

# Modeling Educational Excellence in Puebla, Mexico



by Ravi Ramaswamy

In Puebla, a city of about 1.5 million people in central Mexico, there's a school with a name that may only sound familiar to people from southeast Michigan. With a combination of active, experiential learning, a strong focus on social and emotional skills, and opportunities for building connections with land and community, [Colegio Ypsilanti](#) has been providing high-quality education to children and youth from preschool through high school for the past 35 years.

At every level, including in how it trains and supports its teachers, Colegio Ypsilanti embodies what the [David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality](#), a unit of the Forum for Youth Investment, calls the [Active-Participatory Approach](#), a learner-centered approach to education and youth work focused on meeting the developmental needs of children and youth in order to support their learning and growth. On a daily basis, its staff demonstrate that the students ["can thrive when they feel safe and supported to learn and lead."](#)

Maria Eugenia Serrano, whose background is in educational psychology, founded the school in 1985 while completing training in [HighScope's](#) early childhood education program. Colegio Ypsilanti began as a small preschool and over the years grew with its students to include a bilingual elementary school (1993), a middle school (1996), and a high school (1999).

While amazing things happen every day with the children and younger youth, for now, let's shine the spotlight on the school's exceptional high school program (note: in Mexico, high school is equivalent to 10th through 12th grades in the US).

Building from HighScope's early childhood foundation in active learning and combining best practices from the [HighScope Institute for IDEAS](#) camp model ([referenced last summer](#) in a blog post by Karen Pittman), as well as student-centered pedagogies from both Mexico and the United States, Ms. Serrano and her team have designed a curriculum that transcends what many of us think is possible in a school setting.

Along with offering core academic courses that consistently exceed Mexico's federally mandated requirements, Colegio Ypsilanti's high school includes a wide array of supplemental courses, special workshops, and work projects that its leaders consider essential for supporting youth readiness and success in their community.



One of the fundamental parts of HighScope's early childhood method is the Plan-Do-Review learning cycle. For small children, plans and activities usually revolve around activities and projects in their classroom, supporting both cognitive and social-emotional skills.

For Colegio Ypsilanti's high school students, the Plan-Do-Review sequence expands to support unique and engaging opportunities for leadership and community impact.

And these are not experiences that are limited to a select group of students in an enrichment program. This diverse selection of opportunities is part of Colegio Ypsilanti's basic curriculum.

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First-year students begin with a semester working with a farmer on a small plot of land 20 minutes outside of the city, then progress to volunteering in that community's public elementary school, planning and facilitating physical education and arts workshops for the younger students.

Second-year students spend a semester in a service industry job followed by volunteering in a community-based organization. And finally, the school supports seniors in learning about any post-graduation path they are interested in, organizing university talks and tours, capped by a final semester in a professional apprenticeship of their choice.

All of this high-quality work with students has led to a growing body of alumni who are in careers ranging from musicians, filmmakers, opera singers, lawyers, scientists, medical doctors, activists, nonprofit administrators, entrepreneurs, artists, and academics. And perhaps nothing speaks more to the enduring power of the Colegio Ypsilanti experience than the fact that students come back after they graduate.

Many have now made their careers as teachers at the school, and there is a growing group of alumni who have enrolled their own children in the preschool and elementary school. How has this relatively small institution built and maintained such a spectacular program and curriculum for its students over the years?

Much of the answer lies in its approach to staff training and support. From the school's formative years up through the present, Ms. Serrano and other school leaders have offered intensive teacher training in the summer followed by ongoing coaching and professional development throughout the school year, modeling all of the methods and skills they expect to see teachers use in the classroom. Beginning in the fall of 2009, the school adopted the Weikart Center's validated continuous quality improvement process, the [Youth Program Quality Intervention \(YPQI\)](#).



An easy marriage of formal self-assessment with language and methods that the school was already living and breathing, YPQI became a way to further empower and support teachers in becoming master educators and leaders not only in their school but across the city of Puebla. All of the above is only a small glimpse into the exemplary work of our friends at Colegio Ypsilanti de Puebla.

I strongly encourage you to learn more about them [on their website](#), follow them on social media ([Facebook](#), Instagram: [@colegioyypsilanti](#)), and pay them a visit if you are ever in Mexico. You can also contact Ms. Serrano directly: [maria.serrano@colegio-ypsilanti.edu.mx](mailto:maria.serrano@colegio-ypsilanti.edu.mx). They'd be happy to show you around and give you insider tips on some of the best food in the country.