



EDUCATION IN THE BORDER REGION

Analysis to inform funders, policymakers, and stakeholders on the factors that impact education along the Border, and what it will take to strengthen academic opportunities so that they meet the needs of a modern economy.

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*The U.S.-Mexico Border
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focused on building prosperity
along the U.S.-Mexico Border region
through leadership, collaboration,
and philanthropy.*

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SECTION ONE INTRODUCTION

We believe that the challenges and opportunities across the Border region demand informed civic participation, strong leadership and cross-border understanding, and collaboration.

For generations, the Border region between Mexico and the United States has been transformed from a lightly populated geographic area to a dynamic enterprise zone with a booming economy and population. Today, substantial numbers of residents on both sides of the Border interact on a daily basis, producing a society and geographic territory that is different from the rest of the United States and Mexico.

However, the Border contrasts a highly-developed, wealthy nation with a developing country and the issues are well known but persistent. Research indicates that if the region comprising the Border across the 10 states – Mexican and American – were America's 51st state, it would rank at or near the bottom in nearly all measures of prosperity, community health, educational opportunity, and quality of life. Further, negative stereotypes about the Border region are widely held throughout the United States and Mexico, and they frustrate possible solutions for many Border issues and justify imposition of federal and state Border policies and programs, often without adequate input from local stakeholders and often accompanied by unintended consequences.

This Border Brief, which is one in a series, highlights issues and offers critical insight to drive new solutions. It is our desire that this information will help foster greater philanthropic and corporate support, as well as our nonprofit partners to carry them out to address the need for coordinated philanthropic leadership, cross-cultural understanding, and public policy advocacy. The Border Briefs provide current and accurate information about health, environment, education, migration, philanthropy, and general Border dynamics.

SECTION TWO

EDUCATION AND THE BORDER

The U.S.-Mexico Border region is roughly the area that includes U.S. counties and Mexican municipalities that are all or partly within 60 miles (100 km) north and south of the international boundary, a definition agreed to by the two nations. Although the Border is a barrier between the two countries in some ways, the area integrates many facets of national life and the Border region has emerged as a distinct cultural and economic zone that incorporates elements from both Mexico and the United States. Neither side of the Border is homogeneous; instead, regional

Education is a critical part of Border reality. Its mission is to stimulate critical thinking skills and prepare Border children for jobs and careers as well as to be productive members of society in the region and elsewhere. As the transborder region becomes more integrated economically and socially, there is a growing need for people with the ability to function effectively on both sides of the Border, people who understand both languages, histories, traditions, and cultural nuances. However, the two national systems of education that



differences are evident along the Border. Except for San Diego County and Pima County, U.S. Border counties form one of the poorest regions of the nation in terms of per capita income, health outcomes, and educational attainment, which is an important predictor of income. Even in these wealthy counties, the areas near the international boundary are similar socio-economically to other U.S. communities along the Border. The Mexican Border municipalities form one of the most prosperous regions of Mexico, yet educational attainment also lags. Disparities and asymmetries from north to south across the boundary are significant. The economies, political and public administration structures, and the systems of education, both pre-kindergarten through grade 12 and higher education, have many differences. However, U.S. and Mexican Border societies share language, community traditions, arts, music, and other aspects of culture that bind the region together. The numbers of binational families and people engaged on the other side of the Border continue to grow, expanding crossborder linkages.

meet at the international boundary are not structured for the transborder region needs and focus more on the classical idea of forming citizens that pledge allegiance to a nation. Millions of students are shared by the United States and Mexico, many in the Border region. The Border students are a mixture of international commuting students, students displaced by family deportations from the United States, refugee students waiting in Mexican Border cities, students of migrant families, students who are U.S. citizens, students from families that move back and forth across the boundary, and numerous English language learners and Spanish language learners. Many of these students fall through the cracks and the schools neglect a potentially valuable source of human capital for the Border. A great challenge Border communities is how to adjust basic (primary and secondary) education to better serve the needs of young people, the economy, and society of the region. Improved student and faculty mobility of U.S. and Mexican higher education institutions would also serve the Border region well.

SECTION THREE

PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS

Mexico and the United States have systems of basic (primary and secondary) and higher education that are similar in structure, but with key differences that are apparent in the Border region.¹ Mexico's public education system is more centralized than that of the United States, especially at elementary and secondary levels. The federal government of Mexico provides most of the funding, including fiscal transfers to state education departments, determines a national curriculum for grades 1-9, and negotiates with the national teachers union. The Mexican education secretariat produces, publishes, and distributes free textbooks for pre-school, primary, secondary, distance learning secondary (telesecundaria), and indigenous schools. Currently, there is a controversy about the content of the new textbooks revised by the President López Obrador administration and some states are refusing to use them, alleging that the new books will not enable students to learn basic math and sciences skills.² Federal and state agencies make most decisions for public education at the local level. Public education is free, although there are miscellaneous costs such as uniforms that parents must purchase and that are burdensome to poor families. Public education is compulsory through high school level at institutions that prepare students for higher education or provide vocational training. Almost 90% of basic education students attend public schools and about 80% of high school students do so.³ About half of Mexican students do not finish high school and in the United States some 8% drop out. In Mexico's Border region, employment competes with school for poor students, who often seek work in assembly plants and can be as young as 15. The U.S. public schools are governed by state education departments that have somewhat different policies from state to state in the Border region. At the local level, governance is mainly by locally elected school boards. Students usually attend schools within the boundaries of school district where they are resident. Local boards often set specific policies regarding curriculum within guidelines established by each state and by federal regulations. U.S. public education is free and compulsory through high

school in most states. In 2014, Mexico spent about US \$2,000 yearly per student in public education. The United States spent about \$18,000 per student, although there are dramatic differences by state.⁴ In Mexico about 90% of funding is for teaching and administrative salaries; in the United States that figure is about 80%. Most Mexican public schools operate with a morning and afternoon shift, each with 4.5 hours of instruction compared to 6.7 hours in one shift in the U.S. Border states. Mexican schools have 200 days of instruction each year while the U.S. Border states average 180 days. In Mexico, most public-school funding is from federal coffers although some states such as Baja California have substantial education expenditures from state revenues. Local property taxes and state payments in roughly similar shares fund public schools in the United States. Federal funding is about 7% of the U.S. total and is targeted for low-income students and schools through various programs and for students with disabilities. U.S. federal regulation of public schools has been increasing in recent decades.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics: Education Systems of the United States and Mexico, 2013

Age	U.S. levels of education	Years of schooling	Mexico levels of education
19	Postsecondary and tertiary Community college, college, university		Postsecondary and tertiary Educación superior
18			
17	Upper secondary High school, senior high school	12	Upper secondary Educación media superior, preparatoria, bachillerato
16		11	
15		10	
14	Lower secondary Middle school, junior high school	9	Lower secondary Secundaria
13		8	
12		7	
11		6	
10	Primary Elementary school, grade school	5	Primary Escuela primaria
9		4	
8		3	
7		2	
6		1	
5	Preprimary Nursery school, prekindergarten, kindergarten		Preprimary Educación preescolar
4			
3			



SECTION FOUR

PARENTS AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In the United States, parents promote educational success as individuals and through parent-teacher organizations and often help with fundraising or volunteering in classrooms and participating in education-related activities. U.S. citizen parents also can vote in local school board elections. In recent years, nonpartisan local school board elections have often reflected national political divisions related to ‘culture wars’ issues such as diversity and inclusion or interpretations of America’s past. Parent involvement is greatest at the elementary level and tails off at the secondary level. In Mexico, parents are not expected to play a central role in schools and participation is constrained by education law and common practices. Mexican teachers are authority figures in local communities and educational authorities make most school decisions. Mexican parents put a high value on the concept of “respect” and view behavioral skills as just as important as cognitive skills. When Mexican parents bring their children to U.S. schools and do not actively engage with the school, U.S. teachers and parents often mistakenly interpret this as a lack of interest in their child’s education.⁵

\$18,000 vs. \$2,000

Mexico spends about \$2,000 per student annually compared to the United States’ \$18,000.

SECTION FIVE

TRANSBOUNDARY AND BINATIONAL STUDENTS

U.S. and Mexican public schools in the Border region face many challenges in educating the diverse and fluctuating student population. Although population growth rates in the Border have slowed in the 21st century, the number of school age children is expanding through migration. The region is buffeted by waves of northbound migrants who are held up for months or years in Mexico’s Border cities by vacillating U.S. immigration and asylum policies. Mexican families through actual deportation of a member or fear of deportation often relocate from the United States to a Mexican Border city to be near relatives north of the Border or to enable U.S. citizen children to continue their education in the United States. Substantial numbers of the students in U.S. Border public schools are recent immigrants or children of recent immigrants and frequently are English language learners. Children of asylum seekers also attend local public schools in U.S. Border communities. Some families move back and forth across the Border for work, housing, and other opportunities and their children alternate between the two education systems. Many borderlanders are dual nationals and thus can study in either country without restrictions.



Mexican Border schools are challenged to provide services to migrant children especially when they are not native Spanish speakers as with Haitians or monolingual English-speaking children who have relocated from the United States. Although Mexico has reduced the paperwork requirements for incoming students, Mexican Border schools are at capacity and high schools require an entrance exam that is in Spanish and only offered infrequently. The capacity of Mexican Border schools to provide bilingual assistance to incoming monolingual students is scarce.

3% of all pre-kindergarten-12 students.⁶ Although most were in states of Mexico that traditionally sent waves of migrants north, many thousands of students from the United States were in Mexico's Border region. The number of crossborder students residing in Mexican Border municipalities and who attended school in the United States in 2015 was estimated to be 39,599, or 1.9% of the region's students.⁷ Most were from Tijuana in Baja California (15,837), followed by Ciudad Juárez in Chihuahua (9,058). These transborder students faced a daily commute of about an hour, and most were transported

43.8% of the cross-border students live in a household with a cross-border worker.

U.S. public primary and secondary schools in the Border states do not require proof of citizenship to admit students but do require a simple proof of residency such as a utility bill or even an affidavit attesting to where the student resides. The higher cost of living in Border cities such as San Diego means that many low-income workers live in the Mexican sister city and continue to send their children to U.S. schools. Binational family networks, present all along the Border, facilitate this process. Most U.S. sister cities have private schools that attract students from Mexico whose families can afford the tuition, transportation, and other costs.

Millions of students have moved from Mexico (and now increasingly from Central America) to the United States; many have also left the United States, depending on economic cycles, U.S. immigration policies and enforcement, deportation strategies, and other factors. Many of these students are U.S. citizens and in 2017 about 600,000 were in school in Mexico where they were some

in private cars. Some 81% of the transborder students were born in the United States. Some 43.8 percent of the crossborder students live in a household with a cross-border worker. In 2017 there were 54,000 children from the United States enrolled in Baja California schools. At that time, the San Diego Unified School District was working to facilitate entrance into schools across the Border for its students moving due to deportation of parents or other reasons.⁸



SECTION SIX

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION CHALLENGES

Learners of English as a second language receive some assistance in U.S. Border public schools, but generally not to the level that students are able to become fully bilingual and biliterate in academic Spanish and English. U.S. Border public school systems have a severe shortage of bilingual teachers, although the number has been growing in Texas. There are some dual language schools in the U.S. Border region, but these are often private and resource intensive and cater to privileged families rather than the wider community. English language support is usually not provided by Border Mexican public schools as there are few bilingual teachers, although Mexican public schools now include English language in the standard curriculum as required by national policy. In both cases, overcoming the language challenges and a new education culture interferes with educational attainment. Often, the incoming student is dropped back a year.

Academic experts and practitioners agree that students who have moved to the other country and enroll in schools where instruction is not offered in their native language and teachers are not trained in cultural characteristics of the new students have difficulties in adjusting to the new

schools, with reduced learning outcomes. The stress and fears of deportation compound the difficulties that the students experience. A body of research indicates that in order to improve Border educational outcomes a 'border specific pedagogy' is necessary. This implies teachers and school principals who understand the cultural context of local and incoming students from Mexico or from the United States, who are familiar with both education systems, and who fully understand student needs.⁹

A recent study of binational students in the San Diego-Tijuana region pointed out that Border regions were squandering opportunities to produce educated bilingual workers for the dynamic regional economy and to prepare students for transition to higher education.¹⁰ Policy alternatives suggested include empowering parents to navigate school systems in both countries, facilitating biliteracy in Spanish and English, and provide teacher training to support integration of binational youth in the classroom. Of course, such measures require binational collaboration of multiple stakeholders as well as additional funding.

“ Border localities and states should invest in K-12 public schools to support a Border pedagogy, one that includes bilingual teachers who are culturally adept and able to mentor students from both sides of the Border.

Paul Ganster, Ph.D.

SECTION SEVEN

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT

The concentration of low-income communities, large numbers of Spanish-speaking families, high numbers of single parent households, large numbers of children, and the disruptions caused by migration flows all contribute to low levels of education attainment in the U.S. Border region. Recent research suggests that the key factor in low educational attainment levels for Border Latino children is poverty.¹¹ In 2000, 73% of U.S. Border residents above the age of 25 had completed high school; 80.4% was the national figure.¹² If U.S. Border counties together were compared to U.S. states, the Border would rank 27th in the percentage of adults with a four-year degree and if San Diego County was excluded, the Border would rank last. Marginalized communities in the Mexican Border region face similar educational challenges.

73% In 2000, 73% of U.S. Border residents above the age of 25 had completed high school, lagging behind the national figure of 80.4%

The Border Human Development Index (BDHI) analyzes key measures of education in the Border region.¹³ The BDHI includes a measure of school enrollment for ages 5 through 19 that represents the creation of new human capital and educational attainment for the share of population 25 or older with the equivalent of high school or more schooling. Based on data from 1990-2015, at the national level Mexico made progress in reducing the gap in school enrollment with the United States but the gap in high school attainment is large and did not improve. At the level of the Border region, in 2015, Mexican school enrollment was at 82.8 %, slightly below that of Mexican Border states and the nation. For U.S. Border counties, 2015 school enrollment was 93.7%, which was less than Border state and national figures. U.S. Border county enrollment was more than 10 percentage points higher than in Mexican Border municipalities. Border counties and municipalities attainment figures were also below those for their respective states and the national numbers. The gap between Mexican municipalities and U.S. Border counties for high school attainment for age 25 and over was substantial, with 29.0% south of the Border and 79.3% north of the Border. Mexican municipalities also demonstrate less educational attainment than Mexican averages. Clearly, there is a crisis in education attainment among Border students. The public-school systems on both sides of the Border are not meeting the education challenges.

	Mexico				United States			
	1990	2000	2010	2015	1990	2000	2010	2015
National	0.448	0.453	0.488	0.509	0.791	0.878	0.856	0.878
Border states	0.482	0.44	0.52	0.475	0.776	0.82	0.822	0.866
Border municipalities / counties	0.38	0.449	0.449	0.469	0.763	0.822	0.801	0.841

▲ Source: Joan B. Anderson & James Gerber (2023) *The US-Mexico Border Human Development*



SECTION EIGHT

HIGHER EDUCATION

The U.S. Border region has a well-developed complement of public and private higher education institutions. Community colleges offer 2-year associate degrees, certificates, and diplomas and many of their students continue at colleges and universities for a bachelor's degree. Some colleges offer bachelor's degrees and some also offer graduate degrees. Universities provide undergraduate degrees as well as post graduate degrees that include master's and PhDs. Some Border universities have large research programs in many areas and some have professional schools such as medicine, law, or business. There are also private non-profit and for-profit higher education institutions. For-profit post-secondary education institutions in the U.S. Border region range from technical training to undergraduate and graduate degrees. Many have very low graduation rates and many operate only through web-based instruction.

Higher education in Mexico's northern Border expanded dramatically from the 1970s with significant public and private investment to serve the needs of the region. By the second decade of the 21st century, Mexico's Border cities had a well-developed higher education infrastructure that included specialized research and graduate training institutions; public universities offering undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees; and technical institutes that provide trained personnel for the rapidly growing industrial base. The high cost of education at U.S. Border universities has encouraged some U.S. Border residents to seek graduate and undergraduate degrees at nearby high-quality Mexican universities. Teacher training institutions such as the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (UPN) are found in Mexico's Border cities. The Mexican Border also has excellent private universities that provide quality education, some with a focus on technical and

For many decades, **U.S. and Mexican Border universities have collaborated** through joint research projects, faculty exchanges, student exchanges, conferences and seminars, and efforts to develop joint and dual degree programs.

business degrees for the expanding Border economy, and others providing more comprehensive educational and research opportunities. Mexican Border cities also have numerous for-profit higher education institutions.

For many decades, U.S. and Mexican Border universities have collaborated through joint research projects, faculty exchanges, student exchanges, conferences and seminars, and efforts to develop joint and dual degree programs. U.S. and Mexican universities have developed undergraduate and graduate dual, or double, degrees that enabled a student to study in both countries, although the U.S. accreditation system, U.S. state regulations, and Mexican regulations create difficult bureaucratic barriers for binational higher education efforts. The higher costs of transborder programs have also been a problem. Some U.S. Border universities have regularly held classes across the Border that included binational faculty and students.

Applied research and service-learning topics also enabled U.S. and Mexican students to gain experience together in binational regions. U.S. and Mexican students also participate in a range of research field trips in Mexico. CETYS University and the Tecnológico de Monterrey are accredited by U.S. organizations, which has facilitated international exchanges with U.S. counterparts.

Academics on both sides of the Border have long understood the synergies of binational research teams. U.S. and Mexican research collaboration often provides better analysis of key issues to support stakeholders and decision makers on both sides of the Border. However, barriers exist for transborder cooperation of higher education institutions. U.S. and Mexican faculty often have quite different teaching and research responsibilities that may not be compatible for collaborative efforts. Binational research is complicated



by Border crossing logistics and difficulties in spending research funds on both sides of the Border. U.S. university administrators have prohibited faculty and students from entering Mexico during periods of Border violence or during the COVID-19 pandemic when U.S. and Mexican campuses were closed. Fortunately, videoconferencing provides a useful alternative, but not a substitute, for face-to-face research meetings.

Student exchanges and student mobility across the Border provide personal and institutional benefits and enhance the education of future employees and leaders of the transborder region. Along the Border, there are thousands of students who commute to universities in U.S. Border cities from their homes in Mexican Border cities. Many live in Mexico because of lower costs or because parents or a family member has been deported and are willing to endure the difficulties of the regular commute in order to pursue educational opportunities north of the Border. After 09/11 student visa requirements were tightened to require full-time students to reside in the United States, which caused difficulties for some students in the Border region. These students are bilingual and bicultural and are a valuable source of human capital for the region.

Texas established in 1987 the Programa de Asistencia Estudiantil (PASE) that enables Mexican residents to enroll and pay in-state tuition at Texas public universities, state technical colleges, or some community colleges located in a county Bordering Mexico. This program

recognized the importance of higher education for the binational community and has been especially successful at the University of Texas, El Paso, where 1,085 Mexican students were enrolled for the fall semester 2014. In 2016, New Mexico State University initiated a similar program. Arizona voters approved in-state tuition for non-citizens in 2022 and California established a program in 2023 to permit students who live nearby in Mexico to enroll at community colleges in San Diego and Imperial counties, paying resident tuition of approximately \$1,256 instead of the non-resident cost of \$6,603.¹⁴

In the years prior to and after the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, educational leaders and other stakeholders expected that expanded trade and investment would lead to synergies among the higher education systems of the three nations. In 1990 meetings of U.S. and Mexican academics, educational leaders, and foundation personnel held at Wingspread, Mazatlán, and elsewhere discussed steps to facilitate cultural and educational exchange as well as binational research on the Border and bilateral issues.¹⁵ Other meetings explored higher education as a component of North American integration and organizations such as the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC) were established to foster academic collaboration among U.S., Mexican, and Canadian colleges and universities.¹⁶ While these initiatives facilitated better binational cooperation of higher education across the Border, they never



*Although U.S. and Mexican public universities understand institutional and regional benefits of faculty and student mobility and binational research projects, **collaboration across the Border is surprisingly small and tends to be underfunded** and ad hoc.*

progressed to a systematic effort to harmonize national education systems of higher education such as with the Bologna Process in Europe.¹⁷ Mexico, however, did move forward with stronger ties with the European Union on education through global agreements by Mexican and EU authorities in the early 2000s.¹⁸ U.S. and Mexican Border higher education institutions have never been able to leverage geographical proximity to develop to significantly advance transborder cooperation and regional benefits.

The dynamic U.S.-Mexican Border region is characterized by accelerating economic integration and growing transboundary connections of society, philanthropy,

public health, culture, crime, environmental impacts, and other important aspects of regional reality. It has long been recognized that the transborder region needs an educated workforce and leadership that has language skills and cultural understanding and knowledge to function effectively in the binational region. It is important that citizens and leaders understand the structure and function of institutions and the context for business and society on the other side of the Border. A challenge for higher education institutions in the Border region is to produce graduates to meet the needs of the complex transborder region.



SECTION NINE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Paul Ganster is director of the Institute for Regional Studies of the Californias at San Diego State University. In 2022, he was honored with the Ohtli award, the highest recognition granted by the Government of Mexico to individuals who have opened pathways to Mexicans abroad, particularly in the United States of America.

Dr. Ganster is the author of numerous articles, chapters of books, and edited works related to Border regions. Recent publications include *The U.S.-Mexican Border Today: Conflict and Cooperation in Historical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016) and with Kimberly Collins, “Binational Cooperation and Twinning: A View from the US-Mexican Border, San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Baja California” (*Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 32:4, 2017). His ongoing research is on management of the binational Tijuana River Watershed, air quality at Border crossings, crossborder collaboration, the binational problem of used tires, and sustainable tourism in the peninsula of Baja California. He has been a Fulbright professor in Costa Rica and a visiting professor at the Autonomous University of Baja California in Tijuana. He received his bachelor’s degree from Yale University and his doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles. Ganster is chair of the Good Neighbor Environmental Board, a federal panel that advises the president and congress on the Border environment. He is also chair of the Committee on Binational Regional Opportunities (COBRO) of the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG). In 2016, he was recognized with the Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS) Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2017, the Autonomous University of Baja California awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor Honoris Causa for his scholarly work in the binational region and for his work linking UABC and SDSU. Also in 2017, Tijuana Innovadora recognized him in the induction ceremony to the Paseo de la Fama / Walk of Fame at the Palacio Municipal of Tijuana for his binational leadership.

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SECTION TEN

ENDNOTES

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U.S.-MEXICO BORDER PHILANTHROPY PARTNERSHIP

The U.S.-Mexico Border Philanthropy Partnership is made up of more than 400 members from academia, business and corporate entities, government, philanthropy, and nonprofit organizations spanning all regions of the U.S. and Mexico. Together, we share a common vision and commitment for a thriving border region.



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