as players in school projects: i) they take part in the design of the micro educational policy of the school facility where their children study; and ii) will surely concretely intervene in concrete school-intervention activities (contributing with work, materials, time, among other); on the other hand, they are held accountable by the establishment where they served as players. That is to say, the school community, specially tutors act as "judges and parties"[27] in this process.

PEC school principals received support to participate in courses and seminars of professional managerial skills development courses and seminars, given by public and private universities in different venues across the country.

In order to externally assess participating schools, from a qualitative point of view, a sample of 485 establishments was taken. The assessment shows that 71.5% of schools that are in their PEC second year have improved their student's school utilization results, at the same time obtaining failure rates of 4.2% and dropout rates of 0.65%, lower than the urban schools outside the Program (5.6% and 1.2%, respectively) (SEP, 2002: 19).

5. Final considerations

Once the analytical information of some of the variables of the polices addressed by each country to fight educational lag, both by comparing countries and in each country itself; it is possible to see the differences between them are significant, therefore, it is not possible to talk about a bloc or homogeneous sub-region. The socioeconomic performance, the institutional arrangements, the results expressed through indicators and the description of programs are highly differentiated. That is to say that these three countries are hardly similar regarding the subject at hand.

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[27] Translator's Note: "judge and party" is a part of a proverb in Spanish that says: "If you impart justice you cannot be judge and part" meaning that you cannot always have what we want, and especially not two things at once.

Canada, for example has a strong economy, quite acceptable social conditions, a highly decentralized system (federal in the strict sense), good enrollment indicators, and has programs to fight its country's very local lag causes such as geography and multiculturalism. The United States is economically stronger, but its social and educational outcomes are lower than Canada's. Likewise, Mexico presents even lower educational and socioeconomic indicators. For the two latter, migration is a common matter; just as is native multiculturalism for Canada and Mexico.

Despite the differences, there are clearly defined elements for all countries. One case is that for all three systems it is clear that schools (and the system in general) are partly responsible for the educational lag, and that they can do something to correct this. That is to say that it is evident that the internal system policies are key. Especially in the case of Mexico where besides these endogenous elements, the State invests in compensating in other matters that the social system does not solve, particularly the issue of poverty and its influence as a cause of school dropout (scholarships, school materials, among others).

In other words, educational lag is a multiple variable question, some of them can be local but others cannot. The current intra and international social mobility (still restricted, but expected to be extended) confronts each country to very specific policy designs. One issue has to do with literacy in different languages. Not being able to understand the language of the locality or country you migrate to is a major impediment to learning.

It is clear that much of what the social system succeeds in giving its members results in the fact that they have to take or not ulterior measures to close the gaps. If in a social system, a part of its population succeeds in obtaining the necessary and sufficient goods and services to have a materially dignified life, afterwards it will be necessary to find the way of correcting such deviations. However, it is necessary to wonder if there is some way for them not to present themselves and allow the society to serve to these issues at another level.

Anther issue is how to do in order to make students feel comfortable at school, to feel that they are learning. The latter makes us think if teaching-learning in basic education is about contents, about learning to learn or about learning to learn contents.

To conclude, it is worth making an effort to make a diagram of the different solutions that have been given in the countries of the continent. Learning from others' contextualized experiences is a method that has proved efficient as well as the fact that it helps the cultural exchange between nations.

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