The Quest for Educational Equity in Mexico

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I examine the dynamics of implementing at-scale reforms to provide meaningful educational opportunities to disadvantaged students in Mexico. To effectively reduce social inequality and exclusion, education policies need a mix of system-wide and targeted efforts that are implemented at scale and sustained long enough to become institutionalized. The resiliency of those policies requires an elusive balance between system-wide and targeted efforts, alignment between federal and state initiatives, and supportive politics. However, the politics of implementing system-wide reforms are more contentious than those involving targeted efforts because they disrupt entrenched interests, making such efforts harder to sustain. Targeted policies, while easier to implement, reinforce the segregation of students into different educational tracks of varying quality.

The Mexican public education system has, since it was created a century ago, advanced policies that challenge high levels of inequality and poverty. Such efforts became more salient as Mexico joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and after the democratic transition that took place in 2000. These forces shaped policies with inclusive intent over remarkably long periods, even as some administrations made modifications to these policy initiatives and claimed them as their own. While considerable financial resources were devoted to these policies, implementation was deficient because of the challenges of simultaneously meeting three essential conditions: 1) complementarity and coherence between system-wide and targeted programs, 2) alignment between federal and state priorities and sufficient levels of capacity across states and localities to support the demands of those policies, and 3) supportive politics. The results of these equity-oriented policies fell short of the aspirations of the reformers, and they were insufficient to transform the structure of economic and social opportunity in Mexico.

The economic transformation resulting from the greater integration of Mexico into the global economy, beginning in the mid-1990s with the incorporation of Mexico into NAFTA and followed by the political transition toward more competitive politics in 2000, incentivized policy elites to prioritize education. Education-

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al development had stagnated in Mexico because of the debt crisis of the 1980s and the consequent economic adjustment and contraction in education spending. As Mexico joined NAFTA, President Salinas de Gortari and then President Ernesto Zedillo made education a higher priority in the national agenda.[1] Their education reforms and others that followed over successive administrations incorporated the goal of advancing educational opportunity for children from marginalized backgrounds, most notably by expanding the duration of compulsory education from six to twelve years, plus three years of preschool, which improved education quality and provided assistance for poor families.

While a series of multiparty agreements supported these reforms, the capture of significant elements of educational governance by the Mexican teachers' union (in particular, teacher selection, preparation, and career advancement), the use of programs to advance partisan goals, the lack of alignment between federal and state authorities when led by opposing political parties, and different levels of institutional capacity across states shaped their implementation. After providing a brief historical and institutional context, I examine some of the education policies and programs spanning more than three decades and six presidential administrations.

Mexico is the tenth most populous country in the world, with 42 percent of the population under the age of twenty-five.[2] Given this demographic structure, schools and higher education institutions can shape individual opportunity and social institutions in very short order. While the law that established primary education as free and compulsory in Mexico was passed as early as 1888, the Mexican revolution of 1910 provided the impetus for the expansion of education. It enshrined the right in article 3 of the constitution of 1917 and committed significant federal spending to education upon the creation of the Ministry of Education in 1921, with the aim of centralizing and coordinating efforts to advance education.[3] The strong role of the executive branch of government in educational governance and finance made education a very appealing instrument to serve partisan politics. For instance, the national teachers' union, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, was created in 1943 by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the ruling party in Mexico for seventy-one years, from the party's founding in 1929 until the turn of the twenty-first century. The teachers' union has exerted extraordinary control in educational governance, controlling teacher appointments, teacher education, and paths for career advancement, among other elements. In exchange, for seven decades, the union played an important role in mobilizing electors during election seasons and in guarding polling stations and counting the votes, helping to assure the political hegemony of the PRI.

The first secretary of education of Mexico, José Vasconcelos spearheaded efforts to expand access to primary education, public libraries, and literacy. In 1936, President Lázaro Cárdenas established the Department of Indigenous Affairs, which cre-

ated the first schools for Indigenous children in rural areas. Building on this work, the Ministry of Education developed a specialized strand of schools, called "Indigenous schools," tasked with the complex goal of educating Indigenous students in rural areas. In 1946, Congress amended the constitution, making six years of education compulsory and free; and in 1959, following a reform to the General Law of Education in 1957, the Ministry of Education established a national program of free school textbooks, which spurred the development of a new set of textbooks, aligned to the national curriculum, to be distributed to all students in primary schools.[4] In 1971, President Luis Echeverria established the National Council of Educational Development (CONAFE), an autonomous agency tasked with the expansion of access to education in rural and marginalized regions of Mexico, mostly small communities that lacked rural or Indigenous schools. Indigenous schools, the national textbooks, and these various programs continue to this day.

During the 1980s, because of the government's structural-adjustment programs to face the debt crisis, education spending receded, slowing down efforts to advance educational equity. But beginning in the 1990s, successive policies expanded the duration of compulsory schooling: from six to nine years in 1992, adding three years of preschool in 2002, and from nine to twelve years in 2012.

The enduring focus of these policy initiatives on equity has gradually advanced educational opportunity in Mexico. Since its creation, the Mexican education system has pursued efforts to include marginalized students through a mix of *system-wide policies* designed to serve all students in making the system more inclusive, such as expanding enrollments and providing textbooks, as well as *targeted policies and programs*, such as the creation of a directorate of Indigenous schools, the community-based schools sponsored by CONAFE, the full-day schools, the polytechnical universities, and the intercultural universities.

Today, Mexico relies on a complex set of educational institutions to educate a large student population. At the precollegiate level, as of 2021–2022, the education system includes 34,413,485 students, of which, 29,461,792 are in public institutions; 24,113,780 students are enrolled in basic education, 4,861,091 in upper-secondary education, and 4,004,680 in tertiary education.[5] These students are taught by 1.2 million teachers in 225,000 institutions. The education system is organized in three levels: basic education (comprising three years of preschool, six years of primary school, and three years of lower-secondary education), upper-secondary education, and tertiary education. Basic education and upper-secondary education are compulsory and free, as mandated by the constitution, although there are no enforcement mechanisms compelling parents to send their children to school or to force students to attend.

At the basic-education level, there are three different types of schools: general schools (in urban and rural areas), Indigenous schools (run by the directorate of Indigenous education, not by Indigenous communities), and community schools

(operated by CONAFE). Twenty-one thousand Indigenous schools enroll eight hundred thousand students, out of an estimated 1.2 million Indigenous students, who also attend general schools. Indigenous groups in Mexico speak sixty-eight different languages, some of which are used for instruction in Indigenous schools. In those schools, there is no dual bilingual education (in which students would learn all subjects in both languages). At best, Indigenous languages are taught as a subject for three hours a week; but because many of the teachers assigned to those schools are unable to speak Indigenous languages, they typically don't even do that. The poor training of teachers in Indigenous schools and nonexistent coordinated bilingual education contribute to the low educational outcomes of those schools. A large percentage of Indigenous students attends either regular rural schools or urban schools, which offer no language support. One of the shortcomings of these various subsystems of the Mexican education system has been the lack of flexibility to adjust to demographic flows, such as the large migration of Indigenous communities to urban areas.

Basic education is a shared responsibility of the thirty-two states and the federal government, and there are significant variations across states and local governments in resources and capacity to fund and support educational initiatives. The federal government, which had full responsibility for schools until a constitutional reform decentralized education services in 1992, supports states through a series of programs that transfer resources and set national education policy on issues such as curriculum, teacher appointment processes, and mandatory textbooks. Since state secretaries of education are appointed by state governors and the federal secretary of education is appointed by the president, there is greater alignment between state and federal policy when there is party affinity across the federal and state governments.

Who is marginalized in Mexico? Social and economic exclusion in Mexico is shaped by various intersecting dimensions of identity, among which social class is salient. Ethnicity and location of residence also play a role in social exclusion, and those living in small communities in rural areas in certain states – mostly in the south – are the most marginalized. Indigenous populations and those who are displaced in search of economic opportunity are also marginalized. Intersectionality across various dimensions aggravates marginalization: for instance, Indigenous groups who are poor and live in rural areas in the poorest states are more marginalized, and among them, women are marginalized further.

While the incidence of poverty has declined over the years, it has done so slowly over the last decade, only to increase post outbreak of COVID-19. In 2016, 43.2 percent of the population was considered poor; this figure declined to 41.9 percent in 2018 and increased to 43.9 percent in 2020. Poverty incidence varies con-

siderably by state, from over 60 percent in the southern states of Chiapas (75.5 percent), Guerrero (66.4 percent), and Oaxaca (61.7 percent), to under 30 percent in the central and northern states of Jalisco (31.4 percent), Nuevo Leon (24.3 percent), Coahuila (25.6 percent), Chihuahua (25.3 percent), Baja California (22.5 percent), and Baja California Sur (27.6 percent). Among OECD countries, Mexico has the third-highest level of income inequality, and while it declined during the 1990s until the mid-2000s, it has since stagnated.[6]

Nine out of ten Indigenous people, who represent 12 percent of the population, live in higher or very high marginalization, and eight out of ten live in poverty.[7] While 79 percent of the population lives in cities with more than one million people, 21 percent lives in remote and small communities of less than 2,500; the geographic dispersion of this population makes it more difficult to implement effective programs.[8]

Educational reform was spearheaded by the integration of Mexico into NAFTA during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994). President Salinas launched a program that modernized basic education, reformed the curriculum, and established a new generation of school textbooks. The creation of technological and polytechnical universities complemented these system-wide reforms by offering preparation in technical fields linked with the economic needs of the various regions of Mexico. These universities, which still exist, have been aligned to the export-oriented industries most directly impacted by NAFTA. The administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) introduced dual programs of study that provided flexible pathways to continue higher education studies. Over 80 percent of the students served by these institutions are first-generation college students. Other targeted programs begun during the Salinas administration included compensatory programs to support education in the poorest southern states.

President Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), who had been secretary of education during the Salinas administration, continued these efforts, further emphasizing civic education and a review of the history curriculum. His administration enhanced efforts to evaluate the quality of education, joining the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which evaluates students' knowledge and skills. In 1997, Mexico launched PROGRESA, a program that provided economic incentives (cash transfers) to families, conditional on enrolling their children in school and following up with health checkups; the program lasted for nearly two decades until it was terminated in December 2018. The Zedillo administration also began a program to expand the duration of the school day. Much of the expansion in enrollments in the preceding decades had relied on using the same school building for multiple shifts of students, which shortened the duration of students' school day to about four hours of instruction. The program of

full-day schools sought to increase learning time to about eight hours of instruction; it continued in the three subsequent presidential administrations, and its reach increased tenfold to more than twenty-five thousand schools during the Peña Nieto administration. An impact evaluation of the program found that it had significantly improved student learning while also reducing grade repetition and dropout rates, particularly for low-income students and for those in schools serving high percentages of low-income students.[9] The program of full-day schools was discontinued, however, during the administration of President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

The election of President Vicente Fox (2000–2006) in July of 2000 marked the first political transition of power to a party other than the PRI. President Fox maintained the priority of advancing transparency and accountability in education and created an autonomous institute for educational evaluation, the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education. This institute coordinated several evaluations of student knowledge and skills, including participation in PISA, and mandated that the reports of such studies be publicly available. The emphasis during Fox's administration was on system-wide improvement of the quality of education and expansion of access (including allocation of funding through school-based management programs and the implementation of large-scale technology in education initiatives), along with the continuation of two targeted programs, the PROGRESA cash-transfer and CONAFE compensatory programs. During the Fox administration, a constitutional reform in 2002 decreed three years of preschool education compulsory, which considerably expanded access to preschool in the following years.

In its 2001 development plan, the government proposed that Indigenous education should be approached as intercultural and bilingual education. Intercultural universities were established (and continue) in some regions of the country, but overall, this recommendation has not been implemented beyond teaching Indigenous languages a few hours a week in Indigenous schools.

During Felipe Calderón's presidency (2006–2012), education remained a priority. System-wide initiatives to foster equity included a comprehensive curriculum reform and the expansion of access to high school. Targeted initiatives included the expansion of the conditional cash transfer program and the implementation of a national nursery school program to support female workers. Other efforts of system-wide improvement focused on strengthening the quality of education, enhancing learning environments and infrastructure in basic education, promoting the use of technology in education to support digital literacy, extending the use of educational assessment to increase accountability, and supporting bilingual education, especially the learning of English.

Calderón's successor, President Peña Nieto pursued a series of structural reforms, including education. A constitutional amendment incorporated *quality*

education for all as a constitutional right, setting equity as a national priority, and led to system-wide initiatives as well as several targeted programs to support educational opportunities for marginalized students.[10] Equity was identified as a core element of quality education in the general education law.[11]

The range of Peña Nieto's system-wide reforms included the redesign of the curriculum to foster twenty-first-century skills, values, and socioemotional development. It also prioritized the improvement of learning environments, defining minimum norms for the operation of schools (so schools serving marginalized children would meet minimum conditions to support learning), expanding the program of full-time schools, and establishing a school-improvement service. It revamped teacher, principal, and supervisor career tracks, defining required competencies and standards and outlining a career structure that included evaluation of competencies necessary to join and advance in the profession. It provided constitutional autonomy to the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education and tasked it with the evaluation of both the system and teachers. Finally, the reform funded improvements to school infrastructure.[12] Among the system-wide policies to advance inclusion were the expansion in enrollment in early-childhood care and education as well as upper-secondary education in 2012. The reform also expanded the number of schools offering a full school day of six to eight hours, beginning in 2013, with the objective to eventually extend this modality to all students.

Among the targeted programs to support inclusion were the conditional cash transfer programs, renamed as PROSPERA, and the CONAFE community school programs that offered scholarships to high school graduates who teach for at least a year to enroll in higher-education programs. The reforms also increased support to Indigenous schools, reaching about half of the twenty-one thousand Indigenous schools in the country. Other targeted programs to support inclusion included investments in infrastructure for the most dilapidated schools (Escuelas al CIEN) and dropout-prevention programs, including the Movement against School Dropout (Movimiento contra el Abandono Escolar), which provides information to students and families, participatory planning, and community outreach.

An assessment of the status of the right to education conducted at the end of the Peña Nieto administration by the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy, an autonomous public agency created to evaluate the impact of government programs, identified five priorities for advancement: 1) improve the physical infrastructure of schools; 2) expand early-childhood education, increase the number of institutions of upper-secondary education, and promote access for and retention of students at risk; 3) reduce inequalities in access to education among different groups and equalize the quality of education across types of schools; 4) improve student learning; and 5) improve teachers' initial education, their continuous professional development, and the effectiveness of instructional practices.[13] This assessment concluded that important progress had been achieved in the preceding five years,

especially in terms of access to education and creation of schools, while highlighting the elusiveness of the constitutional mandate of ensuring an excellent education with equity for all. In particular, the report concludes that the education system reproduces inequalities in tracking the most disadvantaged groups – Indigenous and migrant students, students learning at community centers, and students learning via tele-education – in separate education streams.[14]

The administration of President Lopez Obrador (2018–2024) discontinued some education reforms initiated by his predecessor, dismantling the process of teacher appointments and promotions based on assessments of knowledge and skills, and transforming the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education into a government agency without constitutional autonomy. The administration also diminished the emphasis on system-wide policies of inclusion in favor of targeted programs without a clear target population. Lopez Obrador's administration launched seventeen "priority programs" to foster social inclusion, most of which were to be implemented by the Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development, Education, and Welfare. An analysis of the seventeen programs by the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy concluded that only six of them clearly identified the results they sought to achieve and the target populations these programs were meant to serve.[15] Three programs to be implemented by the Ministry of Education were the creation of one hundred new "Universities for Well-Being," the Benito Juarez Universal Scholarship for Students of Upper-Secondary Education, and Youth Writing Their Future. The goal of the Universities for Well-Being is to create one hundred institutions of higher education in communities where upper-secondary education is offered but there are no institutions of higher education nearby. The Benito Juarez scholarship program for students of upper-secondary education awards 875 pesos per month (approximately USD 51) to students enrolled in this level. Youth Writing Their Future is another scholarship program for students aged eighteen to twenty-nine, enabling them to continue their studies in higher education or technical training, consisting of 2,575 pesos per month (approximately USD 150).[16]

The various policies to support educational inclusion implemented over the past three-plus decades have produced several achievements – notably, the expansion in access to education and the extension of compulsory education – that have elevated the levels of educational attainment of the population. On average, the Mexican population has ten years of schooling, an increase from 8.6 years of schooling in 2010.[17] At the age of three, 39 percent of students are enrolled in preschool, 78 percent are enrolled in preschool at the age of four, and 73 percent are enrolled at the age of five.[18] Between the ages of six and eleven, 96 percent of students are enrolled in school and 97 percent of students who begin primary school complete it.[19] Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, 84 percent

of kids are enrolled in secondary education, and between ages sixteen and seventeen, 61 percent are enrolled in an upper-secondary school.[20]

Even though these policies expand access, equity disparities remain, particularly in access to upper-secondary education. In 2019, 64 percent of the Indigenous population between the ages of fifteen and seventeen were enrolled in school, compared with 76 percent among their non-Indigenous peers. Among those living in highly marginalized cities, 65 percent were enrolled, compared with 77 percent among those living in cities with low marginalization. Among school-age youths working more than twenty hours a week, only 29 percent were enrolled, compared with 91 percent among students working less than twenty hours per week.[21]

Important challenges to equal educational opportunity remain. Results from the National Program for Learning Assessment (PLANEA) in language and math show that 40 percent of students have only a basic mastery of language and another 34 percent are below this basic level; in math, 65 percent are below the basic level. For both subjects, most of the higher performing students attend private schools.[22] Students of Indigenous parents score systematically below non-Indigenous students, and this gap is twice as large in community centers.

Results from PLANEA show systematic and large differences in students' performance by marginalization. At the end of lower-secondary school, students with an Indigenous background score lower on average than non-Indigenous classmates in math, and the proportion of students who are below the basic level on PLANEA is much higher in smaller and more marginalized localities (62 percent compared with 34 percent in nonmarginalized areas).

Completion of upper-secondary education is highly inequitable. Non-Indigenous students are twice as likely to finish upper-secondary education as Indigenous students.[23] And students from wealthier backgrounds are three times more likely to finish upper-secondary education than their less privileged peers.[24] Though this does represent an improvement since 2000, when wealthier students were five and a half times more likely to finish.

The cross-national PISA survey of knowledge and skills administered by the OECD shows that the low levels of knowledge of fifteen-year-olds in Mexico have not improved since 2000, the first year of the assessment, although it should be noted that during this period, the percentage of fifteen-year-olds in secondary education increased from 50 percent in 2003 to 63 percent in 2018 and 64 percent in 2022.[25] On average, students in Mexico score lower in the evaluation than students in other OECD countries, though not significantly different from students in other Latin American countries participating in the assessment (such as Chile, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Argentina). In 2018, 35 percent of the students in Mexico did not achieve a minimum level of proficiency in reading, math, and science. By 2022, this figure had increased to 38 percent. Those students are disproportionately poor. While socioeconomic background is significantly

related to student performance in the assessment, the gap between the most advantaged and least advantaged students is comparable to the gap for all countries in the OECD, and the gap has decreased in Mexico over the last two decades.[26] Student achievement levels dropped significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Math scores declined fourteen points (or an effect size of about 0.14). Reading scores declined by five points, science scores by nine points. These declines were comparable to the OECD average declines of fifteen points in math, ten points in reading, and two points in science.[27] The strength of the relationship between student performance in math and socioeconomic background was lower in Mexico (10.4 percent) than both the United States (14 percent) and the OECD average (15.5 percent). And the percentage of the most disadvantaged students attaining in the top 25 percent of scores was similar in Mexico (11.8 percent) to the United States (10.6 percent) and the OECD average (10.2 percent), indicating comparable levels of education resiliency. The average gap in math between advantaged and disadvantaged students was lower in Mexico (fifty-eight points) than in the United States (one hundred and two points) or the average for the OECD (ninety-three points). It should be noted, however, that in Mexico, only 64 percent of fifteen-year-olds are enrolled at the grade level at which PISA is administered, whereas 86 percent are in the United States.[28]

In Mexico, as in the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic tested the resiliency of education systems to sustain educational opportunity in challenging conditions. In-person instruction was suspended to contain the spread of the virus, and the federal government relied on a mix of online instructional resources and educational television to support education at home. The federal government's strategy to support the continuity of learning during the pandemic, known as "learning at home," included the production and broadcast of television and radio programs, the distribution of printed materials in regions with limited access to digital media, the distribution of digital resources via websites, and a national call center to support students, teachers, and parents.[29]

State and local government initiatives supplemented these efforts by launching radio education programs, prioritizing school attendance, and distributing education resources to vulnerable groups.[30] The pandemic influenced educational opportunity through multiple channels, not just through the suspension of in-person instruction. Vulnerable families were more impacted, and this undermined their ability to support the education of their children. A study of how teachers supported educational opportunity during the pandemic identified six challenges: 1) deficient quality of instructional materials deployed in the learning-from-home system, 2) lack of access to reliable technology, 3) deficient skills to teach remotely, 4) lack of parental involvement to support students at home, 5) limited views of the role of educational technology to support learning, and

6) preexisting socioeconomic inequalities amplified the impact of the pandemic on learning opportunities.[31]

The low effectiveness of remote-education modalities used during the protracted period of suspension of in-person instruction caused many children to disengage from school and some to drop out. At the preschool level (ages three to five), net enrollment rates dropped from 71.4 percent in 2019–2020 to 63.3 percent in 2021–2022, at the primary level they dropped from 98.3 percent to 96.3 percent, at the lower-secondary level they increased from 83.8 percent to 83.9 percent, and at the upper-secondary level they dropped from 63.2 percent to 60.7 percent.[32] Students experienced significant learning loss, which was greater among marginalized students, though the loss experienced was, on average, consistent with that of other OECD countries.[33]

Despite more than three decades of equity-oriented policies, equal educational opportunity for all remains elusive in Mexico. Much progress has been achieved in expanding access to education and in increasing the number of years of schooling of the population, but levels of student knowledge and skills remain low relative to other countries in the OECD and relative to the intended goals of the Mexican curriculum. Important gaps also remain in access to upper-secondary education, in student knowledge and skills, among marginalized students and their more privileged counterparts, and between public and private schools. But these gaps are not exclusively the result of what educational institutions do. Poverty and inequality shape opportunities to learn through multiple channels, including the support students have at home and the conditions in which they live.

The policies to support inclusion have been of two types. The first are those that seek system-level transformation to expand inclusion: for instance, declaring a quality and equitable education a constitutional right, making three years of preschool and of upper-secondary education compulsory and free, and efforts to improve the quality of education. The second type of efforts include targeted policies, such as conditional cash transfer programs, programs of Indigenous education, and community-based programs. Both types of policy have demonstrated great resiliency over time, suggesting that educational inclusion and equity have become an important priority across party lines. Mexico's increasing reliance on the use of evidence to analyze public policies supports the continuity and continuous improvement of such policies. The creation of the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy has provided steady support in the form of analysis and data to inform policymaking. But despite the resiliency of the equity-oriented efforts, there have been occasional setbacks, such as the elimination of the autonomy of the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education and the elimination of knowledge and skill assessments from teacher career tracks.

The more resilient policies include system-wide approaches, such as high levels of spending in education, extension of compulsory education, creating and distributing new textbooks, augmenting the ambitions of the curriculum, and efforts to assess student knowledge. Though there have also been disruptions to the autonomy of the agency in charge of student and teacher performance assessments.

Policies comprising special efforts to reach disadvantaged groups have also been resilient; these have included Indigenous schools, community-based education centers for small rural communities, technological universities, and scholarship programs. Less resilient have been programs that extended the duration of the school day, programs to increase the autonomy of schools, and reforms related to the careers and preparation of teachers.

A key differentiator between the most and least resilient efforts was whether there were synergies among the three sets of forces described earlier: 1) complementarity between system-wide and targeted efforts, 2) alignment between national and state-level strategies and state and local institutional capacity, and 3) politics. The most enduring reforms benefited from the enabling environment for implementation that such synergies created. For instance, the expansion in compulsory education was complementary with the scholarship programs that supported the poorest students to enroll in those additional years of education. Both reforms were within existing levels of institutional capacity and were political wins, creating gains for many groups, without obvious losses for any. The gains included more jobs for teachers, scholarships for constituents of local politicians, and construction projects for supporters. In contrast, reforms that did not benefit from such synergies were more fragile, such as reforms to teacher appointments or teacher education that challenged the teachers' union's hold on those processes. The extension of the school day created new demands (on teachers and budgets) without commensurate gains to interest groups.

But what made policies enduring sometimes rendered them ineffective. For example, Indigenous education and community programs survived at the expense of allowing the teachers' union and local politicians to appoint poorly prepared candidates to teaching positions, resulting in lower quality of instruction. Programs that sought system-wide transformation received more scrutiny than targeted programs such as Indigenous education and community schools. Recent reports of the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Policy indicate that the "subsystems" into which vulnerable students are tracked are the reason for their lower educational opportunities because they receive lower funding, materials, technical support, and human resources, all of which increase educational inequality.[34]

The stratification of poor and Indigenous students in tracks, different levels of institutional capacity, and the capture of elements of the education system by the teachers' union account for the gap between policy intent and implementa-

tion. Considerable variation in states' levels of institutional capacity and resources shape how policy is implemented across Mexico. In addition, when state and national offices are controlled by different political parties, there are fewer incentives to work together to implement education policies.

The implementation challenges to equity-oriented education policies in Mexico reflect forces that have been identified elsewhere. A study of the politics of education reform found that access-oriented policies benefit from more political support because they distribute gains to many groups and costs to few, whereas quality-oriented policies enjoy less political support because they impose costs on key groups.[35] A study of education reforms in the United States concluded that most of them have failed to reach scale, except for the expansion of schooling and the incorporation of extracurricular subjects in high school, which did not require deep changes in practice and worked within existing organization and culture. Other exceptions were "niche reforms" that were able to change the "grammar of schooling" for smaller subsystems or networks of schools, rather than the entire system, such as the adoption of advanced placement courses, the international baccalaureate, and the Montessori education philosophy.[36]

Mexico's efforts to advance equal educational opportunity have shown remarkable continuity since the 1990s. To the many children who today achieve higher levels of schooling than their parents, there can be little doubt that the education system offers them better chances to build their future than the other institutions in their lives. As the gap between policy intent and implementation closes, Mexico's efforts will come closer to creating equal opportunity for all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

[1] It is debatable whether the integration of Mexico in NAFTA alone created sufficient incentives to improve education quality, since much of the economic development strategy involved the creation of industry based on lower wages, relative to other partners in the economic zone. However, during the same period, the Economic Commission for Latin America proposed an agenda for economic and social development in Latin America that would rely more on high value–added industries based on knowledge. These policy ideas influenced the education and social development strategies of countries in Latin America. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and UNESCO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Education and Knowledge: Basic Pillars of Changing Production Patterns with Social Equity* (United Nations, 1992).

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[7] OECD, *Strong Foundations for Quality and Equity in Mexican Schools*, 47.

[8] Ibid., 21.

[9] Marcela Silveyra, Mónica Yánez, and Juan Bedoya, *¿Qué impacto tiene el programa escuelas de tiempo completo? Evaluación del programa en México 2007–2016* [What is the impact of the program of full time schools in Mexico 2007–2016?] (Banco Mundial, 2018).

[10] OECD, *Strong Foundations for Quality and Equity in Mexican Schools*, 13.

[11] Ibid., 36.

[12] Ibid., 13–14.

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