

TRANSPARENCY, COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Teresa Bracho González and Arcelia Martínez Bordon

Although, at least in principle, citizens today are better equipped to make demands for the improvement of the Mexican education system than they were four years ago, day to day reality shows that these changes are still difficult to achieve. On the one hand, the government authorities involved have not done all that they could to make their daily work more transparent; on the other hand, citizens have not been able to exercise their right to accountability in the educational system. This essay offers a critical look at the challenges still facing the accountability of the educational system, with a focus on schools—not just in regards to the programs they offer, but also in terms of their impact on students' educational achievement. We argue that while there have been notable advances in transparency, better access to information is necessary (though not sufficient) in order for the educational system to be accountable in practice.

Currently, and thanks in large part to the Federal Law for Transparency and Access to Information (LFTAIPG in Spanish), the public has access to better information on, among other things, the programs offered by the Ministry of Public Education (SEP in Spanish); such as rules of operation, administrators' salaries, and the mission statements of its various departments, as well as the specific services they provide.

However, in practice, better access to public information does not imply that such information simply flows to the people enrolled in the SEP's programs. In fact, access to this information continues to be the privilege of the few, those who have had the good fortune to already be educated, and who understand, among other things, how a public budget is put together. Those who do not have access to the internet, or who live in rural communities—especially those who live in alarming conditions of marginalization—not only are not using this new information (much of which is found on-line), but are very unlikely to know that they even have the right to demand accountability from their schools and from the education system more generally.¹ Thus, the fact of simply having improved *rights* to information, thanks to the LFTAIPG, has not channeled that information

¹ On-line searches take time. One needs to be a relatively skilled navigator in order to not get lost in the sea of information, which is not always current or broken down in a convenient way. For example, educational expenses are broken down by state. The SEP's website only includes very general information that corresponds to its administrative functions. To find more detailed information, one has to go to the Ministry of Finance and Public Credit's site and look for Federal Expense Budgets.

from decision-makers to citizens. As we will show below, enhanced transparency is not synonymous with, nor a guarantee of, enhanced accountability, at least not in the broader sense of the term.

Accountability, according to Schedler, involves three dimensions: information, justification, and sanction; that is, “it obligates power-holders to open themselves to public scrutiny; it forces them to explain and justify their actions; and it subjects them to the threat of sanctions.”²

In order to fulfill the first requirement—providing public information—the SEP would have to inform citizens about the policies, actions and programs of every school, and of the school system as a whole. It would also have to provide information about results (e.g., learning achievements, drop-outs, failures). At the individual school level, this would also mean keeping parents informed about, among other things, day to day problems that might be impacting the way their children are able to learn, as well as about how public resources are being used.

Although in Mexico there is always talk about how important it is for civil society to be actively involved and demand improvements in children’s education, the fact is that parents are excluded from most of the decisions made by schools. This is not a coincidence. Parents receive little or no information about school plans, policies or educational programs. An exception might be—due to their notoriety—the scholarships offered by the Oportunidades Program and the support received by schools enrolled in the Quality Schools Program (Programa Escuelas de Calidad, or PEC).³

To meet the second criteria for accountability—justification—the SEP and individual schools would have to go beyond simply reporting on their activities. Instead, they would be “turning over accounts” to parents, explaining *why* they are doing what they are doing, and why they are doing one thing and not another. For example, they would need to explain how a school comes up with its annual work plan. In those schools receiving PEC support, it would include explaining to parents how and why some schools are accepted into the program; and once in, how the school’s Strategic School Transformation Program (Programa Estratégico de Transformación Escolar, or PETE) is justified and developed. In theory, the development of a school’s PETE is supposed to involve the parent representative of the School Social Participation Council (Consejo Escolar de Participación Social, or

² Andreas Schedler, “¿Qué es la rendición de cuentas?” in *Cuadernos de Transparencia* 03 (Mexico: IFAI, Mexico, 2004) p. 12.

³ For more information on the operation and results of the PEC, see CIDE evaluations, coordinated by Teresa Bracho González.

CEPS). However, in practice, in some schools the parent representative's role (and that of the other members of the council) is just to show up and sign the PETE, which has already been written. In other words, the School Council only exists on paper and only meets to comply with the PEC's rules. Suffice to say that if one visits a PEC school, the probability of meeting parents who have actually participated in developing the school's PETE, or who even know and understand what it is, may be lower than one would wish.⁴

Finally, the third dimension of accountability that Schedler describes, involving sanctions, would mean that employees (teachers, principals and supervisors, among others) who were not performing up to standards could be penalized.⁵ They could thus be held accountable to the General Education Law, the rules of operation for specific programs, or, say, to the commitments they themselves establish in their annual work plan.

What can an ordinary citizen do to promote this nascent transparency, especially to work on this lack of "justification" and "sanctions"? Many would say that the solution lies in active parent participation, via their local school-based associations and the Social Participation Councils (Consejos de Participación Social en la Educación, or CPSE), which were created in 1993 as part of the General Education Law. However, we have to think critically and have realistic expectations about how much advocacy work those organizations can take on. The reality is that parent associations have their hands tied: they are not allowed to express opinions on pedagogical matters or get involved in activities other than purely social or ceremonial ones—like organizing events for Mother's Day. The schools that have Social Participation Councils, meanwhile, do little to involve so-called civil society. In other words, it seems these are "Social Participation" councils in name only. They typically consist of the principal, a teacher representative, a union representative, a parent, an alumnus, and a distinguished member of the community. However, it is really the principal, faculty and union representatives (also employed as teachers at the school) who generally run the council and dominate decision-making. In some places, there are municipal education councils, which can be effective spaces for local state-level engagement—for instance, as ways to address the city council and the state Education Department. However, these leave ordinary citizens (so-called civil society) out of the conversation as well, a problem that only worsens at the level of state and national councils.

⁴ Based on preliminary results of a study by Arcelia Martínez Bordon, in collaboration with Teresa Bracho González, on the Social Participation Councils. See also the study on school accountability coordinated by Teresa Bracho.

⁵ Andreas Schedler, "The Concept of Political Accountability," Working Document No. 92, CIDE, División de Estudios Políticos, 1997.

In the absence of properly functioning councils, it may be worthwhile for Parent Associations to play more of a role in the accountability process (they have been “participating” in schools for years). However, that would be a way down the road. Teachers and other educational authorities would have to become more understanding, and citizens would have to participate more actively. It is not enough simply to have a webpage where the SEP posts information about its programs. Parents have to be informed about their rights and responsibilities, and about what kinds of results are coming out of their schools and specific programs.

In regards to this last point, it is worth mentioning the recent controversy (2005-2006) over the public’s right to access school evaluations. The National Evaluation Center for Higher Education (Centro Nacional de Evaluación para la Educación Superior, or Ceneval) had ranked the country’s secondary schools according to the results of the Exani-1, a high school entrance exam taken by secondary school students—public and private—during the 2002-03 academic year, and was being pressured to disclose the results. While some intellectuals and academics read the Ceneval’s resistance as a step backwards in the government’s efforts to provide more public accountability, others were opposed to the publication of the results. The latter challenged the use of that exam as a basis for ranking schools, and especially as a means to collapse public and private schools into the same scale. They argued that the Exani-1 was designed to measure the educational level of individual students, not schools’ efforts or results. The exam would not be a fair way to measure public schools, they said, given how poorly prepared many students are when they come to secondary school, and the range of problems they face stemming from adverse socioeconomic and cultural circumstances.⁶ In fact, as Ceneval’s report itself indicates, the Exani-1 results are not representative of institutional performance because only those students who volunteer take the exam.

Clearly, better ways of informing the public about basic school performance have yet to be defined. This is a very expensive project, involving institutional statistics and controlled tests. The few methods of evaluation that currently exist do not address teaching or learning processes, which obviously affect children’s performance. However, although in Mexico there is little tradition of evaluation (such that areas like adult education are at this point basically ignored), currently there are important efforts underway to create and improve methods—both to evaluate the education system, and communicate the results.

⁶ For more information on this controversy, see the newspaper *Reforma*—articles published between August, 2005 and February, 2006.

In terms of parent participation, we are still struggling against a dominant culture of fear. Citizens need to be made aware of their right to demand accountability from educational authorities, and to know about and question evaluation results. It is crucial to get past people's belief that anyone who complains (and participates) will lose their benefits under social welfare or education programs, or will be forcefully "disappeared"; or if they get involved (and if necessary, complain), their children's grades will be affected.

In summary, the right to access information generated by educational program offices should be accompanied by better evaluation and better information available to those who use the programs. That right should also be connected to the exercise of participatory citizenship, so real processes of accountability in schools begin to unfold. The process of working towards transparency and accountability has begun, and is unquestionably laudable. However, the consolidation of that process within the structure of the educational system, from policymakers to the schools, has yet to happen.