

EMERGENCY IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

*A program
without vital signs*



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SYNTHESIS

Mexican education has prevailed in a constant transition environment and lately its evolution has been affected by the sanitary contingency of COVID-19. The pandemic implied, among other measures, the decision to close the schools and traverse to different modes of distance education to stop the spread of the virus. Management of the pandemic in matters of education has had issues ranging from operational to clear follow up on objectives and has forced the integration of immediate actions to satisfy the demands

of the students, teachers, and the whole educational system as an overall ensemble in light of the challenge of confinement.

The main inconsistency in the Sectoral Education Program (PSE for its acronym in Spanish) 2020-2024 is that completely ignores the sanitary crisis, it does not include the educational needs pertaining education required by “the new normalcy”, and much less propounds mechanisms for the return to on-site classes once the sanitary contingency is controlled. In other

words, it doesn't present proposals on the effects of COVID-19 in the short, medium, or long term. The PSE goes from being a program that should be oriented towards the primary objectives in education appealing for educational fairness and excellence, to become an isolated document, unconnected, and obsolete in the implementation of new educational strategies. In the face of a landscape devoid of planning and efficient answers, two coherent efforts are required from a wide number of performers to contain education inequality, school attrition, and the enlargement of the educational schisms of millions of students in our country.

DISASSOCIATION, DECONTEXTUALIZATION, AND OBSOLESCENCE PSE 2020-24

In the middle of constrains like confinement, increased caution in personal hygiene, and health, the Sectoral Program of Education (PSE) 2020-2041 was published.¹ This program, by mandate of the Planning Law, should have been delivered and articulat-

¹ DOF (Official Journal of the federation, for its acronym in Spanish) dated July 6th 2020: <https://tinyurl.com/SVr2pse2020>.

ed immediately with the National Development Plan 2019-20204 (PND for its acronym in Spanish)² published on July 12th, 2019.

Without a ruling strategy that sets and guides its actions, the National Education System (SEN for its acronym in Spanish) has had to traverse the traditional on-site teaching model, to an online model. With a lag of more than 12 months since the PND was published, the PSE does not consider a sequence of politics and actions with the plan, and outright ignores the national context around the COVID-19 pandemic. The PSE is a document disassociated from the PND and does not propound solutions in the short term, much less in the medium and long one.

To illustrate the disassociation that exists on one side from the elements of the PND with the PSE on the educational field, illustration 1 elaborates on the elements posed by each document. This comparison allows for the inference that, albeit no educational system in the world was ready for a disaster magnitude pandemic, in Mexico the ruling documents of educational politics do not consider all or even the best strategies to face a crisis with unique dimen-

² DOF dated July 12th 2019: <https://tinyurl.com/SVR2PND2019>.

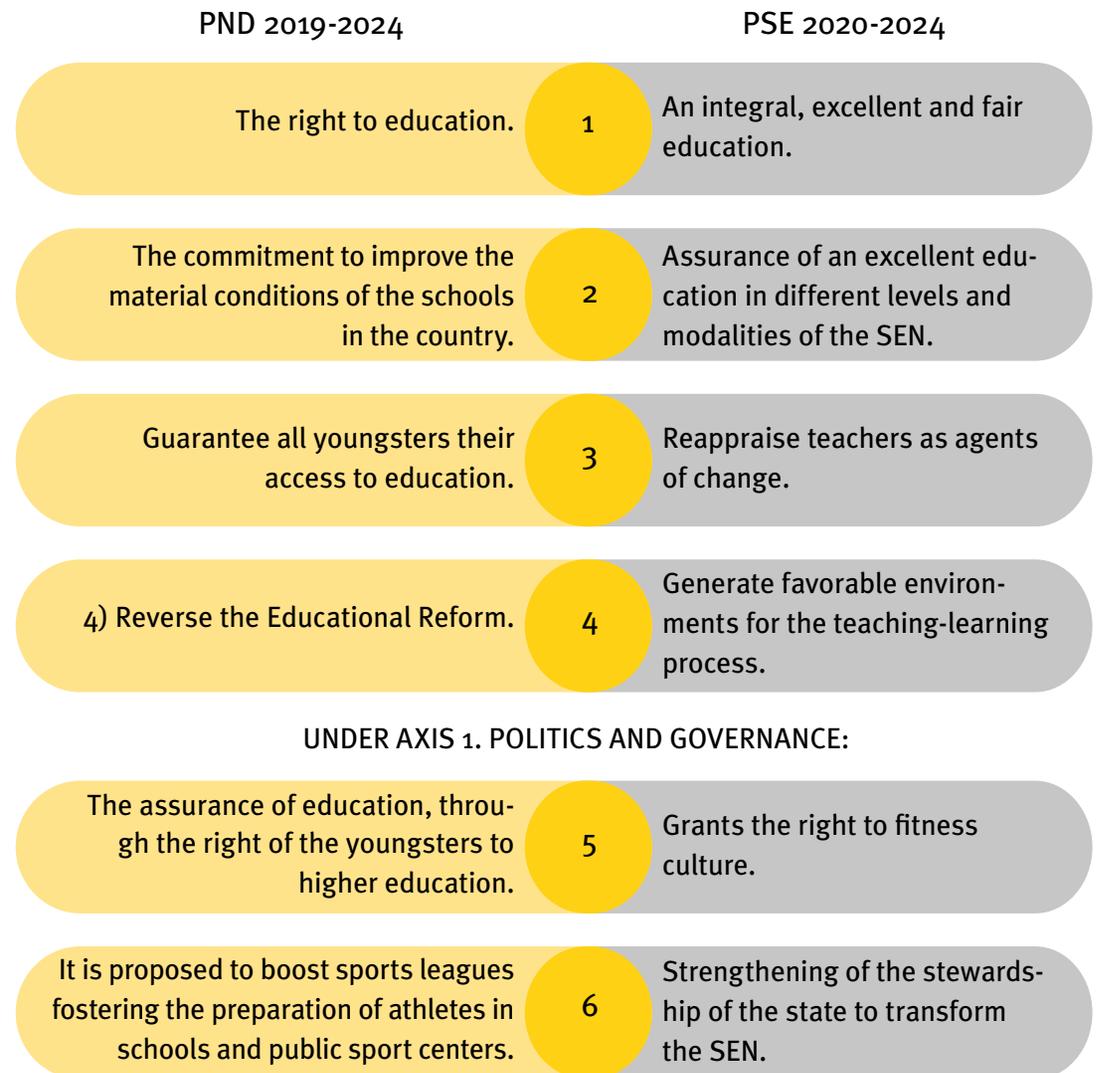
sions in the country nor the world. In spite that the Educational Authority (AE for its acronym in Spanish) is trying to adjust and adapt to the current juncture, is evident that without the backing of a founding axis on its planning, these answers will have improvised and isolated results.

Considering that the goal of the PND is to establish and direct the primary objectives of the sexennium and that the PSE's goal is to define the routes in which the educational sector should transit to accomplish those objectives, it would be expected that both documents should have a strong bond in matters of the educational field. Never the less, with a lag of 20 months since the entry of the current government and under an unfortunate scenario in public health, the lack of a unique strategy with which the AE can perform and manage the education of at least 28 millions³ of children, and adolescents that attend basic education in the country, is exposed.

Likewise, and even though it is stipulated on the PND 2019-2024, pertaining to the "Grant of the right of youngsters to higher education through social pro-

³ General outline-Schooled- from the National Educational System. Total school enrollment. INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography, for its acronym in Spanish): <https://tinyurl.com/y3k26gt4>.

FIGURE 1. DISASSOCIATION BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL PROPOSALS PND - PSE



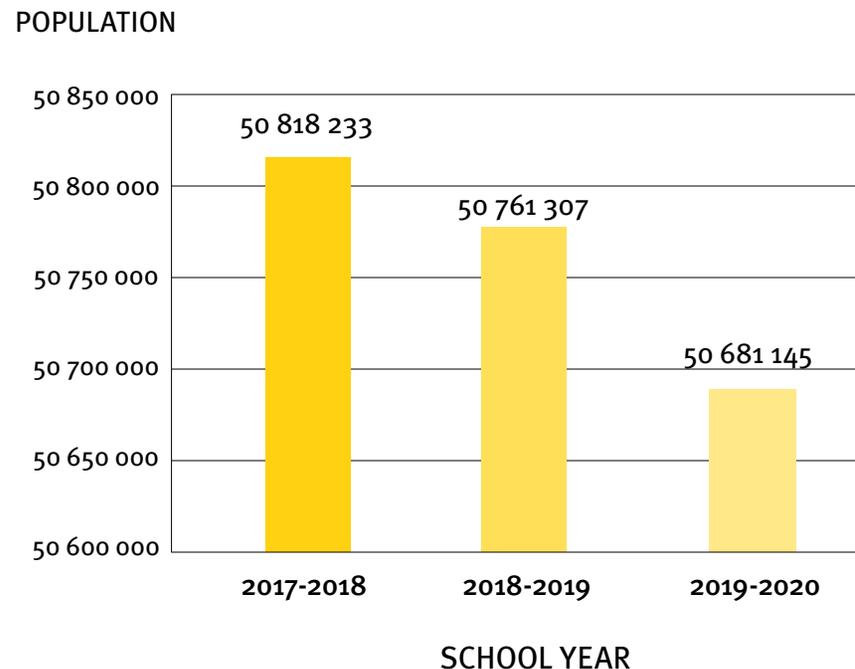
Source: In-house elaboration with information from the PND 2019 - 2024 and PSE 2020 - 2024.

grams”,⁴ the enrolled population has declined cycle by cycle. In other words, the government measures to try to avoid the exclusion and school attrition of thousands of youngsters have been counterproductive. Since the beginning of this administration, the population that was studying in a school modality⁵ went from a little more of 50.818 millions of students in the school cycle of 2017-2018 to 50.761 million in the school cycle of 2018-2019 and finally to 50.681 million in the school cycle of 2019-2020. Meaning, since before the arrival of the pandemic 80,162 children and youngsters between 3 to 25 years of age did not enroll from one cycle to the other, in spite of the government efforts.

In this respect, school attrition, a result of the digital exclusion intensified by the effects of the pandemic in the educational field, which can become a big problem in the medium and long term. Just in the school cycle of 2018-2019, the school attrition rate was 12.9% in the high school level, whilst for the school cycle, 2020-201 is foreseen to be 17.5%.⁶ There is an absence of educational policies that have proposals to contain this issue.

4 Like “Universidades para el bienestar” [Universities for the wellbeing] and “Jóvenes construyendo el futuro” [Youngsters building the future] Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019-2020- DOF p. 19: <https://tinyurl.com/SVR2PND2019>.
 5 Secretaría de Educación Pública. SEP. Available in: <https://tinyurl.com/y6xhphsj>.
 6 School attrition rate INEGI: <https://tinyurl.com/y5uce9cu>.

CHART 1. EVOLUTION OF SCHOOLED POPULATION FROM 3 TO 25 YEARS OF AGE BY SCHOOL CYCLE



Source: In-house elaboration with SEP (Secretariat of Public Education for its acronym in Spanish) data.

LIMITATIONS IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD

One of the most relevant constraints that override the effective and correct execution of the PSE is, on the first place, the lack of congruity with the current conditions of the pandemic; and on the second place the lack of a budgetary framework, even though there was an increase on the budget for the fiscal year of 2020 of 24 thousand millions of pesos for the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) compared to 2019,⁷ this amount does not consider enhancements

⁷ According to the Draft Expenditure Budget of the federation branch 11 for the Secretariat of Education, for 2020 \$326,286.7 millions of pesos are expected, in comparison with the \$300,140.2 millions of pesos budgeted for 2019.

or reinforcement of policies towards the needs of the SEN, but it will shelter only four programs related to the bestowal of scholarships:

1. Programa de Becas de Educación Básica para el Bienestar Benito Juárez [Elementary education scholarship program for the wellbeing Benito Juárez]. (\$29,968 millions of pesos).
2. Programa de Becas Elisa Acuña [Scholarship program Elisa Acuña]. (\$4,157 millions of pesos).

For 2021 there is a raise on the budget of 3.6% in proportion to 2020, which ascends to \$338.046.9 millions of pesos, according to what was published by the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit (SHCP for its acronym in Spanish). <https://tinyurl.com/yysmz2z>.



Image: Teacher attending students / Classroom during pandemic, San Luis Acatlán, municipality of Me'phaa. Photos: Courtesy Teacher Aquilino Martínez Solano en <https://piedepagina.mx/la-pobreza-de-la-montana-de-guerrero-impide-las-clases-a-distancia-durante-la-pandemia/>

3. Universidades para el Bienestar Benito Juárez García [Universities for the wellbeing Benito Juárez García] (\$978 millions of pesos).
4. Beca Universal para Estudiantes de Educación Media Superior Benito Juárez [Universal scholarship for students in high school or higher levels Benito Juárez](\$28,222 millions of pesos).

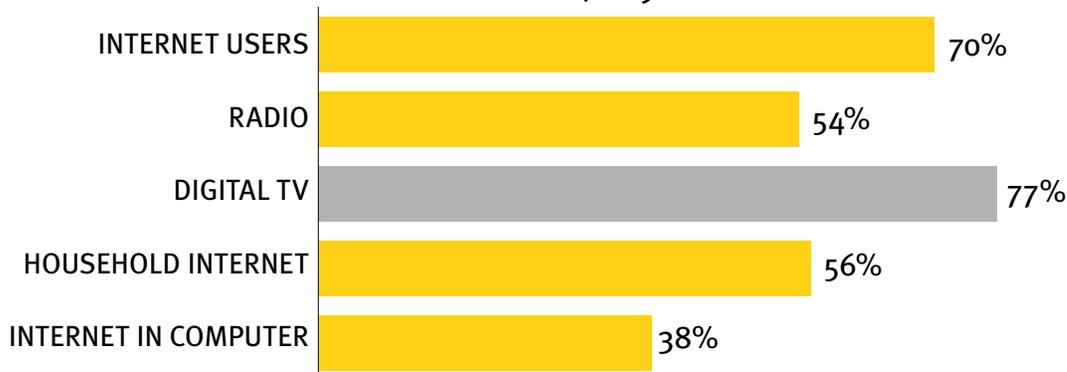
In third place, the frailty caused by the null bond between the PND and PSE is found. Disassociated proposals are presented, leaving aside the real needs of an education system threatened by delays in access to health and technological services, gaps in poverty, and educational quality.

One of these urgent needs refers to the compliance of the human right of internet access in all sectors of the school population. Similarly, it's obvious that enhancing this internet access with effective management and use of the digital media by students and teachers, especially to keep optimal performance in the school cycle of 2020-2021 is needed.

Under this framework, internet coverage as well as access to digital media become one of the most important alerts in this new government. With an overview in which since 2019 the National Survey on Availability and Use of Information Technologies in Households

(ENDUTIH for its acronym in Spanish) revealed that from the 115, 065,309 considered individuals, only 70% are users of the internet, 54% are users with access to radio, 38% has internet on their computer and 77% have open digital television coverage. Likewise, as mentioned in the previous report,⁸ on the level of households for the same year, only 44.3% own one computer and 56.4% have an internet connection. If the statement given by the educational authorities promotes the use of open television as an educational resource, it is important to emphasize that 23% of the families in Mexico don't have access to Open Digital

CHART 2. PERCENTAGE OF ACCES AND USE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN HOUSEHOLDS, 2019



Source: In-house elaboration with information from INEGI.

⁸ *La pandemia en México. Dimensión de la tragedia*, [The pandemic in Mexico. The scope of the tragedy] July 2019. p.92.

television (TDA for its acronym in Spanish). Albeit a low percentage, there is no doubt it could hinder a little more than 6 million students from using this resource.

With this evidence we can deduce, on one side, that is very likely that many of these students are not qualified to continue with their education since at least 74.99⁹ millions of users do not have access to digital media in 2019, including the internet (on the household or in the computer), digital television and radio. On the other side, school attrition due to digital exclusion is already a major issue. The school attrition rate in the school cycle of 2020-2021, according to data from INEGO, could reach 17.5%,¹⁰ both elements becoming a challenge for the recently implemented distance education strategy.

23% of Mexican families do not have access to Digital Television. Even though the percentage is not high, it could hinder a little more than 6 million students from using this resource.

⁹ ENDUTIH, 2019.

¹⁰ School attrition rate INEGI: <https://tinyurl.com/y5uce9cu>



Image: There are communities in the country where there is no television nor internet connection. Photo: Courtesy at <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2020/04/21/aprende-en-casa-el-fallido-proyecto-de-la-educacion-publica-ante-el-covid-19/>

THE URGENT NEED TO PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL RESULTS

It is important to recognize that even though the Mexican authorities are doing everything they can to rescue the educational dynamic in Mexico, the learning of children is still threatened by events like social exclusion and educational gaps, now deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenges that the SEN faces with the start of

the cycle the past August 24th, which is presented in a long-distance modality with the program “Aprende en casa II” [Learn at home II], are coupled with severe inconsistencies and vagueness around the roles the different educational performers play. Nevertheless, despite the push towards digital media by the educational community that the pandemic brought, in general, there isn’t a clear path pertaining to the role of the teachers, principals, and supervisors about the television content and teaching materials.

Likewise, there is uncertainty on the reliability of the learning evaluations since this strategy, which determines the progress or admission to new levels of educational institutions, is not clear on its procedures of implementation. By having to choose components to postpone, dismiss, or provide long-distance tests, earnest worries arise about fairness, especially when access to education becomes variable.¹¹

The setting we face in the matter of the validation of learning, taking into account the international evaluations of students, is a challenge for the Mexican case. In reading, math, and science we have obtained a below-average score from the OCDE. Only 1% of the students reach a high level of competence in at least

¹¹ UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response. Education Sector issue notes. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y5vm7eyw>.

LOW LEVEL OF COMPETENCE IN READING AND MATHEMATICS (BELOW OCDE AVERAGE)



READING
45% STUDENTS BELOW AVERAGE



MATHEMATICS
56% STUDENTS BELOW AVERAGE

one area (far below the average of the OCDE: 16%), 45% of students presented a low level of competence in reading (average from OCDE: 23%) and up to 56% of the students obtained a low level of competency in mathematics (average from OCDE: 24%).¹²

Accordingly, the risk to obtain deficient learning, as part of the COVID-19 pandemic, is higher. Foregoing, the digital exclusion, the limited support for teachers pertaining training on TIC (Information and commu-

¹² Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018-Results. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yxdho8hy>.

nication technology, for its acronym in Spanish), the issue of school attrition and deficient performance pertaining educational results, will be added to the list of problems of the already stressed and tattered SEN. For this reason, coherence in the educational planning and the actions the government in performing in this new and confusing state of education during the pandemic is urgent. Only actions like that could prevent millions of students from becoming members of a lost generation.

¿WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN NOW?

Some recommendations by international bodies (ONU [UN, for its acronym in Spanish], PNUD [United Nations Development Programme, for its acronym in Spanish]),¹³ suggest to all countries to prioritize the reopening of schools as soon as they have local transmission of COVID-19 under control, otherwise prolonged closing of studies centers could spawn a “generational catastrophe”. Table 1 elaborates on the approaches for the reshaping of functional programs considering the effects of COVID-19.

¹³ ONU: <https://tinyurl.com/y46zyogb>.



Image: Poverty and lack of technology discourage distance learning Photo: Julio César Martínez/OEM-Infomex en <https://julioastillero.com/video-pobreza-y-carencias-tecnologicas-desmotivan-el-regreso-a-clases-a-distancia/>.

TABLE 1. MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND COVID-19 REPORT, UNITED NATIONS

	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	FOURTH
PROPOSAL	<p>Reopen schools.</p> 	<p>Prioritize education in financing decisions.</p> 	<p>Guide actions towards those harder to reach.</p> 	<p>Build today the future of education.</p> 
RECOMMENDATION	<p>Recommendation:</p> <p>The reopening of schools and learning centers and the return of students to schools considering a balance between health risks and educational risks.</p>	<p>Recommendation:</p> <p>Postulates the need for arranging to fund for education, unsatisfied by countries of medium incomes and low in education.</p> <p>* They propose protecting and raising the budgets for education as well as join international efforts to assist development.</p>	<p>Recommendation:</p> <p>About the integration of mostly minority groups that have a higher risk: people in crisis and emergencies, displaced and/or with disabilities.</p> <p>* Said efforts should be sensitive towards the inequalities faced by children and youngsters managing to close the digital gap.</p>	<p>Recommendation:</p> <p>They propose to move towards systems that impact quality education for everyone</p>

Source: In-house elaboration with UN information, 2020.

Albeit these recommendations of educational policies are exclusively focused on the pandemic period, in the Mexican case they have been completely disregarded at least on those pertaining budgetary raise, considering vulnerable groups and consolidations of more and better adapted educational systems towards their needs during and post-pandemic. In these three cases, the federal government has ignored the proposals of international bodies as well as national experts on the field of implementation of educational policies.

On the same guideline, the effects of the sanitary crisis by coronavirus also threaten human development on a global level. Education, health, and living conditions are elements that could roll back for the first time this year, since the introduction of the concept in 1990.¹⁴ Here lies the importance of adding efforts from experts on the field, from national educational authorities, state governments, from performers of the SEN and the international community, with the goal to start to revert the imminent havoc of this scenario.

¹⁴ nk to 'Human Development Perspectives COVID-19: Assessing the impact, envisioning the recovery: <https://tinyurl.com/y2k4jk3c>.

THESE ARE TIMES FOR MORE AND BETTER EDUCATIONAL PROPOSALS

In response, some countries have drafted frameworks that in practice could help with the educational endeavor. For example, the Chicago Teachers Union estimated in July that once the situation was controlled the reopening of public schools in the city safely could cost between \$450 million and \$1.7 thousand million dollars.¹⁵

Likewise, the US Senate drafted a bill that could provide \$70 thousand million dollars to schools with the aim to open schools safely, or even provide the necessary technology to low-income families. In Ecuador,¹⁶ a groundbreaking program started where the return to school will be given progressively in rural sectors where there are no cases of the virus.

In Mexico, according to SEP's Joint Statement No. 7 dated July 17th, 2020, its instructed that the return to school will be given when the epidemiological traffic light is on color Green; meaning, only when it is safe for the school community.¹⁷ None the less, the Mexi-

¹⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/y4w2x54y>.

¹⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/Ecu2oedu>

¹⁷ Comunicado Conjunto No.7. [SEP's Joint Statement No. 7 da-

can strategy has been to work through the so-called “republican austerity”, without any hint towards budgetary adjustments to raise the expenditure on education. The stance of the SHCP refers that there will be no availability for emergency funds, suggesting that in 2021 Mexico will have to face the worst crisis with a fiscal package with more constraints than in previous years.¹⁸ Likewise, Mexico needed calculations for the start of activities under the traffic light framework proposed by the government are not being done. There are no signs of policies that plan or foresee what kind of “new educational normality” will be required for every one of the social contexts in the country.

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ted July 17th 2020]: <https://tinyurl.com/y67b5ljb>.

¹⁸ Article: INVESTING.com “SHCP: México no cuenta con fondos para crisis 2021” [“SHCP: Mexico doesn’t count with funds for the 2021 crisis”]. Recovered from: <https://tinyurl.com/yxfchv23>.

FINAL REMARKS

The disruption caused by COVID-19 in the family lives affects amongst many other elements the social, political, and economical dynamics. In this regard, the pandemic has extended its toll on the educational systems of Mexico and the rest of the world.

The little consistency in the educational field has been exposed since the formulation of the PSE 2020-2024, that on one hand ignores completely the sanitary crises by not including the needs of the “new normalcy”. On the other hand, presents a lack of relationship with the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (2019-2024), without aggregating innovative proposals in the educational field, and finally, does not include any approach towards mechanisms for the safe comeback to school classes on a safe manner, once the sanitary situation is controlled. The PSE went from being a ruling program in the educational field to an otiose, disjointed, and obsolete document.

The lag and the incompatibility that the PSE presents in this moment of crisis, without a doubt, affect the performance that they could have on the SEN. Without a clear orientation of their action axis, the Mexican government has had to improvise and demonstrated

the few tools that it has to face the worst crisis in education in years. Albeit there was no way to predict the arrival of the virus, and the effects it would bring in hundreds of sectors; issues like budgeting, anticipated planning of education on the middle to long term, or the level of attention that the most vulnerable communities should've had, could have been prioritized.

Even though it is important to recognize that the AE has acted under the criteria to minimize the impacts on the educational sector, it is also fair to recognize that this effort has been insufficient, and has not settled the grounds for a solid and well-reasoned stance to face the current crisis. It could have been thought given the stated social vocation of the current government, that any attempt to reach on-site to the farthest communities with scarce access to information and communication technologies through well-equipped convoys (two or three times per week) would've been made. This type of limitation, imposed by the government itself, has translated to a series of inconsistencies in detriment of the Sistema Educativo Nacional (National Education System).

The implementation of a homogeneous educational model as the one used so far is inevitably going to generate inequity elements in the different types of



communities that exist in the country. Meaning, that when a government that implemented well-delimited policies by sector, region, and other types of communities was more needed, the AE presented a single and irreversible plan that jeopardizes the educational reach and its key performers. Teachers, for example, have not had the possibility to participate proactively in the recently implemented educational model.

The need to reformulate a program attached to a current context in benefit of the vulnerable groups and that considers different educational modes, incorporates all performers on the educational sector and

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIONS IN PRE AND POST-COVID-19 SCENARIOS

PERFORMERS IN THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR	PRE-COVID-19 LANDSCAPE (PRESENT ELEMENTS)	POST-COVID-19 LANDSCAPE (BURGEONING NEEDS)
Educational authorities	<p>The elements present before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Inconsistencies on the development of the PSE » Null relationship between the PSE and the PND » Lack of innovation in the educational field » Budgetary inflexibility (“Republican austerity”) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » The reformulation of an educational program that considers the dictated constraints of the sanitary condition and its effects short, medium, and long term. » The inclusion of proposals to combat school attrition from students as well as teachers from the SEN. » Availability of resources in the interest of tumbling the bankruptcy of private schools and possible collapse of the public sector.
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Absence of teacher training programs. » Current performers in educational dynamics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Training in the use of information technologies, the use of digital platforms to follow up on the learning process. » Sense of belonging due to their role as agents of change in the new educational model. » Transparency in the actions to apply that rule the educational authorities.
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Growing school attrition. » Low scores in skills and competencies of reading and mathematics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Consider a program including the student that do not have digital media (Television, radio, internet in the household and/or computer).
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Indirect engagement inside the learning process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Constant communication and coordination among teachers, students, and parents that lead to the validation of learning.

Source: Vital Signals in-house elaboration.

assures fairness; turns out, today more than ever, essential. Hence, Table 2 elaborates some needs resulting from the analysis of the educational sector in the pre and post COVID-19 scenarios.

This concatenation of bad governmental decisions has resulted in the loss of a valuable opportunity to reconstruct the SEN, already very distressed and obsolete in many features. This was the moment to adjust the course and to structure a new educational system, considering not only the abolishment of the immediate effects of a pandemic but a complete reformulation of the educational programs.

With a landscape as the ones living in the middle of the pandemic, the complexity to solve all these problems inside the educational sector is conceited. Never the less, the responsibility that the AE has to anticipate actions that will take place once the crisis starts to be averted cannot be exempt. Part of that commitment should be reflected in the clarification of goals and objectives as much in the PND as well as the PSE which are not going to be able to fulfill timely and due form during this administration.

Facing the regrettable consequences of an unimaginable magnitude pandemic and one that will determine the future of learning in our children and

youngsters; the need to have a real platform for educational planning in the medium and long term and not just decisions that propitiate political opportunism are exposed. Likewise, it should allow performers, such as parents and the very students to act and collaborate in the implementation or encouragement of studying habits and to pay attention to efforts on the teacher's education to face the challenges from the XXI century inside and outside of the pandemic.



