
A CENTURY OF LDS CHURCH SCHOOLS IN MEXICO INFLUENCED BY LAMANITE IDENTITY

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Since its inception, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been interested in proclaiming the gospel through missionary work and through educating its members. As early as 1831, Joseph Smith established schools for children of members living in Ohio.¹ The School of the Prophets was established two years later.² In 1837, the Kirtland High School met with an enrollment of 145.³ Parley P. Pratt taught a school of elders in Missouri until the Mormons were driven to Nauvoo, and there they established schools in each ward and the University of the City of Nauvoo. Following the death of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Saints moved west to the Great Basin, building schools in all their settlements.⁴ By the 1870s, the Church requested that every stake fund an academy. Between 1875 and 1911, thirty-four academies were organized; one of these, the Juárez Academy, was officially dedicated in Mexico in 1897.⁵

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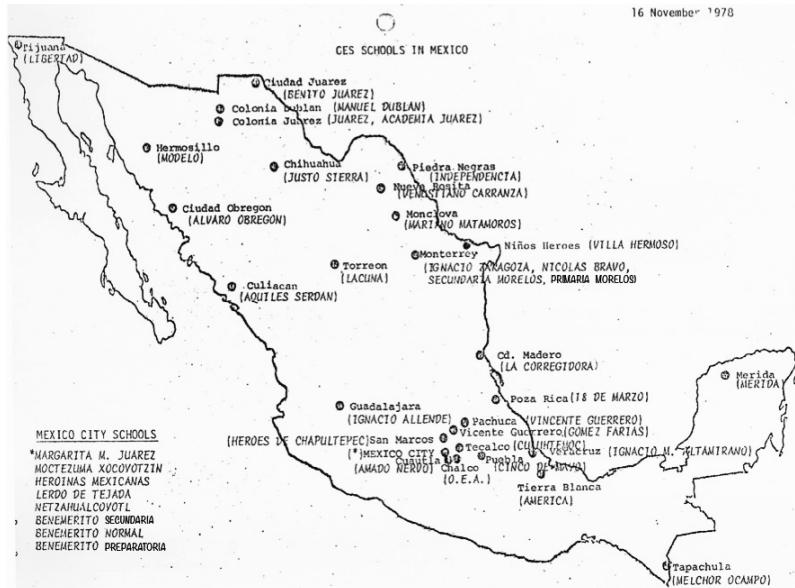
Although it was built primarily to educate the Mormon American colonizers, it was a forerunner to the creation of a massive Church Educational System throughout Mexico.

Since the Church's beginning, the Lord's focus on education was at the heart of the gospel. In July 1828, two years before the Restoration of the Church, the Lord revealed that one reason for the plates' preservation was in part "that the Lamanites might come to knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know of the promises of the Lord."⁶ While we don't know the complete ancestral pedigree of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, we do affirm that the peoples of the Book of Mormon are among their ancestors. Hence, they have often been called "Lamanites," and we affirm that they are heirs to the great promises made in that sacred volume.⁷ Thus, it not only became incumbent upon Church members to find and baptize those considered to be "Lamanites" at the time, but also to teach them who they were and prepare them to receive the promises of the Lord. Because the Saints felt the urge to fulfill this mandate, one of the first official Latter-day Saint missions commenced in 1830 with a call for Parley P. Pratt and Ziba Peterson to join Oliver Cowdery and Peter Whitmer Jr. in the preaching of the gospel to the "Lamanites."⁸ In 1845, the Church issued a proclamation that stated in part that "the sons and daughters of Zion will soon be required to devote a portion of their time in instructing the children of the forest (Indians) . . . and glorify them as the sons and daughters of the royal house of Israel and of Joseph."⁹

For the next century, the LDS emphasis on converting and educating the perceived Lamanites would wax and wane. During the presidencies of David O. McKay and Spencer W. Kimball, however, the emphasis increased dramatically, causing not only an increase in baptisms among this people, but ultimately the creation of an immense educational system. In addition to placing American Indian students with Latter-day Saint families so they could go to school and creating Lamanite seminary programs in areas highly populated with Latter-day

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Map of Church schools in Mexico as of November 16, 1978, by Ephraim Villalobos Vasquez.

Saints, the Church also instituted a large-scale international educational system for those then considered to be Lamanite children and youth throughout the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, Central and South America, and Mexico. By examining the historical, political, social, and religious underpinnings of more than a century of LDS Church existence in Mexico, this paper will attempt to show how the Church's emphasis on educating and converting those whom its leaders considered to be "Lamanites" influenced its educational endeavors in Mexico.

Mexico as a Mormon Refuge and Mission Field

When the Mormons escaped the violent and bitter persecution in Nauvoo and began their trek west to the Rocky Mountains, they were leaving not only a state, but a country. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between Mexico and the United States was not signed until

after the Mormons had lived in the Salt Lake Valley for over half a year. Less than fifty years later, some Latter-day Saints would again seek refuge and colonization in Mexico as a result of religious persecution aimed at those practicing plural marriage. Not only was Mexico a place of refuge which led to future colonization, but it provided a fertile ground for missionary work, especially among those that the early Latter-day Saints considered Lamanites. Indeed, from the earliest days of the history of the Church, it was widely accepted that the inhabitants of Mexico were Lamanites.

In 1874, Brigham Young announced that the time was near to take the gospel to millions of Lehi's Mexican descendants.¹⁰ After the many years of political and religious turmoil in Mexico known as La Reforma, that time finally came in 1876. La Reforma opened the doors to many Christian religions, including Mormonism. Although early proselyting efforts were difficult for the missionaries, the prophet earnestly granted his approval of their mission. However, he felt that their efforts were best spent focusing on one group in particular. "I feel that it would be wise for you to visit the old original blood as much as possible,"¹¹ Young advised.

Brigham Young's announcement came at a critical time in Mexican history, because Benito Juárez's Reforma had fostered a renewed pride in Mexicans' Indian heritage. As a result, many contacts were made and sustained among the liberal Mexicans who were sympathetic to the indigenous citizens, and they appreciated the teachings contained in the Book of Mormon and its possible connection to their own people. Taking advantage of this newfound Indian pride, early Mormon missionaries sent over five hundred copies of important Book of Mormon selections, all containing the same scriptures, to nearly one hundred of Mexico's major cities and to its most prominent men.

Impressed with their report upon arriving home, Brigham Young immediately continued the missionary work and land scouting by sending new missionaries. In 1876, the first five members of the

Church from Mexico were taught and baptized, and by 1879, the first Mormon congregation in Mexico was organized. On April 6, 1881, Apostle Moses Thatcher, with several missionaries and a handful of Saints, dedicated the land for the preaching of the gospel.

By 1885, Mormon leaders had secured land in northern Mexico, and immediately some of the Church's most able families began colonizing there, because the twenty-five-year attempt to defend the Church's stance on plural marriage had failed in the United States. Appreciative of the Mexican refuge but wary of outside influences, these early colonists isolated themselves from their immediate surroundings. Because education was foundational to Mormon theology and culture, schools became a top priority for these early colonists. In 1886, Ana Maria Woodbury Romney began educating the children in her own home, and by 1897 the Juárez Stake Academy had officially commenced.¹² Little did these early colonists know that as they were forming these small schools for their own children, they were laying the foundation for empowering thousands of Mexican students and thus partially fulfilling their call to teach those then considered Lamanites. These students would eventually be taught, mentored, and graduated from nearly fifty LDS Church schools nationwide. These schools would not come immediately, however, and the Mexican Saints, both natives and immigrants, would be put through a refiner's fire before receiving the blessings of their sacrifices.

For example, shortly after a failed attempt by President Helaman Pratt of the Mexico Mission to unify the native Mexican members with the mature Latter-day Saint American colonists, the Mexican mission was closed in June 1899, primarily due to cultural differences between the two parties. Hundreds of recent converts were left as orphans to fend for themselves until the mission was reopened in 1901.¹³ With the reopening of the mission, great care was taken by the now-fluent Spanish-speaking missionaries—well versed in Mexican law and culture and educated primarily in the colonies—in order to

find the earlier converts and continue the work of conversion. During the next decade, these missionaries would not only baptize over a thousand Mexican natives but also use the educational training they received prior to their missions from their families, church, and the Juárez Academy to train the converts as leaders and assist them in building a strong foundation for the newly formed branches. The results of their efforts would prove critical to the Church's existence and growth when political and social unrest in the country would require the Church to depend on its own native members to survive the impending Mexican revolution and its long-lasting effects.

From 1876 to 1910, Porfirio Díaz ruled Mexico. He was a popular leader when he first took office, but his increasing support for international growth, favoritism towards the elite, and antagonism toward the native Indians resulted in major national discord. This eventually led to the expulsion of all Americans, including the four thousand Mormon colonists in northern Mexico and all American missionaries. With only sporadic visits from the missionaries and their mission president, opportunities for leadership responsibility increased among the local Mexican members. As a result, native members quickly became self-reliant and independent. Although progress and expansion were slow, the members pressed forward. Two prominent Mexican members baptized during this time were Rafael Monroy, who became the first branch president in San Marcos, Hidalgo, and the first Church martyr in Mexico, and Bernabe Parra, who opened the first Mormon school outside of the colonies.

Native Mexican Growing Pains

In many ways, the maturity of the Church in Mexico paralleled the journey of childhood to adulthood. With increased independence and responsibility came growing pains, experience, and consequences. Several events resulted in a great wedge between many native Mexican



August 7, 1945. A group of students from the San Marcos Hidalgo primary school accompanied by their teachers Leonor Lozano and Luis Gutierrez. Photo from record book kept by staff of San Marcos Hidalgo Primary. (Courtesy of author.)

Mormons, who now considered themselves Lamanites, and their North American “Gentile” leaders. First came their newfound ecclesiastical independence, then the tragic death of their beloved mission president, President Rey L. Pratt, in 1931. The pains continued when there seemed to be no adequate replacement—Mexican national pride enhanced the desire to be

led by one of their own and increased deep antagonistic feelings toward the Americans, whom they blamed for unfairly taking over half of their country in the Mexican-American War. Mexican Saints desired their own native Mexican mission president to represent their people and prove their capability, thus further fulfilling the perceived role of the Lamanites. American Mormon leaders perceived the Mexican members’ desire for a native mission president as a form of apostasy and rebellion against general priesthood authority.¹⁴

This divide led to nearly ten years of internal conflict from about 1935 to 1945 as Mexican nationalism and perceptions of Lamanite growth and responsibility clashed with loyalty to American Church authority and personal testimony. “If the Church does not give us the means as well as open the way for complete development, we will never be able to carry forth this important work for ourselves and our people,” one member declared. “It will be impossible for us to make the necessary progress without this leadership opportunity.”¹⁵ Members feared that without adequate experience they could never “blossom as the rose.”¹⁶ As these and similar sentiments continued to build, some influential

native Mexican leaders took more drastic steps, forming a separate organization with local native leadership, which led to a ten-year separation and excommunication (later changed to disfellowship) of nearly one-third of the native Mexican members.¹⁷ Even though this group did not sustain the mission leadership sent from Church headquarters in Utah, they regarded themselves as faithful Church members.¹⁸

Recognizing the need for new leadership, presiding ecclesiastical authorities in Salt Lake City called Arwell L. Pierce to preside over the Mexican mission with a special charge by J. Reuben Clark Jr., an Apostle and former U.S. ambassador to Mexico, to reunify the Church there. The Church was once again unified thanks to Pierce's incredible leadership and great love for the Mexican people; the efforts of many local leaders, including Isasias Juárez, Julio Garcia, Bernabe Parra; general Church leadership; and the newly sustained prophet, George Albert Smith (who successfully spoke at a Mexican Area Conference to reunite the members in 1946). Focus now could be turned to strengthening the Saints and preparing the rising generation "to blossom as the rose," primarily through education, as was the pattern in the early Church history.

In 1944, recognizing the need to educate his own children as well as many of the other illiterate members, Bernabe Parra, a well-off native Mexican convert and branch president, founded his own private school at San Marcos Tula, Hidalgo, about thirty miles northwest of Mexico City.¹⁹ By 1946, over seventy-nine children were enrolled in this elementary school.²⁰ Unlike the reports of their sister schools in the colonies, who in 1942 reportedly failed to give the child much more of Mexico than his cousin receives from his Spanish class in Salt Lake City,²¹ this school was Mexican through and through. They celebrated Mexican Independence Day, taught Mexican history, spoke Spanish, and involved the community in all types of Mexican festivities. One year later, President Arwell Pierce joined Parra and others in requesting assistance from the Church for the school.

The timing of Parra's request for help from Church leaders could not have been better. David O. McKay, then serving as one of the senior Apostles, not only had a professional background in teaching, but was the first member of the Quorum of the Twelve to have taken an international tour around the world. For a year, he had taken notice of the needs of members of the Church, resulting in, among other things, a desire to educate the underprivileged Saints. In addition, Elder Spencer W. Kimball, who was called to the Quorum of the Twelve in 1943, was admonished in his patriarchal blessing to "preach the gospel to many people, but more especially the Lamanites." Then, in May of 1945, President George Albert Smith assigned Elder Kimball to "look after the Indians—they are neglected. Take charge and watch after the Indians in all the world."²² Needless to say, Parra's request was heard. Later that year at a general conference, Elder Spencer W. Kimball announced, "We are looking forward to a new day in schooling where our Lamanites may receive many of the advantages that our own children have."²³

During the next two decades, the Church ran a Lamanite Seminary program, commenced the Indian Placement Program (primarily in the western United States), initiated the Lamanite Generation at BYU, founded the Church College of Hawaii, and started an international Church Educational System that reached students from elementary to high school throughout the Pacific Islands, New Zealand, Central and South America, and Mexico. A writer for the Church's official magazine, the *Ensign* (whose entire issue for the month was devoted to the progress of those then considered Lamanites), wrote of these educational endeavors, "Possibly the most important thing that could be said about the Lamanite programs of the Church is that they are developing leadership and strength among the Lamanites. The gospel of Jesus Christ," he continues, "brings men and women to a greater measure of their potential, and nowhere is this more evident than among the Lamanite members of the Church."²⁴

The Church's international growth was accelerating, and member conversion in Mexico was extraordinary. Between the years 1946 and 1961, Mexican membership grew from approximately 5,000 members to nearly 25,000.²⁵ With this increase in membership, especially among the underprivileged class, came a glaring realization of the lack of education and resources among them. Although the Church supported and approved of Bernabe Parra's school, the need for more resources became apparent. Many native members looked to the well-established and successful Mormon Colonies in the northern Mexico state of Chihuahua for further secular and religious education and leadership training of their children. Some wondered why these same resources given to the American colonists were not available for the natives. No longer could the need for good education be ignored. Desiring to help these new converts and their children, Mexico mission president Claudio Bowman encouraged a study to be done to assess the needs of education in Mexico.

Mexico's Educational Needs

In 1957, President David O. McKay formed a committee to investigate the possibility of establishing Church schools in Mexico. He named Elder Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the Twelve, who was responsible for the overall direction for Church programs of special interest to the Lamanites, as director of the committee, with Joseph T. Bentley and Claudius Bowman, both mission presidents serving in Mexico, as members of the committee.²⁶ These capable leaders ascertained the number of students, the buildings necessary, the legality of the Church operating educational facilities in Mexico, the political leanings of the government, and the available state educational system in each area. The results of this study led to the development of the Sociedad Educativa y Cultural, S. C. (Educational and Cultural Society), which would be the catalyst to building and organizing over

forty elementary schools, two additional secondary schools, one preparatory school, and one normal school during the next decade.²⁷

From 1957 to 1960, constant correspondence occurred among local LDS ecclesiastical and educational leaders in Mexico and the General Authorities. Major concerns addressed through the correspondence were the politics of the Mexican educational system (which had strong Communist and atheistic influence),²⁸ the buying and owning of land, and official recognition of the Church by the Mexican government.²⁹ Partially in reaction to the religious domination of the Catholic Church, the Mexican constitution placed strict limits on all churches, including prohibiting churches to purchase land, separating religion and education, and requiring native teachers to avoid proselytizing to their children.³⁰

After a thorough investigation of educational resources and needs, Elder Romney and Joseph Bentley recommended the development of a large private educational system supported by the Church to be completed by the fall of 1960. They also recommended that a high school be built which “could well form the nucleus of a center not only for Mexico, but for all the Latin American missions where priesthood manuals and materials for church auxiliaries could be prepared.”³¹ With the expansion of the Church in mind and with the necessity to build strong ties with the Mexican people and government, they wrote, “We have a great work yet to do in these lands, . . . developing our programs around the native cultures. Stories and illustrations for Mexico should be taken from Mexican history and from the lives of Mexican heroes such as Benito Juárez and Hidalgo.”³² On January 21, 1960, the First Presidency approved the recommendations and assigned Elder Romney and Ernest Wilkinson to take charge.³³

During the October general conference of the same year, in his talk “The Day of the Lamanites,” Elder Spencer W. Kimball reported, “[The Lamanites in general] are facing an open door to education, culture, refinement, progress, and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church

has spent its millions in Hawaii and New Zealand, and other islands to provide schools for the young Lehites. Surely, no descendants need go now without an education, and schools in Mexico will be followed by schools in other nations. Surely the number of deprived ones is being reduced, and opportunity is knocking at their door." He continued, "A new world is open to them, and they are grasping the opportunities. God bless the Lamanites and hasten the day of their total emancipation from the thrall of yesteryear."³⁴

Commencement of Church Education throughout Mexico

Under the new LDS educational advisory board in Mexico and superintendent Daniel Taylor from the Mormon colonies (who had extensive experience in Mexican education, law, and culture and who was trusted by leaders of the Church), the society built schools, trained and hired teachers, and enrolled students by the thousands. In fact, by the end of 1969, thirty-nine schools were created throughout Mexico, named after "outstanding Mexican civil servants independent of religious influence." When asked nearly half a century later about the connection between the school building and the empowerment of the Lamanites, Dan Taylor responded, "The two had everything in common. We were helping the Lamanites 'blossom as a rose.'"³⁵

Due to the high rate of graduation from the LDS primary schools and inadequate secondary schools provided by the government, Church educational leaders in Mexico turned next to the creation of secondary and preparatory schools, with a heavy focus on the central campus in Mexico City. The board determined that this campus would include a *primaria* (elementary), a *secundaria* (junior high), a *preparatoria* (high school), and a normal (teacher preparation) school. All students would live in homes on campus rather than dormitories, in order to provide a family-like environment, which would allow students to

participate with “foster parents” in prayer, scripture study, chores, and other family activities. This environment provides the youth with personal attention and mentoring from active Latter-day Saint couples. All students on campus would be required to work as part of their tuition.

During the next few years, decisions regarding the funding of the schools in Mexico, especially the large campus planned for Mexico City, became topics of concern and even debate among the Brethren and top educational leaders in the Church. With his desire to promote junior colleges in highly LDS-populated areas throughout the United States, Ernest L. Wilkinson pressed firmly for finances to be allocated toward that end. Others including Elder Boyd K. Packer (serving then as Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve) emphasized putting the money the Church would be spending on junior colleges in privileged areas into places they believed needed it more, such as Mexico. Elder Packer wrote the following in a letter to the First Presidency during a highly inflamed period of debate between Wilkinson and him:

I confess to a deep yearning concern for the underprivileged youth of the church, particularly those of Lamanite descent, and find myself restlessly hoping that something may be done to provide even a meager education. I have visited in Mexico and know something of our school program there. In Mexico illiteracy is on the increase. . . . Somehow to commit hundreds of millions of dollars to provide the well-privileged youth of the Church with an education they will achieve anyway with less expense and more convenience than if we provide it seems unfortunate stewardship of our educational resources. Is it an error to suggest that the testimony of the Book of Mormon for these underprivileged children in Latin America and elsewhere is predicated upon their ability at least to read?³⁶

Eventually, Elder Packer’s suggestion for the money to go to those most in need was realized. On November 4, 1963, after years of research and after buying and preparing the land for the proposed, school, Elder Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the Twelve flew to Mexico City to personally supervise the groundbreaking for the first building.

Following speeches given by local leaders, Agricol Lozano Herrera, a Church attorney and member of the Board of Education, announced the official name of the school: Centro Escolar Benemérito de las Americas (Benefactor of the Americas), referring to Benito Juárez, a well-known national hero in Mexico. Lozano explained that by adopting this name, they were showing appreciation for their great ancestry and common heritage. Furthermore, this name would set this school apart from Catholic schools, which were typically named after Saints.

Elder Marion G. Romney then spoke. He recalled his own childhood education in the Mexican Mormon colonies, he spoke of his love for Mexico, and he encouraged the children to learn every word of the Mexican national anthem and to love not only the song but “to love Mexico.” He then prophesied, “This school for which we are breaking ground today is destined to become a great Spanish-speaking cultural



Groundbreaking ceremony at Benemérito de las Americas, November 4, 1963. Left to right: Joseph T. Bentley, Ernest LeRoy Hatch, Agricol Lozano Herrera, and Elder Marion G. Romney with children, parents, and teachers in background. (Photo from record book kept by staff of Benemérito and in possession of author.)

center. Its influence will reach far beyond the valley of Mexico. . . . It will be felt in all of Latin America, including South America. Hundreds of thousands of people will come here. Going out from here, they will help the Nation build up its education, its culture, and its spirituality.”³⁷

On February 17, 1964, exactly 125 *secundaria* (junior high) students entered and began their studies at Benemérito. Three years later, the *preparatoria* (high school) was opened. The students came from all over Mexico; the majority were recent converts from the poor economic class. They participated in a variety of extracurricular activities, including music, sports, and academic and civic clubs. They attended seminary daily, and for the first time in Church history, a campus stake was organized for high-school students.

In 1967, following much fasting, much prayer, many incredible instances of communication, and a perceived miracle, the Mexican government granted unheard-of permission to establish a normal school, provided that there were adequate numbers of Church-owned *primaria* schools to employ the teachers upon their graduation. Thus, in 1968, the normal school was also included. The number of total students on campus reached 2,803 during the 1974–75 school year.³⁸



Benemérito student dance performers. (Photo by Esli Hernandez.)

Mexico School's Government Assessment and Prophetic Potential

In 1971, Manuel Lopez Davila, an official in the Secretaría de Educación Pública recorded, “The education labor of the Mormon

community in Mexico must be considered as an effective help in the development of education in our country. . . . All of the Mormon schools are incorporated with and are recognized by the [Secretaría de Educación Pública].” Continuing the report, he described the educational setting of students and faculty. “The school rooms are magnificent. Its shops, laboratories, library, auditorium, and gymnasium are well equipped.” He concluded, “The Mormon community, organized educationally as the Sociedad Educativa y Cultural, . . . has the backing of the top officials of the [Secretaría de Educación Pública] because of the objectives and collaboration that said community has in helping us to resolve [the educational problems in Mexico].”³⁹

In February of 1977, the Church held its largest conference ever with over 25,000 people in attendance, many of whom were Church school students and faculty. This conference was held in Mexico City. As prophet of the Church, President Kimball gave a notable address, the impact of which cannot be overestimated. In his talk, he related a dream he had had nearly thirty years prior regarding the “progress and development” of Lehi’s children. “I saw the great people of the Lamanites in beautiful houses and having all the comforts that science can afford,” he related. “I saw the people of Lehi as engineers and builders. . . . I saw you in great political positions and functioning as administrators of the land. I saw many of you as heads of government . . . [and] in legislative positions where as good legislators and good Latter-day Saints you were able to make the best laws for your brothers and sisters.” He saw their children as attorneys and doctors “looking after the health of the people.” He saw them as “owners of industries and factories” and “of newspapers with great influence in public affairs.” He saw artists and authors whose writings had a “powerful influence on the thoughts of the people of the country.” He saw “the church growing in rapid strides” and wards and stakes organized by the hundreds. He saw missionaries, “not only hundreds but thousands,” and a temple “filled with men and women.”⁴⁰

With the foundation of the Church and Church schools in place, this talk empowered the Saints in Mexico and dramatically enabled their educational pursuits. Paragraphs from President Kimball's talk were made into posters, memorized by students, printed in daily student planners, and discussed in families and at many church functions. In reference to her education at the Church's elementary school in Hidalgo and later at Benemérito, and the impact of President Kimball's talk, one alum reminisced, "From these schools, we not only learned the secular information, but we became united as members of the Church. We realized, as we studied the Book of Mormon, and read, studied, and talked about President Kimball's dream, that we were a chosen people with previously unheard of possibilities."⁴¹



Representando los Ideales, by Ignacio M. Beteta and Roberto Cueva del Rio, is prominently placed in the entrance to the Benemérito administration building. It represents the need to reach the ideal in life by gaining intelligence, power, truth, and light.

A Drastic Change in Church Education

Although the schools, especially Benemérito, were deemed effective, changes were afoot that would eventually transform the Church's school system in Mexico. In 1971, under the direction of newly appointed commissioner of education Neal A. Maxwell, the Church adopted a policy to "not duplicate otherwise available" educational opportunities.⁴²

During the late 1970s, possibly as a result of the announced Official Declaration 2 removing “all restrictions with regard to race that once applied to the priesthood,”⁴³ along with the failing health of President Kimball, emphasis turned from the Lamanites to a worldwide Church. Expansion of the Lamanite programs came to a halt. After a thorough investigation by Church leaders in the early 1980s, they determined that the Mexican government was providing adequate educational opportunities for most elementary and secondary students. Therefore, in 1984, all Mexican Church schools were phased out with the exception of Academia Juárez’s secondary and preparatory schools and the preparatory school at Benemérito. Dan Workman, the CES administrator over the Church schools in Mexico, reported:

These meetings were held simultaneously all over Mexico, in all forty of the schools that were going to be closed. They announced that the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve had met. They had been given the information about the schools, and it was the will of the Lord that these schools would now be phased out and they would utilize the public schools. Then each congregation or group was asked to sustain the Brethren in that decision, and they were given the opportunity to object. There were only two or three in all forty schools who raised hands in objection, and none of them were members of the Church. They were all mothers. It was a great revelation to me about the loyalty of those people in Mexico, because none of them wanted to lose their schools. But if the prophet said they were to be closed, they were to be closed, at whatever sacrifice.⁴⁴

Although there was uniform acceptance of the closing of the schools and overwhelming signs of obedience and faith by the members, many Saints quietly struggled with the decision. Efrain Villalobos Vasquez, who was one of the first students at the Hidalgo School and later a teacher and administrator at Benemérito for nearly thirty years, was the superintendent of the Sociedad Educativa y Cultural when the decision and announcement were made. Years later, reflecting on his feelings of the closing of the school, he related: “I didn’t understand



Academia Juárez building, completed in 1904. (Photo by author.)

the decision, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it. I had been told that this was what was being done, and felt that my only choice was to fall in line with the leaders. I wished we could have been a part of that decision-making process. I wished that our opinions were taken into consideration.”⁴⁵ Today, many members say that they can now see the wisdom in closing the schools and putting the funds into the international seminary and institute program, but during the time the loss of their schools was a tough pill to swallow.

Although these times were difficult for many members, growth in Mexican membership did not reflect it. When the Church schools were started among the Mexican natives in 1961, there were approximately 25,000 members. By 1972, this number had quadrupled to



Graduating class of 1939. (Taken from The Juarez Stake Academy, 1897–1997.)

over 100,000. Over a period of three days, November 7–9, 1975, Elder Howard W. Hunter of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles created fifteen stakes in the Mexico City area. Because of these numbers, the Church leaders planned and dedicated the first Mexican temple

in 1983, during the sensitive time of the school closures. In 1993, Mexico officially recognized the Church, allowing the Church to have ownership of land in its own name—a controversial topic finally resolved after nearly a decade of debate. By 2004, the Church would reach over one million members in Mexico.⁴⁶

Although the majority of the Church schools were closed during the 1980s, Academia Juárez and Benemérito continued to be influenced by the Church's earlier emphasis on Lamanites. In fact, in front of every student academic notebook, the monumental talk by President Kimball is prominently printed, reminding them of who they are and inviting students to fulfill prophetic vision. Students are constantly reminded of their Lamanite heritage on posters, in dances, in assemblies, and in daily dialogue and instruction.

For nearly a quarter of a century, Benemérito and Academia Juárez have existed as well-known, prestigious sister schools in Mexico. With an enrollment of over four hundred students annually at Academia Juárez and over two thousand annually at Benemérito, these schools have been homes to thousands of students. On January 29, 2013, the paradigm of home and family for these students and faculty on Benemérito campus took an unexpected and dramatic shift. Mexico area president Daniel Johnson, accompanied by Elders Russell M. Nelson and Jeffrey R. Holland and others

from both the education and missionary departments of the Church, announced the conversion of Benemérito from a high school into the second-largest Missionary Training Center in the world. Elder Holland declared, “This is a dramatic moment in Church history. You have lived to see your role in one of the most historic moments in the Church.”⁴⁷ Elder Nelson then prophesied, “This sacred place will help the country of Mexico to become all that God intends it to become. With that sanctification, it will be a blessing to the entire world.”⁴⁸

When asked why the Saints in Mexico had received so many blessings throughout the last century, including a number of temples, missions, and schools, Elder Nelson responded, “I believe it relates to who they really are. We know who they really are by reading the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon was written for the Lamanites, and the people of Mexico have that tradition and the blessing of being a believing people.”⁴⁹

Conclusion

By examining the historical, political, social, and religious underpinnings of over a century of LDS Church existence in Mexico, it is clear that the Church’s emphasis on the Lamanites influenced its educational endeavors in Mexico. Now, after nearly 120 years since the school officially commenced, and after being a flagship to over fifty schools in the country, the Juárez Academy is the only Church-owned school left in Mexico. Although this school commenced with the intention of teaching the American Mormon colonist youth, the enrollment is now almost completely native Mexican members. Teachers and leaders of the school and community take pride in the school’s academic excellence, bilingual curriculum, and history of creating Church, community, government, and family leaders throughout Mexico and the world. According to Elder Paul V. Johnson, who served until 2015 as commissioner of the Church Educational System, there is no intention at this point in closing

the school.⁵⁰ Although Benemérito and the other schools have fulfilled their missions in Mexico, as Elder Nelson related, “we are only in the middle of Mexico’s history, and we do not know what the future holds.”⁵¹

Notes

1. Milton Lynn Bennion, *Mormonism and Education* (Salt Lake City: The Department of Education of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 6.
2. D&C 88:77–78, 136–38.
3. Bennion, *Mormonism and Education*, 12.
4. Bennion, *Mormonism and Education*, 40–49.
5. Albert Kenyon Wagner and Leona Farnsworth Wagner, *The Juarez Stake Academy, 1897–1997: The First One Hundred Years* (Juárez, Mexico: The Academy, 1997), 5.
6. D&C 3:20.
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