

Longer year won't improve Mexico's schools, study finds

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(Phys.org) —As Mexico and other Latin American countries wrestle with improving the quality of education for primary school students, economists at the University of California, Riverside have found that extending the length of the school year in the region will do little to improve student performance on standardized tests. Such policies also have the unintended result of widening the achievement gap between students in impoverished communities and those who attend more affluent schools, the researchers also found.

These findings have significant implications for [policymakers](#) in Mexico—and throughout Latin America— where new leaders are making education a top priority as they consider various proposals aimed at improving [student performance](#).

Results of the three-year study, "Test-Mex: Estimating the Effects of School Year Length on Student Performance in Mexico," will appear in the *Journal of Development Economics*. The study is available online. The research project was funded by UC MEXUS (University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States), an academic research institute focused on making positive contributions to society in both Mexico and the United States.

The study is the first to examine the entire student population of primary public and private schools in Mexico (and the first in Latin America) from third through sixth grades, said Jorge Agüero, assistant professor of economics and the paper's co-author. The paper was written with

Trinidad Beleche, who earned her Ph.D. in economics at UCR and is an economist at the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#).

"Having more days of school when the quality of the school day is poor won't translate into more learning," Agüero explained. "Other Latin American countries are using the expansion of the school year to improve the quality of learning. If our results in Mexico apply to other parts of Latin America, they will not see the benefit they hope for and they will widen the achievement gap. That's not what policymakers want. A longer school day and longer school year are not what is needed. A better school day may be what is needed."

The researchers analyzed student performance on standardized achievement tests for all third- through sixth-graders in Mexico for 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08, and identified levels of poverty or affluence associated with every public and primary school in the country.

Because the length of the [school year](#) ranged widely—from 139 days to 183 days, variations that resulted from such disparate causes as regional festivals lasting several weeks and extreme weather—Agüero and Beleche were able to determine the extent to which more days of instruction benefits student performance.

They found that increasing the number of school days benefits students attending schools in better-off localities more than their counterparts attending schools in areas with higher poverty rates, which suggests that the [achievement gap](#) between students in better-off and worse-off schools could increase with additional instructional days.

"The cost of one school day in Mexico is approximately \$10.56 U.S. per student, so adding 10 more days of instruction for 11 million students could be very costly, while the benefits estimates in our analysis seem to

be, at best, small," the economists wrote.

Students in Latin America consistently rank near the bottom of global academic performance rankings, Agüero noted. For example, two-thirds of Mexico's schoolchildren perform at basic or below basic levels in math and reading. In rural Peru, only 7 percent of second-graders have mastered the curriculum.

Many Latin American countries are considering other policies to boost student achievement, such as providing more textbooks or laptop computers, or separating children into groups based on their academic performance. Agüero and Beleche did not analyze the effectiveness of these policy proposals.

The stakes for Latin America are high, Agüero said. Peru, for example, has seen rapid economic growth in the last decade, but with the prospect of a labor force that is not trained to meet future needs, "can they sustain those growth rates?"

"Twenty years ago in Latin America the challenge was children not going to school," the economist said. "Today, nearly all children under 10 go to [school](#). The question is, what are they learning today, and is it enough to move these countries forward?"

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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