

Educating Migrant Children in Mexico

A mobile educational system with classrooms in railway cars and a traveling teaching staff offers the children of Mexico's migrant workers an uninterrupted education.

Student populations with special educational needs abound. In Mexico, the needs of a particularly unique group of students are being met by the Mexican Railways. This government-owned enterprise has led the way in planning and implementing programs that deal with the problems of migrant families employed in remote and relatively inaccessible areas.

One such program operates in the Chihuahua-al-Pacifico line, which traverses a variety of terrains in its trajectory from northern Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. Completed in the early 1960s, the route requires extensive maintenance and repairs in desert, prairie, and tropical zones, including the famous Copper Canyon atop the Sierra Madre. The repair and maintenance of this scenic route produced a set of health, housing, and educational problems that required a responsive and creative approach.

Until 1964, Jose Murguia Lopez was a rural teacher in Mata Ortiz, a small railroad community at the foot of the Sierra Madre in the state of Chihuahua. He observed that maintenance crews and their families were routinely shuffled to areas not served by state or federal schools for periods of up to three months. This practice resulted in a tremendous loss of instructional time for the children. If families could be relocated to live in railroad cars in order to maintain family unity, Lopez reasoned, then schools and teachers

could also be relocated to maintain educational needs. For two years he lived on the contributions of concerned parents while he planned, proposed, and finally, in 1966, obtained approval for a novel approach to educating migrant children.

Education on Wheels

Lopez's idea is today a mobile educational system with 14 schools dispersed throughout the states of Chihuahua, Sonora, and Sinaloa. The mobile school's first and current principal, Lopez himself, works from a railroad car in Mata Ortiz. The teachers of the mobile school live in adjacent cars, which are sparsely furnished but comfortable. Other railroad cars that serve as classrooms are equipped with a blackboard, two rows of wooden seats, and a small complement of teaching aids. The cars are heated but not air conditioned. In stations where electricity is not available, portable power plants enable teachers to use electronic equipment and personal appliances.

The 14 teachers and their principal, who are paid by the Mexican Railways, receive the same wages and benefits as other state teachers. Most of the teachers are now recruited from areas served by the railroad. They have systematically replaced the urban or outer-region teachers who usually did not last long on the job. Teachers who were initially employed without teach-

ing certificates later acquired them during summer sessions at a federal teacher training institute. Teachers also attend postgraduate classes in the state's normal school in Chihuahua City and participate in inservice education workshops.

The day-to-day scheduling of each school depends on the number of children in attendance and their level of academic attainment, which ranges from grade one through six. In the winter, older children, who can better withstand the cold weather, attend classes in the early morning, and younger children in the afternoon. In the summer, when the afternoons become unbearably hot the opposite occurs. Teachers schedule students in groups throughout the day to accommodate the grade level diversity. The classrooms are self-contained and operate like one-room schoolhouses. Texts and workbooks are provided free of charge by the federal government. In addition to receiving a state-quality education, students participate in extracurricular activities, as well as yearly academic, cultural, and athletic contests.

Teacher evaluations, conducted three times a year by the principal and zone inspector, stress a strict adherence to the official Mexican federal curriculum. This adherence is one reason the educational attainment gap between children of mobile schools and those attending state schools has been reduced (Saucedo, 1983).

Mobile Education for Adults

Adult education under the concept of the open high school has also become a part of the mobile educational system. Students desiring to attend regular high school and later preparatory school are encouraged to continue their education in localities with such schools. To alleviate the educational gap for those over 15 years of age who cannot relocate to attend classes, one mobile school has started evening sessions. These students are not required to pass an entrance exam like other high school students in Mexico, nor do they follow a set schedule of classes. Instead, they meet with the faculty individually or periodically as a group, completing most of their work on an independent study basis. Students must pass a nationally standardized exam, scored in Mexico City and handled with the same zeal and safeguards as an Educational Testing Service exam. After passing the test,

students may then enter any preparatory school in Mexico, completion of which is a prerequisite for admission to a university or teacher training institution. Thus, the system has begun to expand its services to other students in the railroad communities who normally would have been limited to a 6th grade education—the general attainment goal for mass education in Mexico.

Cooperation Reaps Benefits

The benefits of the mobile education system accrue not only to students and their families but also to the industry and the state education system as well. Under the mobile educational system, students:

- Receive a continuous education with the same curriculum, teacher, and instructional group.
- Suffer no separation from family members, friends, or their immediate community.
- Receive the added benefit of a low teacher-student ratio.
- Obtain instruction from a permanent teacher who is from their community and, therefore, does not resent being there; knows them and their families well; and can be held more accountable by the community.
- Receive an education that parallels that of a regular state-operated school.

The Mexican Railways, in return, obtain the loyalty and support of its employees. By financially supporting the mobile educational system, the company relieves the state of a fiscal responsibility it would be hard pressed to meet. Furthermore, the educational attainment of the railroad communities is closer to the national goal, surpassing it in some cases because of the evening high school. In the long run, a better-educated community means a more competent labor pool and a more productive labor force for the Mexican Railways. The cooperation among industry, the state educational system, and the community has already produced better educated generations of students with all parties involved benefiting from the results.

Applicability to the U.S. and Other Countries

Effective educational practices in unusual circumstances can be properly implemented when both government and industry cooperate in meeting their social obligations. In the case of the needs of the children of migrant

workers in the United States, make-shift programs have long been used to cope with the basic problem of a fragmented educational process due to the demands of that industry on their parents. Unlike the Mexican Railways, agribusiness in the United States has done nothing voluntarily to alleviate the problems faced by an itinerant labor force. Nor have school districts changed their delivery of services other than by slightly modifying the school calendar to ensure that students and their families are available to pick the crops. This small concession is hardly an example of social concern (Taylor, 1973).

Educational systems in the United States could emulate the concept behind the Mexican Railways' strategy with both migrant children and native Americans. If industry, government, and education genuinely accept collective responsibility for educating these children, creative and novel solutions can emerge. The computerized academic record-keeping system that enables American schools receiving migrant students to determine their instructional level in various subjects is but one example.

Federal and state education agencies should begin educating decision makers about the short- and long-term benefits their companies obtain from employees whose children are properly educated as a result of corporate efforts. Similarly, federal, state, and local governments need to become cognizant of the monetary and social cost of allowing any segment of the population to be undereducated. Collaborative efforts to alleviate special educational problems of the labor force are sound investments in the future of any nation. □

References

- Saucedo, J. Personal interview, June 14, 1983.
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