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THE AMERICAN SCHOOL IN MEXICO CITY

A Letter from James G. Maddox

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The American School in Mexico City, operated by the American School Foundation, a nonprofit civil society incorporated under the laws of Mexico, provides an excellent example of the way in which people from the United States who live in a foreign country have created a school for their children which maintains high academic standards, qualifies its graduates for entering colleges and universities in the States, and retains many of the characteristics of North American elementary and secondary schools.

It is a large school which represents the results of many years of experience. It started from small beginnings in 1888, and has grown to the point where it now has almost 1,500 students, a staff of 74 teachers plus a superintendent, three principals, the necessary complement of administrative personnel, and an annual budget of over US\$300,000.

It is a coeducational, nonsectarian institution, whose doors are open to children of all creeds, races, and nationalities. It provides training from nursery school through high school. Approximately 40 per cent of its students are Americans; 40 per cent are Mexicans; and the remaining 20 per cent are of 25 to 30 different nationalities.

For administrative purposes the American School is divided into: an elementary division, comprising nursery school, a kindergarten, and the first six grades; a junior high division, which includes the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades; and a senior high school, which is made up of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. From the first through the sixth grades the school is required by law to meet the minimum requirements of the Mexican public school system. It, therefore, divides the school day into two parts: during one-half of the day instruction is in Spanish; during the other half instruction is in English. The nursery school and kindergarten classes are in English, but courses in the seventh and eighth grades are taught in both Spanish and English. From the ninth through the twelfth grades all courses are in English.

When a student finishes the sixth-year elementary school, he receives the government primary certificate which enables him to

continue his studies in a regular Mexican secondary school, or to enter the junior high division of the American School. Graduates of the high school are admitted to colleges and universities in the States that are members of the various regional associations. The American School is a member of the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.

It attracts Mexican students from upper-class families for two main reasons: first, in the primary department, Mexican children can become fluent in English while at the same time they qualify for study in secondary schools in Mexico; second, most of the Mexican children in the academic department of the high school are preparing to enter college in the United States. For the Mexican who wants to do his undergraduate college work in the States, the American School is his surest avenue of approach. He cannot, however, enter the University of Mexico on graduating from the American School. The National University of Mexico will not accept the credits of the American High School as evidence of preparation for University study. Nevertheless, many graduates from the American School enter such institutions as Cal. Tech., M.I.T., Harvard, Yale, and Cornell, not to mention the scores who go to state universities and colleges in every part of the United States.

A student must earn 18 credits to graduate from the academic department of the high school. Of this total, 12 credits must be as follows: four years of English; two years of foreign language--Spanish, French, or Latin; two years of science; two years of mathematics; and two years of history, of which one must be American history. The remaining six credits can be taken in further study of mathematics, science, and foreign language, or in geography, typing, art, music, home economics, and mechanical drawing. The school also has a commercial department, which attracts 15 to 20 per cent of the high school students, most of whom are girls from Mexican homes who are preparing to be bilingual secretaries. The basic courses in the academic department of the high school are by no means easy, and the academic qualifications of most of the teachers are high. It is a school where good students can get a good education.

In the elementary division, where the school day is split (a half-day for Spanish and a half-day for English), where some of the Mexican teachers insist on following the lecture or dictation method of teaching, and where many of the children are not completely fluent in both Spanish and English, the school probably fails to accomplish as much in teaching the ordinary skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic as would be the case if it were following only one curriculum. Even here, however, the school inspectors seem to be a bit lenient and most of the Mexican teachers follow American methods of teaching, with the result that the whole pattern of instruction is warped heavily toward the United States method of educating children. Moreover, the students enjoy some definite advantages. They learn two languages at an early age. And they become acquainted with some of the value judgments of two different cultures while they are so young that the differences

between the cultures do not seem particularly extreme.

The objectives, attitudes, and relations among faculty, students, and parents of the American School appear to be about midway between those of a select private school and the more ordinary public school in the United States. Extracurricular activities are few; there appears to be a lack of warm mutual respect between teachers and pupils; and school spirit is low. The school does have competitive athletics, complete with parades of the band and twirlers, and other "hip-hip-hooray" accouterments, but these things never quite come off. Likewise, it has a student council, a student court, and other elements of student government, without quite making them work. At the same time, it falls short of capitalizing on the values of selectness of student body, pride in accomplishment, and the spirit of the "old school tie," which characterizes a really topnotch private school.

A part of its dual personality stems from the fact that it is an American school in a foreign country. A good public school in the United States draws mental as well as financial sustenance from the community in which it is located. It prepares students for life in the culture of which it is a part. Here in Mexico, however, the Americans who send their children to the American School are not interested in having them become Mexicans. The school is not for the purpose of preparing children to participate in the life of Mexico. Parents, of course, want their children to learn Spanish; they want them to learn to live with Mexicans but not like Mexicans. The American School prepares children for life in the United States, or for what is sometimes referred to as "the American way of life." This means that the school is something of a cultural island. It is quite different in curriculum, methods of teaching, and basic objectives from the ordinary Mexican school. At the same time, it is not a replica of a school in the United States.

Certain types of difficulties almost automatically flow from the fact that the school is an American institution operating in a foreign setting, and from the further fact that preparing children who live in a foreign culture to follow the American way of life really means preparing them to enter college in the United States. Many parents, students, and even teachers do not understand that there will inevitably be a difference between Old Podunk High back in Plainville, U.S.A., and an American school in the center of Mexico City. It doesn't matter how small Plainville is, you can't reproduce it on the 15-acre campus atop Tacubaya Hill. Because people do not always recognize this, there are frustrations, gripes, and dissatisfactions which call for a continuing process of discussion and re-education among parents, teachers, students, and school administrators. The American School in Mexico City has been weak, during the past four or five years, in keeping this process alive. The arrival of a new superintendent a few months ago, to replace an obvious misfit, promises to correct this deficiency. An analagous, though quite different, problem arises from the high school centering its main emphasis on preparing students to enter

college in the States. Although there are a few vocational and "life adjustment" courses available at the American High School, they are not the main center of emphasis, and the youngster who does not expect to go to college in the States or who has not yet developed a genuine seriousness of purpose in his studies does not find much to interest him at the American School. This presents quite a problem to many teen-age boys, which--when coupled with an almost total lack of job opportunities for part-time work when they are not in school--results in numerous parents sending their boys to private schools in the States and in other youngsters being quite unhappy because there are not adequate outlets for the never-ending energy of youth.

There are, of course, other problems. Teachers' salaries are low; most teachers are in the salary range of US\$1,400 to US\$1,800 per year, but some are at lower levels. There is a solid core of teachers (most of whom are Mexicans or have a Mexican husband or wife) who remain in their jobs at the American School for long periods--about 20 per cent have been teaching at the school for 10 years or longer. At the other extreme, however, there are always those who come to Mexico for a one-year period--some of them stay for only a few weeks--and are quite ready to quit their teaching jobs in the middle of a term, or at any other time that the magnet back home exerts its pull. Even though this proportion is low, it is a highly disturbing influence. Some students had as many as three different teachers in the same course during the school year. Many parents feel that tuition is high. It runs from US\$20 to US\$25 per month for each child, including bus fare, and to this must be added books and laboratory fees for youngsters in high school. On the whole, however, it is probably as good a school as most public schools in the United States. I am not unhappy in having had one daughter graduate from it, while two more daughters are attending it for their second year.

James L. Maddox