OPEN DATA'S IMPACT

MEXICO'S MEJORA TU ESCUELA

Empowering Citizens
to Make Data-Driven Decisions About Education

OPEN DATA

By Andrew Young and Stefaan Verhulst[*]
January 2016

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Founded by the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO), with support from Omidyar Network and others, Mejora Tu Escuela (http://mejoratuescuela.org) is an online platform that provides citizens with information about school performance. It helps parents choose the best option for their children, empowers them to demand higher-quality education, and gives them tools to get involved in their children's schooling. It also provides school administrators, policymakers and NGOs with data to identify areas requiring improvement and hotbeds of corruption, in the process raising the overall quality of education in Mexico.

Dimension of Impact

✓ Empowering Citizens

✓ Informed Decision-making

Key Takeaways

- Making previously inaccessible information available to the public is a major public service, but a necessary next step involves giving citizens a means to meaningfully act on that information.

- Platforms to reduce corruption run up against powerful vested interests. Open data advocates need to develop strategies not only to source and disseminate information, but also to push back against these interests. The challenges are as much social and political as they are technical.

- In cases where governments are reluctant to release potentially damaging information to the public, civil society can play an important role in finding creative ways to obtain, clean and publish that information.

- In countries with major societal problems like rampant corruption, it is easy to lose sight of the potentially impactful uses of open data to improve the everyday lives of citizens.

I. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Education in Mexico

For years, education in Mexico has been substandard and generally lagged behind standards in other, comparable countries. This poor performance cannot be attributed to a lack of budgetary resources – Mexico spends a larger portion of its budget on education than any other member of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It is important to note, though, that, at least in part, this is due to the higher number of Mexican children who pass through the public school system than other OECD countries.[1] But while that money has led to nearly universal basic education, outcomes remain stubbornly poor. Mexico's graduation rates are near the bottom of OECD countries, with fewer than half of students earning a high school diploma.[2] In addition, Mexican students perform poorly in international comparative tests of math, science and reading skills[3], and, according to a recent study, 80 percent of teachers failed an evaluation exam designed to test their competencies.[4]

While Mexico's education system has been generously funded, it has suffered over the years from endemic corruption. The scale of corruption is difficult to calculate, but it is by all accounts massive. Last year, an "abuse meter" – a giant electronic signboard erected in the capital by activists that tries to update in real time the amount of waste – estimated that at least $2.8 billion are lost to corruption every year in the education sector. The year the billboard was erected, it showed more than $33 million lost in just the first week of the school year.[5]

The corruption takes many forms: ghost teachers on payrolls, preselling of exam results, officials with lavish lifestyles, teachers demanding bribes to give good grades and candidate teachers bribing to pass training tests. The rot is widespread and, increasingly, widely recognized. One activist recently referred to corruption in the education system as "the robbery of the century."[6] A 2009 report from Transparency International found that the average household paid an additional $30 per year for their children's education, despite that education being "constitutionally free."[7] In 2010, Transparencia Mexicana's National Index on Corruption and Governance found that parents paid a bribe 3.5 percent of the time when seeking an enrollment form for a public school.[8]

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1   http://www.sep.gob.mx/wb/sep1/sep1_Estadisticas

2   Villagran, Lauren. "Test the teacher? Educators balk at Mexico's reforms." The Christian Science Monitor. March 1, 2013. http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2013/0301/Test-the-teacher-Educators-balk-at-Mexico-s-reforms

3   Villagran, Lauren. "Test the teacher? Educators balk at Mexico's reforms." The Christian Science Monitor. March 1, 2013. http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2013/0301/Test-the-teacher-Educators-balk-at-Mexico-s-reforms

4   Villagran, Lauren. "Test the teacher? Educators balk at Mexico's reforms." The Christian Science Monitor. March 1, 2013. http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2013/0301/Test-the-teacher-Educators-balk-at-Mexico-s-reforms

5   Cave, Damien. "Billboard Drives Home Extent of Corruption as Schools Suffer." The New York Times. September 1, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/02/world/americas/billboard-drives-home-extent-of-corruption-as-schools-suffer.html.

6   Cave, Damien. "Billboard Drives Home Extent of Corruption as Schools Suffer." The New York Times. September 1, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/02/world/americas/billboard-drives-home-extent-of-corruption-as-schools-suffer.html

7   Transparency International, 'Corruption in the Education Sector', Working Paper no. 04/2009 (Berlin: TI, 2009), p. 6.

8   http://gateway.transparency.org/tools/detail/331

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Information and Open Data in Mexico

In Mexico, as in much of the world, information has increasingly been seen as a tool to combat corruption. As Gavin Starks argues in The Guardian: "Allowing citizens to freely access data related to the institutions that govern them is essential to a well-functioning democratic society. It is the first step toward holding leaders to account for failures and wrongdoing."[9]

Mexico has tried to apply these principles to its education sector. In 2008, the Mexican Congress passed a law requiring all states to provide the federal government with information about the condition of schools, payrolls and other expenditures. At the time, this push for greater transparency was seen as a vital component of the effort to combat corruption in education. However, the law has proven largely toothless: Four out of 32 states did not hand over payroll databases for the last trimester of 2013, and eight states handed over empty or incomplete databases.[10]

It is in this context that Mexico's open data initiatives must be considered – both as part of a strategy to combat corruption in education, and also to fight corruption in general. Currently, the country is ranked 24th in the Open Data Barometer, having moved up one spot since 2013.[11] The government maintains a federal open data portal, which contains information from federal, state and municipal governments, as autonomous government entities (which are not subject to administrative and technical control from the central government), like the Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones. The open data portal is part of a broader National Digital Strategy championed by Ania Calderón, the director general of open data for the Mexican government, who is pushing to transition the way open data is treated from "a passive resource to actionable intelligence that can give us concrete results."[12]

The portal has achieved some early wins, such as the release of 100 government data sets in 42 days soon after its launch.[13] However, while such accomplishments are laudable, and may even have made some inroads, corruption remains a formidable challenge, and it is important to recognize the limitations of Mexico's open data efforts thus far. Oscar Montiel, director of community engagement at Codeando México, an organization that seeks to "bring together the best talent and organizations to create a new generation of civic technology,"[14] notes that while "on a policy level everything sounds fantastic," the government's open data plans are at times poorly executed.[15] He also points out that while there does exist a federal open data

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9   Starks, Gavin. "Why open data should be central to Fifa reform." The Guardian. June 12, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2015/jun/12/open-data-central-fifa-reform.

10   Zabludovsky, Karla. "Data Dive Finds 100-Year-Old Teachers and Phantom Schools in Mexico." Newsweek. May 30, 2014. http://www.newsweek.com/data-dive-finds-hundred-year-old-teachers-and-phantom-schools-mexico-252871.

11   http://barometer.opendataresearch.org/report/analysis/rankings.html

12   Interview with Ania Calderón, Director General of Open Data, Mexican Government. March 9, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9L5Wo0LEpY.

13   Bustos Arellano, Paulina, Ricardo Daniel Alanis Tamez, William Gerry and Codeando Mexico. "Open data in Mexico: how Data Squads jump-started national publishing." Open Data Institute. https://theodi.org/case-studies/mexico-case-study-using-data-squads-to-jump-start-government-open-data-publishing

14   Translated by Google. http://codeandomexico.org/

15   GovLab Interview with Oscar Montiel, Codeando México. August 19, 2015.

portal, questions remain (as they do in all countries) over "who decides what should be open and when." Finally, he adds that because Mexico's open data ecosystem is largely built around (often multi-year) contracts and licenses, changes can take months or even years, and there is a general lack of agility when it comes to releasing open government data.[16]

Others are more positive. Rafael García Aceves of Transparencia Mexicana describes a "really vibrant community"[17] of open data users in the country. He argues that it is up to the open data community "to identify and demand which data is needed and to work more on the analytical models," and to come up with new "solutions" that can help "link data with problems." In other words, as the government continues to make data available, the task facing Mexican open data community, both inside and outside government, is to find new, innovative ways of using that data, and to connect the data to real-world problems.

II. PRODUCT DESCRIPTION AND INCEPTION

It is within this context of formidable challenges and limited successes – as well as a deeply entrenched and widely prevalent culture of corruption – that the success, however provisional, of Mejora Tu Escuela must be considered. Launched in 2013, Mejora Tu Escuela ("Improve Your School," in Spanish) is a public, independent, nonprofit initiative with a team comprising members of the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO) and with support from Omidyar Network.[18] The stated goal of the platform is to "promote citizen participation to improve education in Mexico." The project is premised on the belief that "education in [Mexico] will improve only with the active commitment of all members of the educational community, including parents."[19]

In an interview, Alexandra Zapata Hojel, the coordinator of educational projects at IMCO, explained that "Mejora Tu Escuela was born as an effort to really get parents involved in their child's education."[20] At IMCO, there was a growing frustration that parent's lack of ability to engage with the education system in Mexico created an enabling environment for special interests to influence the delivery of education.[21] The parental disengagement is evident in what Zapata Hojel calls "a singular dissonance" in Mexican education: While the country performs quite poorly on various global measurements of education quality, citizen satisfaction in fact remains quite high. A survey conducted in 2013, for example, found that 78 percent of Mexican parents were satisfied or very satisfied with their children's education (meanwhile,

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16   GovLab Interview with Oscar Montiel, Codeando México. August 19, 2015.
17   GovLab Interview with Rafael García Aceves, Transparencia Mexicana. September 1, 2015.
18   Disclosure: Omidyar Network also funded this case study.
19   http://www.mejoratuescuela.org/quienes-somos
20 GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
21   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.

the country scored last in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests among OECD countries).[22] Unlike other examples in this series of case studies, therefore, the effort to use open data to improve Mexican education did not originate in or draw strength from public discontent – in fact, it began as an attempt to address public complacency.

For Zapata Hojel, parental complacency is indicative of a wider problem: a lack of information. Historically, citizens have found it difficult to access or comprehend data that would point to the poor state of Mexican education. In addition, Mexico faces some challenges specific to a rapidly developing nation where levels of educational attainment and social mobility have increased dramatically across recent generations. As Zapata Hojel explained: "[For many] families where the parents graduated from 6th grade, if they see their children in middle school they automatically think that things are better than when they were growing up. So the first challenge we had to face was to kind of shake up the system and share with all of these parents the fact that education in Mexico was of an extremely poor quality and that we were on the bottom of the totem pole in terms of results on a worldwide scale. To do that, we had to access information on all of the schools in the country."[23]

Project Description

Currently, the Mejora Tu Escuela project comprises two key parts. The first is the public-facing platform, targeted at parents and other citizens with a role in the education community. The second is focused on the public-policy side and includes reports on problems with transparency, corruption, teacher payrolls and the like. This aspect of the project also enables media to uncover problems – especially problems related to corruption – in the education sector. Although both aspects of the project are important (and in many ways mutually reinforcing) the case study here is primarily concerned with the public-facing side.

The platform side of Mejora Tu Escuela has four components:

Get to Know Your School – the central information provision aspect of the project focuses on giving parents and other stakeholders access to a diversity of information on schools.

Compare Your School – allows parents to compare their child's school to others in the same area, complete with an assigned school grade. The hope is that this piece of the platform will "get competition going between public schools."[24]

Grade Your School – asks parents and other members of the school community to rate different aspects of a school on a scale of one-to-ten, and leave comments. This information is then fed into the Get to Know Your School stream of information.

Improve Your School – in its current form, Improve Your School provides "concrete tools and

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22 http://datos.gob.mx/historias/educacion/mejora-tu-escuela.html
23 GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
24 GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.

suggestions to parents on how to participate in addressing problems in their child's school."[25] In the future, this section will also be able to suggest concrete actions to parents or teachers based on the hyper-local needs identified (through crowdsourced reporting and/or existing data) for a given school.[26]

Figure 1: Mejora Tu Escuela

Get to Know Your School and Compare Your School

Currently, Mejora Tu Escuela is populated by around 25 databases, with new databases being added as they are made available by the Ministry of Education. Pablo Clark, a content developer at IMCO, notes that likely the most important database is the 2013 census, which includes information about school infrastructure, the number of students in schools, the number of teachers, the names of principals, school locations and contact details (including phone number and email address, if they have one).[27] Additional information is drawn from standardized test results, teacher assessments and other data focused on the educational proficiency of schools.

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25 Hasan, Munyema. "Mexico: Encouraging Parents' Engagement in Public Education Reform." Open Government Partnership. October 2013. http://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/Mexico_0.pdf
26 GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
27 GovLab Interview with Pablo Clark, Analyst, IMCO. August 17, 2015.

School Grades

In addition to providing – often previously inaccessible – data to parents on Mexican schools, Mejora Tu Escuela, as part of the Compare Your School stream, provides graded assessments of schools to enable parents to make better decisions about their children's schooling and to push back against underachieving schools.

Grades for schools are calculated through student result data, with a focus on results in mathematics and Spanish.[28] Schools are then ranked according to four levels of education quality: "Excellent," "Good," "Panzazo" – an expression that roughly translates to "getting through by the skin of one's teeth" – and "Failed." While representing broad and perhaps somewhat crude measurements of school quality, these grades do allow parents to make informed decisions about school selection – and, equally important, empower citizens to demand results from school officials.[29]

III. IMPACT

The impact of Mejora Tu Escuela is evident in the amount of traffic the site receives – between 40,000-45,000 unique visits a day. As Zapata Hojel notes, these numbers are all-the-more remarkable given that IMCO has not invested heavily on dedicated marketing efforts at this point, instead relying on community

engagement and word-of-mouth.[30]

Who are these visitors and the site's users? As with the other case studies in this series, Mejora Tu Escuela's impact has been diverse and diffuse, and can be measured by considering various demographic groups and dimensions of impact. We consider impact by taking into account two key beneficiaries (parents and officials) and discussing the site's overall effect on two dimensions of impact (accountability and corruption).

"We remain optimistic that things will slowly start to change. Our hope is that more monitoring of these information sources will begin to change how money is spent in this sector in Mexico."

Alexandra Zapata Hojel, IMCO

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28 http://www.mejoratuescuela.org/metodologia
29 http://www.mejoratuescuela.org/metodologia
30 GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015

Impact on Beneficiaries

Parents have been the chief beneficiaries of the site. Prior to the site's launch, it was virtually impossible for parents to access information about their children's school. Zapata Hojel notes that this inaccessibility extended not just to test results or information about school facilities; even basic information like school addresses and phone numbers was difficult to access.[31]

The lack of information led to a feeling of disempowerment and disengagement on the part of parents. When launching the site, IMCO heard many stories about parents feeling intimidated by teachers, unwilling or unable to challenge them and demand accountability. Teachers were regarded as "untouchable people that can never be fired, that have so much power, and that can take your son or daughter out of school if they don't like you."[32]

Slowly, but undeniably, the information available on the site is changing the balance of power. IMCO has collected a number of anecdotes demonstrating the impact on parents. They include the story of a woman who was able to combat teacher absenteeism at her child's school using the platform. Teacher absenteeism is a common problem in the Mexican education system, but teachers are rarely fired despite a law that dictates that teachers must be dismissed after three consecutive days of unjustified absences. In this case, the mother was able to use information from Mejora Tu Escuela, and sue the state for failing to fire the teachers in question.[33] Now with the help of IMCO her story is being shared with other parent-teacher groups across the country.

While parents have been the major beneficiaries of the site, the project's sponsors have been surprised by the unintended impact on **policymakers and school officials**. For example, IMCO members and others involved with the site report that they get as many phone calls and emails from principals and local government officials as they do from parents: "We get governors, and people working for the governor's office that call us up and say, 'We're using your data because your data is more reliable than that of the Ministry of Education.'"[34] Clark notes that the number of emails and phone calls IMCO receives from teachers and school principals show "they needed this data. It shows that they have a great interest in having an active participation in their school."[35] In this way, Mejora Tu Escuela is not only empowering parents, but also gradually changing the attitude of government officials toward education and schools.

Increased Accountability

The impact of Mejora Tu Escuela can also be measured by considering its important role in increasing accountability. This is partly a result of greater parent involvement and empowerment; today, parents are demanding more from schools and school officials. The

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31   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
32   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
33   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
34   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
35   GovLab Interview with Pablo Clark, Analyst, IMCO. August 17, 2015.

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media, too, has played a role: Using information from the site, journalists have been able to unearth corruption and shine a spotlight on abuse.[36]

Government administrators and school officials have also played an important role in enforcing accountability. Like teachers, well-intentioned administrators who have long struggled to reform the education system have themselves been empowered by the site; they, too, have been using information to better monitor schools, teachers and the education system in general. IMCO staff note, for example, that it is only through the site that certain school officials find out they have been enrolled in certain federally funded programs. One official reportedly said: "I've never seen a cent of this money." Through the information available on the site, school officials are able to identify corruption in the system, tracking down missing funds and pinpointing the places in the bureaucracy where money is being stolen.[37]

Despite such anecdotal evidence, the broader impact on accountability in Mexican education remains to be seen, however. García Aceves of Transparencia Mexicana notes that transparency does not always translate automatically to impact. "Mexico is just starting to realize that this link between transparency and accountability is not something that is linear or direct," he says. "If you have more transparency, that doesn't mean that you have more accountability. It could actually be the opposite."[38] Felipe Estefan of Omidyar Network agrees while arguing that, although the link between transparency accountability is not always direct, transparency is a "necessary ingredient for increased accountability," the ultimate goal of Mejora Tu Escuela.[39]

Corruption Report

Finally, the website's impact is evident in the way it has highlighted corruption within the education system and pushed the topic to the forefront of public discussion. In 2014, IMCO used Ministry of Education data available on the site to publish a report on the state of corruption in Mexico's education system.[40] The report's findings were backed by the National Audit Agency and stirred national outrage.

Among the report's findings:

- 1,442 teachers on government payroll were between the ages of 100 and 105. Of these, 1,441 were registered in the state of Hidalgo, and all but one was born on December 12, 1912 (i.e., 12/12/12).

- 70 teachers earned more than President Enrique Peña Nieto (who made around $15,000 per month). Of these, 19 worked at schools that had failed or barely passed the national standardized test.[41]

36   "IMCO denuncia que SEP manipuló anomalías sobre maestros." Televisa. May 15, 2014. http://noticieros.televisa.com/mexi-co/1405/imco-denuncia-sep-desaparecio-anomalias-maestros/.
37   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
38   GovLab Interview with Rafael García-Aceves, Open Data Project Coordinator, Transparencia Mexicana. September 1, 2015.
39   GovLab Interview with Felipe Estefan, Associate, Investments, Omidyar Network. January 6, 2016.
40   http://imco.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/20140514_MapaMagisterioMexico_Presentacion.pdf
41   Zabludovsky, Karla. "Data Dive Finds 100-Year-Old Teachers and Phantom Schools in Mexico." Newsweek. May 30, 2014. http://www.newsweek.com/data-dive-finds-hundred-year-old-teachers-and-phantom-schools-mexico-252871.

- The report also found that the average monthly national salary for Mexican teachers was $1,954, and that the teacher with the highest salary lived in Oaxaca state and earned $46,849 a month. In the state of Guerrero, there was a school with a single student, but six employees whose payroll added up to $6,644 per month.[42]

- The report uncovered 536 telesecundarias, or secondary and high school programs available in rural areas via satellite, that apparently operated without electricity. The report also showed that there existed a large number of "phantom schools" that were unregistered (and thus possibly nonexistent), yet that had several teachers on payroll.[43]

- Prior to the report's public release, 10 states initiated audits, and teacher payrolls are now being funded by the federal government instead of state governments. Zapata Hojel hopes to see more "very clear policy results." She adds: "We remain optimistic that things will slowly start to change. Our hope is that more monitoring of these information sources will begin to change how money is spent in this sector in Mexico."[44]
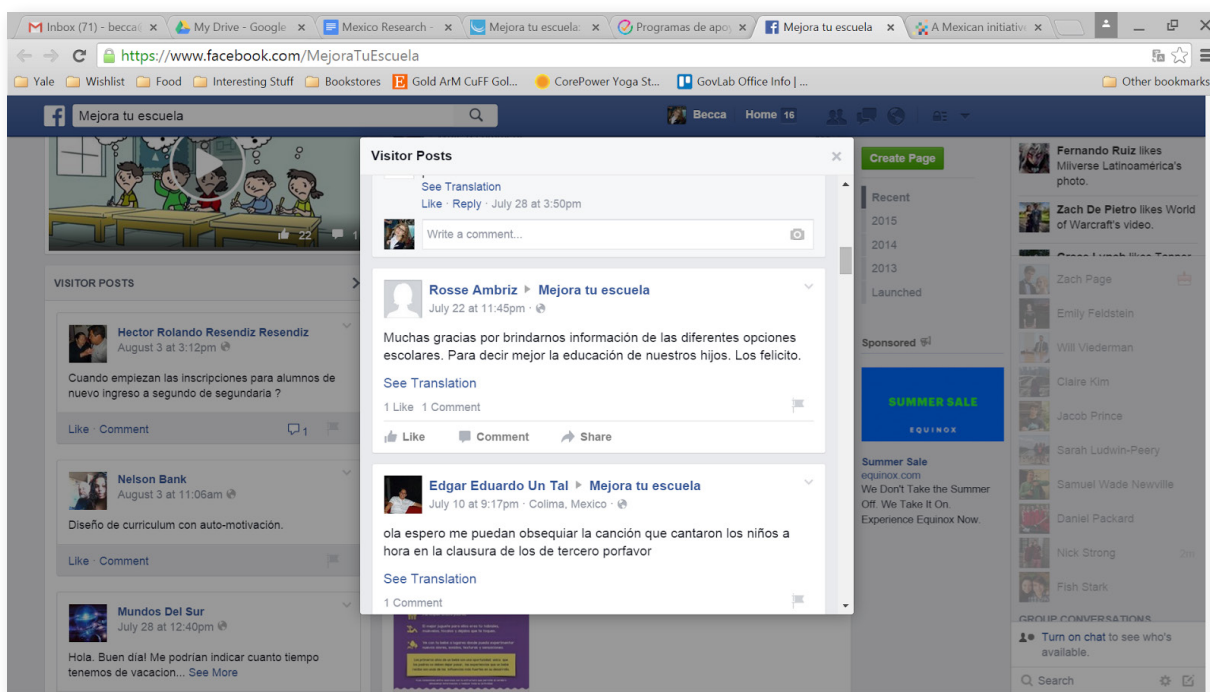

Figure 2: A parent thanks Mejora Tu Escuela for granting access to school information

42   Zabludovsky, Karla. "Data Dive Finds 100-Year-Old Teachers and Phantom Schools in Mexico." Newsweek. May 30, 2014. http://www.newsweek.com/data-dive-finds-hundred-year-old-teachers-and-phantom-schools-mexico-252871.

43   Zabludovsky, Karla. "Data Dive Finds 100-Year-Old Teachers and Phantom Schools in Mexico." Newsweek. May 30, 2014. http://www.newsweek.com/data-dive-finds-hundred-year-old-teachers-and-phantom-schools-mexico-252871.

44   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.

IV. CHALLENGES

In seeking to change Mexican education, Mejora Tu Escuela is working against powerful forces and vested interests. Inevitably, it has faced, and continues to face, a series of challenges to its operations and growth plans. As we have seen so often in this series of case studies, open data programs and activists frequently encounter these types of challenges – they are part of the process of social change, and of changing the way information is consumed and disseminated.

Standardized Test Cancellation

Revelations of corruption can have unintended effects, especially when they come up against such vested interests. In 2014, IMCO's corruption report uncovered the fact that 19 of the 70 teachers who make more than the Mexican president work at schools that "failed or barely passed the national standardized test."[45] That year, under pressure from the teachers' union and others embarrassed by the results, as well as public pressure led by NGOs like Mexicanos Primero, the national standardized testing program was canceled. "As soon as we put standardized test results on the website, and as soon as parents were able to, for the first time ever, compare results amongst schools at the national level including private and public schools, four months later the federal government announced that the standardized tests were being cancelled," laments Zapata Hojel.[46]

The cancellation of the tests led to a major gap in usable data to assess the effectiveness of teachers and schools. Thankfully, the testing has recently been reimplemented (albeit in a new form), and once the data is made public, IMCO will once again import the new data into Mejora Tu Escuela. Still, the cancellation has caused lasting difficulties. In addition to the challenge of a yearlong gap in data, IMCO will have to "find some way to make [the new results] comparable with the results from the last test, which had a different system."[47]

Data Accessibility

While national census data in many ways forms the backbone of Mejora Tu Escuela, it took considerable effort to gain access to that data. For example, only 16 percent of the nonpersonally identifiable information from the census was originally released. The government's initial reluctance to release more information was, in part, due to apprehensions about the extent of corruption that would be revealed. Ultimately, much of the remaining data was leaked to IMCO (and other Mexican NGOs), and this data was posted online.

Zapata Hojel notes that much of the data on the website cannot, therefore, be properly

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45   Zabludovsky, Karla. "Data Dive Finds 100-Year-Old Teachers and Phantom Schools in Mexico." Newsweek. May 30, 2014. http://www.newsweek.com/data-dive-finds-hundred-year-old-teachers-and-phantom-schools-mexico-252871.
46   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015. August 7, 2015.
47   GovLab Interview with Pablo Clark, Analyst, IMCO. August 17, 2015.

called "open data."[48] The information is, rather, a combination of open data, leaked data and information gleaned through scraping and citizen input. This holds potentially valuable lessons: Sometimes data activists must be creative in the ways they source information, combining a variety of inputs to create a genuinely useful tool.

Data Quality

In addition to problems with accessibility, IMCO has also faced considerable problems with data quality. Oscar Montiel of Codeando México, believes that the problem stems in part from the

lower levels of quality required by government itself to do its job. He says: "Their standards are so low, even for themselves, for their own work that when you try to push a bit higher then they don't respond that well."[49]

Whatever the source of the problem, IMCO has from the onset been faced with making accessible error-ridden and outdated data, often stored in inconsistent formats. The IMCO experience points to the significant difference between data being public and data being truly open – i.e., available in standardized, machine-readable technical formats. In many ways, in fact, IMCO has played a major role in cleaning the data, for example through citizen inputs that have corrected errors and updated information. Zapata Hojel notes that, going forward, much of the success of Mejora Tu Escuela will rely on whether or not IMCO and others will be able to push the government "to keep the platform up to date, to keep the platform current, to be able to provide parents and school communities with information that is valuable."[50]

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48   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
49   GovLab Interview with Oscar Montiel, Codeando México. August 19, 2015.
50   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.

V. LOOKING FORWARD

Mejora Tu Escuela's early years have provided valuable proof of concept, and its organizers are pushing ahead with new features and steps to grow the service. The coming months and years will witness a number of enhancements. Some of the additions or steps under consideration are described here.

Connecting Needs with Actions

Under its "Improve Your School" initiative, Mejora Tu Escuela is working to create concrete opportunities that would allow parents (and others) to take actions to address problems they identify. For example, one of the most common forms of cheating in Mexico involves teachers simply dictating answers to their students. Parents who identify this problem now have no way to solve it. Mejora Tu Escuela is looking to include a mechanism that would suggest to such parents that they donate one day per year of their own time to supervise a test.[51] In this way, the gap between information and action can be narrowed.

Publishing a School Budget

Although the site includes a decent amount of information, it still does not clearly link school performance and infrastructure to budgets. This means, for example, that the federal government has no real idea how much it costs to educate a child across the country in various regions and localities. Zapata Hojel states that, in the future, Mejora Tu Escuela will work to add more specific and granular expenditure information — which will be a challenge considering that three levels of government are involved in public school budgeting — so that parents can not only see how schools are performing, but how they are performing relative to funds received. This, Zapata Hojel believes, will take the notion of accountability to a whole new level.[52]

Developing a Report Pipeline

As it stands, when a parent has a problem related to their child's school, the pathway to addressing that problem is intimidatingly opaque since different types of problems require different routes toward addressing them. "If it's a problem related to bullying, it's one route they need to take, and if the problem is in school infrastructure or sexual abuse, the trail they have to take is completely different."[53] Zapata Hojel believes that the pathways are intentionally obscured by the Ministry of Education, leading to not only parents, but also principals being unable to determine a school's supervisor, for example.

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51   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
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Upon gaining access to databases containing information on who key decision-makers are for different schools, IMCO is developing a new "Report Pipeline" to enable parents to report problems and gain step-by-step instructions for how to get that information to the relevant person. Zapata Hojel sees this as a way to "put pressure on some of these government systems and also ... really be able to give parents help in resolving this."[54]

Translating Information into Action

For the people and organizations behind Mejora Tu Escuela, the larger ambition is not simply to provide an information portal, but to create a platform for action. García Aceves notes that, as it stands, "people may be more informed but probably they do not have the tools for activating the institutional mechanisms that they need to solve a problem."[55] While Mejora Tu Escuela provides tools that could be valuable for certain users, García-Aceves argues that every organization (including his own) should work toward developing tools with a clear eye toward impact. Estefan of Omidyar Network states that for Mejora Tu Escuela to achieve the greatest impact possible in the future, it should find ways to draw pathways between complaints (and complainers) and policy responses (and policymakers). Considering the difficulty of simply identifying relevant institutional decision-makers in the education system, Zapata Hojel and the team at IMCO will likely face significant challenges in finding ways to incentivize those decision-makers to actually respond to and address citizen complaints.[56]

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54   GovLab Interview with Alexandra Zapata Hojel, Coordinator of Education Projects, IMCO. August 7, 2015.
55   GovLab Interview with Rafael García-Aceves, Open Data Project Coordinator, Transparencia Mexicana. September 1, 2015.
56   GovLab Interview with Felipe Estefan, Associate, Investments, Omidyar Network. August 20, 2015.