

## **ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD: THE CASE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE STATE OF AGUASCALIENTES, MEXICO**

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**Keywords:** Implementation, public policy, educational policy, educational reform, decentralization of education, evaluation of education

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### **Summary**

Educational reforms in Mexico have traditionally fallen short of their objectives as policies get delayed and diluted in the process of implementation. In the state of Aguascalientes, an educational reform had an unexpected success, according to an analysis of the political forces aligned for and against it.

This article seeks lessons from the implementation of the educational reform in Aguascalientes to understand strategies that are suitable for implementing policy reforms in challenging contexts. The article examines three of the policies implemented in the educational sector in Aguascalientes: a rearrangement of the administration of the educational system by regions, the development of an evaluation system based on external tests, and an increase in school working days by more than 20 percent.

There is a debate in terms of what kind of approach is more effective for implementing public policies. There are two basic approaches in terms of the implementation literature that have been labeled “programmed” and “adaptive” implementation. According to Paul Berman both approaches can be helpful. The nature of the solution to implementation problems depends on the nature of the policy and its context.

This article tests Berman’s theoretical framework based on an analysis of three policies that are very different in terms of the scope of change they proposed, the level of conflict they produced, the kinds of technologies or theories on which they were based, their basic institutional arrangements, and even the stability of the environment in which they were implemented. These are the five variables that are considered critical for policy implementation in this theoretical framework.

## **1. Introduction**

Implementation of public policies is widely recognized as a challenging and uncertain process. Ambitious policies involving a broad scope of change, uncertain technologies, multiple actors and powerful opposing groups are unlikely to be implemented according to their original intent. The educational reform in the state of Aguascalientes, in central Mexico, clearly had these characteristics. Surprisingly, the reform succeeded in this challenging context. Why did this happen? Can this anomalous case help us understand the process of implementation better?

Paul Berman sought to identify the strategies that work for implementing policies in different contexts. He referred to a debate between the partisans of programmed and adaptive approaches of implementation. Based on an analysis of both approaches, and a study of policies that have been successfully implemented, Berman developed an analytical framework for implementation. This framework was based on analyzing a set of basic characteristics of the policy and its context (which he calls the situation). In this article I examine the nature of the policies implemented in Aguascalientes and whether their unexpected success was related to the variables and strategies that the Berman analysis suggests.

I examine three of the policies implemented in the educational sector in Aguascalientes: a rearrangement of the administration of the educational system by regions, the development of an evaluation system based on external tests, and an increase in school working days by more than 20 percent. I obtained information regarding these policies from a bibliographic search and direct interviews with the administrators at the Aguascalientes’ Institute of Education. I conducted interviews with teachers, school directors, school supervisors and zone coordinators in ten schools in three regions of the state

I selected the three policies because, in addition to their saliency, they are very different in terms of the scope of change they proposed, the level of conflict they produced, the kinds of technologies or theories on which they were based, their basic institutional arrangements, and even the stability of the environment in which they were implemented. Berman considers these five variables critical for policy implementation. Therefore, in this paper, I will test Berman’s theoretical framework based on evidence

of the educational reform in Aguascalientes. Clearly, it is a case that differs substantially from the US policy context, under which this framework was originally developed.

## 2. Berman: the structural nature of implementation, programmed vs. adaptive approaches

There is a debate in terms of what kind of approach is most effective for implementing public policies. Paul Berman has identified two basic approaches in terms of the implementation literature that he has labeled “programmed” and “adaptive” implementation (Berman, 1980). Programmed implementation is based on the idea that the problems of implementation arise from a lack of precision in goals, the intervention of too many actors in the process, and the resistance of program deliverers to the policy. The solutions suggested are therefore: clear specification of goals; reduction in the number of actors and steps in the policy; and, use of incentives, monitoring and corrective mechanisms to avoid deviations and discretion from program deliverers.

The partisans of adaptive implementation have a different explanation. According to them, over specification and rigidity in goals create problems because policies deal with a complex and changing environment. Other big problems are failure to engage relevant actors and excessive control over program deliverers. These conditions result in policies not being accepted by the main stakeholders. Also, they make it impossible for program deliverers to adapt to the changing needs of the local context, forcing them to reject or abandon the policy directives.

Which explanation is likely to be useful for people implementing public policies? According to Berman both approaches can be helpful. The nature of the solution to implementation problems depends on the nature of the policy and its context. Structured situations call for a programmed approach while unstructured situations are better dealt with by an adaptive approach. He has found five parameters that are key in determining the nature of the situation and kind of approach to be followed:

| <i>Situation Type</i>                      |                     |                     |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Situational Parameters</i>              | <i>Structured</i>   | <i>Unstructured</i> |
| Scope of change                            | incremental         | major               |
| Certainty of policy’s technology or theory | certain within risk | uncertain           |
| Conflict over goals and means              | low conflict        | high conflict       |
| Structure of institutional setting         | tightly coupled     | loosely coupled     |
| Stability of environment                   | stable              | unstable            |

Is Berman correct? Do successfully implemented policies tend to use one of these two approaches, depending on the nature of the situation? Can adaptive implementation lead to significant changes, or does it necessarily lead to a watered down version of the policy that does not constitute a real reform? Is the Aguascalientes’ experience

consistent with his theoretical-normative parameters? Where do our policies fit in terms of these parameters?

I review three of the most important changes implemented at the Aguascalientes's Institute for Education between 1992 and 1998. The three policy innovations were challenging according to a basic stakeholder analysis and present a different combination of these parameters. Also the three of them were successfully implemented by the same team but in a different manner. The policies in question are the administrative regionalization, the extension of the calendar, and the establishment of a new evaluation system based on external tests. I will examine how this group implemented these policies. Did they use strategies that are compatible with Berman's framework or did they lean toward one of the two approaches that seemed to be more effective in this case?

### **3. The educational reform in Aguascalientes**

In December 1992, a team of people arrived at the Aguascalientes' Institute of Education to take charge of an organization, created a few months earlier for administering an educational system that was just transferred from the federal government to the state government. They had no prior experience working in Aguascalientes' educational sector, a system that has traditionally been very hostile to people from outside the organization. They were led by Jesús Alvarez Gutiérrez, a man in his mid-thirties who, although a native from Aguascalientes, had not participated in state politics until the campaign of the new Governor, Otto Granados, in 1992.

This group of people would appear to have a very small chance of surviving in an organization in which the National Educational Workers' Union (SNTE) had overthrown most of the directors of educational services in the previous two decades. Against all odds, they initiated and sustained a reform of public education unprecedented in any Mexican state. They rearranged the basic operational structure of the organization into a more decentralized system, radically transformed the mechanisms of supervision and the role of the school inspectors, increased the effective days of classes by more than 20 percent, developed a new system of continuing training for teachers, introduced computer and English laboratories into the schools, developed (for the first time in Mexico) a system of evaluation based on universal testing for 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, and introduced pedagogical innovations to the classrooms.

The numbers show substantial achievements in the educational field during this period. The rates of school completion increased by 43 percent at the secondary level. There was also a substantial increase in the average years of schooling. In 1990 the population in the state had an average education of 6.8 years (for the population above 15 years of age), and it increased to 7.85 years in 1995 and to 8.4 years in 1998. This means that the state improved its national ranking in terms of this indicator from 12<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> in the country, an increase in relative standing unparalleled by any other state in the country (see Granados, 1997, pp. 13-14).

These changes occurred within an organization in which groups –such as the Union and the school inspectors– clearly had the power and resources to veto such reform. Because

these groups would be affected by the reform, both in their interests and ways of working, they had good reasons to oppose it. How then did the reforms succeed under such circumstances? Is there anything to learn from the implementation strategies used by the reformers?

#### **4. The state of Aguascalientes**

Aguascalientes is located in the geographical center of Mexico and, for this reason, is well connected with the rest of country. It is also one of the smallest Mexican states with 863 thousand inhabitants in 1995, less than 1 percent of all Mexico's population, and an area of 5,589 square kilometers, making it the third smallest state in the country. Its population is heavily concentrated in the capital city, Aguascalientes, where 62 percent of the state's population lives.

With a stable demographic base and a strongly developing industrial activity, the economic growth of the state has reached 6.8 percent in the last five years, more than double the national average. Indeed, in the last decades the state has turned, from being an exporter of people, into an attractor of residents. According to the 1990 census, 7.7 percent of the population in the state had been living in another state five years earlier.

Aguascalientes has very good communications. It is possible to get to most places in the state within an hour, driving from the capital, and most people also have an easy access to the heads of their own municipalities. In terms of services, the situation of the state is also privileged by Mexican standards. According to the census, in 1990, only 1.67 percent of the population lived in places without electricity, drinking water and sewerage. Indeed, it is the leading state in terms of supply of these services.

#### **5. The actors**

Who were the actors whose acquiescence was required to have the policies implemented? How powerful were they? How were they likely to react to the reforms? What resources would they be willing to commit to oppose or support these policies? The main actors in these policies were the Union, the school inspectors, and the informal local teacher's leaders and leaders of different fractions. All these actors tended to have some relative autonomy in their actions and were important enough to independently affect the outcomes of the implementation.

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## Biographical Sketch

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