

# **Scope of Compulsory Schooling in Buenos Aires City (Argentina, 1880-1916)**

## **Alcances de la obligatoriedad escolar en la ciudad de Buenos Aires (Argentina, 1880-1916)**

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### **Resumen**

Una parte de la producción historiográfica ha tendido a dar por supuesto un desarrollo de la enseñanza primaria resuelto y homogéneo en la ciudad de Buenos Aires, por entonces capital de la Argentina, hacia finales del siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX. Esta presunción ha dejado en un segundo plano el análisis del proceso de la universalización de la educación común que, de acuerdo a las fuentes consultadas, fue problemático. Al respecto, este artículo se propone contribuir a una reconstrucción de dicho proceso, con la hipótesis de que el mismo no fue uniforme debido, en parte, a su vertiginoso desarrollo urbano expandido con la llegada continua y masiva de inmigrantes, así como a la ocupación de mano de obra infantil que impidió a niños y niñas en edad escolar a cumplir con su obligatoriedad de manera total o parcial. A tales efectos, se indaga en torno a la idea de obligatoriedad escolar en Argentina en dicho lapso temporal, en lo que se refiere a su adopción como principio y como mecanismo de expansión del subsistema de educación primaria. Recurrimos a la combinación metodológica para complementar la reconstrucción estadística con los discursos emitidos por autoridades escolares con distintos niveles de responsabilidad.

*Palabras claves:* obligatoriedad escolar - educación común - enseñanza primaria - políticas educativas – historia de la educación

## **Abstract**

A part of the historiographical production has tended to assume a resolved and homogeneous development of primary education in the city of Buenos Aires, then the federal capital of Argentina, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This presumption has relegated to the background an analysis of the process of universalizing primary education which, according to the sources consulted, proved to be problematic. In this regard, the article aims to contribute to a reconstruction of that process, hypothesizing that it was not uniform due, in part, to the city's rapid urban expansion fueled by the continuous and massive arrival of immigrants, as well as the prevalence of child labor, which prevented school-aged boys and girls from fully or partially complying with mandatory education. To this end, the study explores the notion of compulsory schooling in Argentina during this period, both as a principle and as a mechanism for expanding the primary education subsystem. A mixed-methods approach is employed to complement statistical reconstruction with discourses from school authorities at various levels of responsibility.

*Key words:* compulsory schooling - common education - primary education - educational policies - history of education.

## **Introduction: Compulsory Schooling as Object of Study**

At the end of the 19th century, the city of Buenos Aires was undergoing a process of accelerated transformation as a result of having been declared the federal capital of Argentina. At the same time, common education was seen as a fundamental factor for social development, as well as a means for supporting a set of goals related to literacy, child care and the formation of national sentiment in a nation state in the making. In line with this, laws were passed that established a system of public instruction whose principle and vehicle for expansion was compulsory schooling. However, this process faced significant challenges.

This article<sup>1</sup> aims to contribute to a reconstruction of the process of expansion of primary education in Argentina's federal capital between

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<sup>1</sup> An advance of this work was presented at the XIX Jornadas Interescuelas/Departamentos de Historia (2024), at the round table "Historia de la educación argentina (siglos XIX y XX): Estado, instituciones y docentes" (History of Argentine education (XIX and XX centuries): State, institutions and teachers). This article takes up and expands on that paper, enriched thanks to the comments and exchanges of both the coordinators of the round table and the colleagues present.

1880 and 1916, given the complexity of the context in which it unfolded and the fact that this topic has not yet been explored in depth. We begin with the hypothesis that this process was not uniform, as it appears to have been conditioned by several social and urban factors that complicated the effective implementation of compulsory schooling. For this purpose, we used official sources and documents that identify a set of elements influencing the efforts of school authorities and the national treasury to establish compulsory schooling as both a principle and mechanism for the universalization of common education. The research, grounded on a methodology that combines statistical reconstruction with the analysis of official discourses, allows us an examination of the way in which school authorities interpreted and addressed these challenges, in a context where the educational system interacted with a city undergoing constant growth. The documentary corpus consists of the journal *El Monitor de la Educación Común* (EMEC),<sup>2</sup> the annual reports of the Consejo Nacional de Educación (National Council of Education, CNE) to the Ministerio de Justicia, Culto e Instrucción Pública<sup>3</sup> (Ministry of Justice, Worship and Public Instruction) and the session journals of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Argentine Nation.

This paper is structured in three sections. First, we will review both national and international studies on compulsory schooling, which provide a framework for the development of the text. Second, we will examine the normative background that established compulsory schooling in Argentina and regulated primary education. Finally, we will analyze the impact of these provisions within the context of the city of Buenos Aires, assessing the achievements and limits of the school mandate.

According to Gimeno Sacristán (2005), in modern societies, universal schooling acquired an obvious and natural appearance, which endowed compulsory schooling and the democratization of access to education with the status of the spiritual and material progress of society. This partially explains why the notion of the universality of common education became a principle

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2 *El Monitor de la Educación Común* (hereinafter EMEC) was the magazine of the Consejo Nacional de Educación (National Education Council). It disseminated the measures and regulations in force for education in Argentina, as well as pedagogical novelties and didactic resources.

3 Since 1898, this department has been called the Ministerio de Justicia e Instrucción Pública (Ministry of Justice and Public Instruction).

enshrined in Latin American laws after the second half of the 19th century, which entailed a guarantor State and obligated citizens. As a constitutional principle, Viñao Frago (2001) points out the ambiguity created by compulsory schooling concerning the generalization of its application.

Some researchers have examined its implementation in the Argentine provinces at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Ferrero's (2007) work includes a detailed analysis of the articles published in the *Revista de Educación*,<sup>4</sup> in which he examines the influence of compulsory schooling, institutional differentiation and educational reform on the consolidation of the educational system in the province of Buenos Aires. Zapiola (2009) also conducts a rigorous study on the implementation of compulsory schooling in the same province, questioning the true extent of educational policies. His work acknowledges that compulsory schooling was not a fully effective measure, as it was limited by various reasons, among which the State's limited capacity to supervise and control attendance, the lack of resources and the absence of an adequate school infrastructure stand out. Petitti's (2022) work, which focuses on the province of Entre Ríos, investigates the implementation and effects of the compulsory education law between 1886 and 1958. He examines the scope and limitations of compulsory schooling linked to the lack of resources, resistance from some sectors to schooling, and the gap between the letter of the law and its application.

Regarding the universal nature of common education in the city of Buenos Aires, Ciafardo (1992) highlighted the differences between poor children, middle-class children and elite children. The latter had distinct social circuits compared to the other two groups. Children of the middle sectors were the primary recipients of the public education system, while children from the more impoverished sectors had a very low schooling rates and those who did attend school generally only completed the first grades, due in part to child labor. Although the industrial development of the city at the time did not require extensive child labor, it was common to see children engaged in street trades such as newspaper vendors, shoeshine boys, messengers, and others. (Suriano, 1990). These children navigated the streets, parks and promenades

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4 Official newspaper of the Dirección General de Escuelas (General Directorate of Schools) of the province of Buenos Aires published between 1858 and 1992.

of a city undergoing rapid expansion. Political and municipal authorities sought to reorganize the public space, transforming the city in architectural terms and reconfiguring social relations (Rama, 1984; Gorelik, 1998). However, the rapid development of the urban area had to contend with the continuous and massive arrival of immigrants, demographic growth—which led to tenements and boarding houses—the instability of the populations that migrated from one neighborhood to another, and the rapid expansion of the municipality's boundaries.

The issue of the universalization of education was revisited in Argentina with the enactment of Law No. 26,206 on National Education (2006), which extended compulsory education to include secondary education (Cappellacci and Miranda, 2007; Terigi, 2008; Martignoni, 2012; Miranda, 2013; Terigi et al., 2013). Attention has been given to the representations that different institutional actors have regarding the universalization of school education (Montesinos et al., 2009; Giovine and Martignoni, 2011) and efforts have been made to reconstruct the historical dimensions of the meanings of compulsory literacy (Moratti, 2000).

Other studies help position compulsory schooling as a transnational issue. Mollis' (1993) work presents a comparative analysis of the formation of the nation-states of Japan and Argentina toward the end of the 19th century. Both countries developed modern educational systems based on common, free and compulsory education; thus, primary education functioned as a mechanism for socialization, cultural homogenization and the formation of citizenship. Another noteworthy contribution is Guereña's (2019) study on Spain, in which he examines the school discourses that portrayed childhood as the appropriate stage for schooling, alongside narratives that normalized child labor. According to the author, during that period, the voices of parents and guardians often pointed to the need to employ their children, making child labor one of the main obstacles to schooling.

A prolific body of literature produced in Brazil addresses the topic from various perspectives. From a standpoint closely tied to the right to education, Horta (1998) highlights the paradoxical situation of this right, which is both a right and an obligation. For this reason, he examines both dimensions together, exploring primary education in Brazil's subnational

states, and revealing the multiple social and material challenges involved in upholding compulsory schooling—and, consequently, the right to education. Gondra (2010), for his part, explores the expansion of compulsory schooling and acknowledges the multifaceted network formed by various institutions and school trajectories aimed at supporting the democratic expansion of primary education. In this regard, the author concludes that compulsory schooling is a measure that operates in conjunction with a broader set of formal and non-formal educational mechanisms. Meanwhile, Brito and Vinagre (2018) examine the issue of compulsory schooling through discourses published in two newspapers, where diverse—and even opposing—representations are expressed: from an aspirational dimension based on how compulsory schooling was framed in European legislations, to the material and social difficulties encountered in the effort to impose schooling on children in Brazil.

From the above, it can be inferred that, from an early stage, compulsory schooling exposed a plurality of issues related to its implementation as a regulatory mechanism and to its practical realization.

## **From the Circulation of an Idea to Its Adaptation**

The goal of educating the child population has been already recognized in the early political constitutions of Latin American States. In the case of Argentina, the political constitution of the State was formalized in the Constitution of 1853, which declared a set of rights, duties and guarantees, providing a framework for national organization. Among these founding principles is the right to teach and learn, within the framework of republican and federal ideas, which would later be ratified and gradually implemented through the enactment of various laws.

From 1880 to 1884, primary education in the Federal Capital was governed by Law No. 988 (1875)<sup>5</sup> of the province of Buenos Aires until the National Congress provided the administration with a legal framework for the entire federal territory. This law established the obligation of common

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5 The norm has its own antecedents in provincial legislation: the primary education law of Corrientes (1853), the Constitution of Tucumán (1856) and the common education law of Catamarca (1871). See Barba, F. E. (1968). The common education law of Buenos Aires of 1875. *Trabajos y comunicaciones*, 18, 53-66.

education and outlined its implications through the fifteen articles that form the first chapter of the legislation.<sup>6</sup> It limited compulsory schooling to eight years for boys and six years for girls, with a *minimum* level of “instruction” regarding the content. The law set forth duties related to enrollment, attendance and academic performance which could be fulfilled through public, private or home education modalities. Additionally, it mandated the adoption of a district structure under the jurisdiction of peace courts.<sup>7</sup> The law’s implementation occurred during the transfer of provincial institutions to the central government, following the capitalization of the city in 1880, based on an agreement between the Ministerio del Interior de la Nación (National Ministry of the Interior) and the government of the province of Buenos Aires.

In 1882, the city of Buenos Aires hosted the Congreso Pedagógico Internacional (International Pedagogical Congress), where fundamental ideas on primary education were exchanged and the foundation for a nationwide common education legislation in Argentina was laid. The transcriptions of the presentations and debates that followed offer valuable insight to the circulation of ideas surrounding compulsory schooling. References to the educational legislation of “civilized countries” or “modern societies”, which had instituted compulsory schooling, not only were a source of admiration, but also shaped the aspirations of the emerging Latin American nations.

Throughout the debates that took place, almost entirely published in *EMEC*, some dissonant and even opposing voices to compulsory schooling emerged. The feasibility of compulsory education was one of the most debated topics, particularly in light of issues such as population mobility and the State’s capacity to finance the establishment and construction of schools. As Paul Groussac remarked: “Theories are beautiful but reality is bitter! We do not have the means to pass compulsory education laws” (Groussac, 1882, p. 204).<sup>8</sup> Despite these opposing or more moderate positions, the majority of the interventions in favor of compulsory schooling viewed it as a measure of good governance, believing that it promoted universal instruction—a

6 Law 988 Chapter I “De la obligación de la educación primaria” (“On the Obligation of Primary Education”).

7 Law 988 Chapter IV “De los consejos escolares de Distrito” (“On the District School Boards”).

8 Paul Groussac, a French-born historian and writer, served as the director of Argentina’s National Library and was a congressman. He notably advocated for secular education during the Congreso Pedagógico Internacional of 1882.



responsibility of the State if it intended to alleviate the ills associated with ignorance. According to the congress participants, these arguments were rooted in the need to improve individual and societal conditions, as well as to prepare children and young people to understand and fulfill their civic duties. Consequently, one of the resolutions of the congress recommended that all Latin American nations adopt compulsory and free schooling through a national education law. In the first section titled “Sobre difusión de la enseñanza primaria” (“On the expansion of primary education”), the following points were declared:

A) Education in public schools shall be entirely free of charge. B) The law should establish in principle a minimum of compulsory instruction for children aged six to fourteen. C) This principle may only be strictly enforced in areas where there are public schools (...) D) The law must grant parents or guardians the authority to provide the minimum compulsory instruction for their children or wards either in public schools, in private schools, or at home. E) Noncompliance with the law by parents or guardians, in regard to the minimum required instruction for their children or wards, must be subject to punishment. (CNE, EMEC, 1884, p. 615).

The implementation of the principle of compulsory schooling within the federal jurisdictions of Argentina—the city of Buenos Aires and the National Territories—was solidified with the enactment of Law No. 1420 on common education in 1884. The parliamentary procedure and debates surrounding the law saw little opposition regarding the compulsory status of schooling. In a narrow sense, this imposition mandated enrollment, verified through a *tuition*,<sup>9</sup> and attendance as a means of ensuring a minimum of instruction for all children aged six to fourteen. Following this law, the distribution of schools was based on population density, with one *school district*<sup>10</sup> being

9 In line with the provisions of Law 1,420 (Chapter II. Articles 15-18) and the General Regulations for Public Schools in the Capital and National Territories of 1889 (Title V, Chapter II), the school tuition was an annual certificate issued by the school boards to certify the enrollment of school-age children in each district. Additionally, its payment—set at one peso in national currency per child per year—constituted part of the common treasury of the schools.

10 Article 5 of Law 1,420 establishes that compulsory schooling requires the existence of free public schools accessible to school-age children. To this end, each neighborhood with 1,000 to 1,500 inhabitants in cities, and each colony or national territory with 300 to 500 inhabitants, shall constitute a School District. Each district is entitled to at least one public school where primary education, as established by this law, shall be provided in its entirety.



established for every one thousand to one thousand five hundred inhabitants, thereby guaranteeing access to a public school. Furthermore, the regulation outlined control mechanisms through *school boards*,<sup>11</sup> and the registers of school principals, along with penalties and fines for parents or guardians who failed to comply with the law. This represented the State's commitment to ensuring both access to and the provision of free education, facilitating children's entry into and retention in school. It also acknowledged that it would be unreasonable to demand compliance from families or guardians if a school was not within the prescribed proximity.

## The Implementation of Compulsory Schooling

### The Creation of Schools

By 1881, the school censuses conducted by the *comisiones escolares* (school commissions) revealed a significant number of illiterates, alongside low enrollment and attendance rates, in the city of Buenos Aires. Reports from the section *vocales-inspectores* (board member-inspectors) explained to Domingo F. Sarmiento,<sup>12</sup> *Superintendente del Consejo General de Educación* (Superintendent of the General Council of Education), several key challenges to the enforcement of compulsory schooling: the insufficient number of schools, the limited capacity of existing ones, overcrowding and inadequate hygiene standards. These issues had to be addressed legitimately to compel children to comply with school attendance. As stated in the report: "It is not possible, in the present schools, to enforce this law; they are few, and located

11 As established by Law 1.420 (Chapter IV. Articles 38, 39, 40, 41 and 43) and the General Regulations for Public Schools in the Capital and National Territories of 1889, school councils were composed by five parents appointed by the CNE for each school district. Designated as the Comisión Inspectora (Inspecting Commission), they extended the functions of the Inspección General (General Inspection) to each neighborhood, overseeing the hygiene, discipline and moral standards of the schools under their jurisdiction. Additionally, they promoted the creation of cooperative societies, encouraged school attendance among children in the classrooms, and managed the enrollment records.

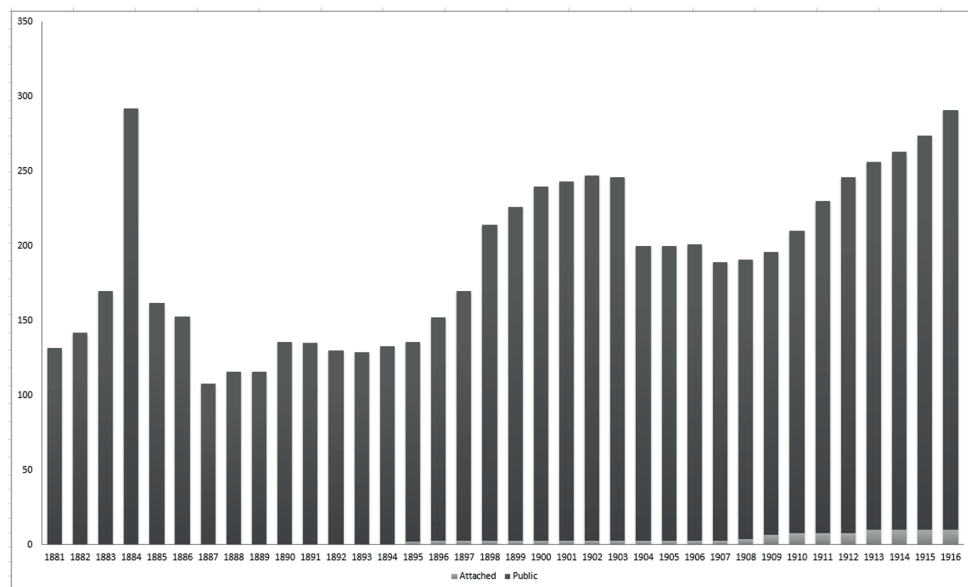
12 The terms used reflect the enforcements of Law 988 in the Province of Buenos Aires. The *comisiones o consejos escolares* (school commissions or councils) were collegiate bodies responsible for administering educational services within a school district.

in insufficient and unhygienic premises” (de la Barra, 1881, p. 181).

This diagnosis prompted the government to make a significant investment in the rapid establishment of schools across various districts, resulting in the creation of twenty new institutions in 1882. Subsequently, in 1884, fourteen school buildings designed according to the “palace-school” model were inaugurated. These buildings embodied the grandeur of the national state and served as symbolic representations of the so-called “melting pot of races.” In this context, da Silva (2022) notes that, during the 1880s in the city of Buenos Aires, two primary concerns shaped school construction: the need to accommodate increasing student enrollment and the desire to adhere to specific stylistic, pedagogical and hygienic standards. The Plan de Edificación Escolar de 1899 (School Building Plan) and the Escuelas del Centenario de 1909 (Centennial Schools)—both ambitious projects undertaken by the National Education Council (CNE)—were conceived within this framework, aiming to address illiteracy through the expansion and modernization of educational infrastructure. As illustrated in Figure I, these investments had a considerable impact on the number of public elementary schools in the city.

With the opening of approximately forty buildings in 1886, the president of the CNE, Benjamín Zorrilla, declared the “school problem” in the capital of the Republic to be solved, stating “...having already sufficient premises in more than half of the school districts of the Capital, next year we will implement in them the school legislation that obliges parents to send their children to school” (CNE, 1887, p. 124). According to official reports, the new buildings were designed to accommodate between two and eight schools, each with their corresponding teaching staff. As a result of the consolidation of forty-five schools, the total number of institutions was reduced by approximately two thirds, thereby improving both enrollment and attendance figures.

**CHART I.** Public schools in the city of Buenos Aires.



Source: Prepared by the author based on data included in the *CNE Annual Reports*.<sup>13</sup>

Although these expenditures had a significant impact on the number of public elementary schools, allowing the gradual reconsolidation of institutions and the expansion of their capacity to accommodate more students, this was reflected in the statistics as a progressive decline in the total number of schools and an occasional slowdown in enrollment and attendance rates. This latter trend occurred, in part, because smaller-capacity schools had been more evenly distributed throughout the territory, whereas the larger-capacity schools were strategically located in more developed areas of the municipality. Additionally, the investments allocated to school construction plans limited the resources available for establishing new schools that were legally mandated. As a result, the demand for additional schools persisted among the local school boards, which, as they reported, lacked the authority to enforce fines and penalties, given that “The law of compulsory education

<sup>13</sup> In Argentina, “Escuelas Normales”—institutions for teacher training—had attached primary schools to provide student teachers with the opportunity to complete their practical training.

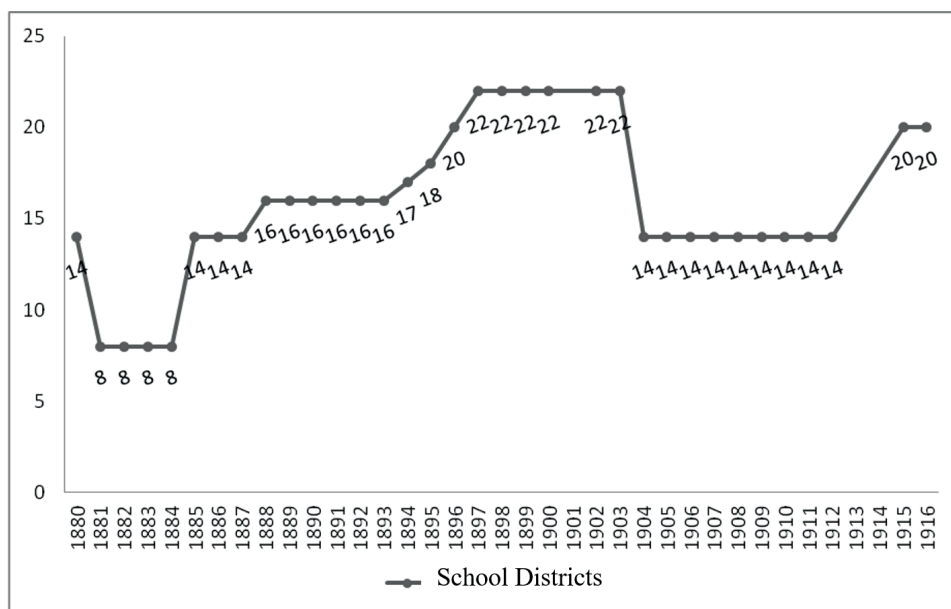
is a dead letter as long as schools and the financial resources to operate them are lacking” (Altgelt, 1885, p. 494).

The inspection reports, for their part, showed concern over the marked disparity between the number of school-age children and those actually attending school. According to the technical inspection, “This difference is most alarming in the more remote parishes and, consequently, where the proletarian segment of the population is larger” (Guerrico, 1887, p. 286). Moreover, the city’s rapid and exponential growth was characterized by population instability, neighborhood transformations, and commercial fluctuations due to “the growing appreciation of property, which causes it to change hands frequently, resulting in constant population movement and frequent migrations from one neighborhood to another” (CNE, 1888, p. 79). These dynamics hindered the CNE’s efforts to effectively address the challenges posed by compulsory education. For example, the incorporation of the neighborhoods of Flores and Belgrano in 1887 extended the city’s boundaries, expanding the scope of official action:

...despite its constant attention to its duties, the Council finds itself hindered in its efforts by unforeseen events, leaving it without school buildings due to insufficient resources in certain areas of recent and rapid population growth; at other times, rendering, albeit partially, some buildings constructed for primary education unusable. (CNE, 1888, pp. 81-82)

Indeed, the city grew at an accelerated pace, following an urbanization model influenced by European ideas aimed at transform it into a modern city, accompanied by population instability between neighborhoods. As this transformation took place, the municipality established new administrative structures that proved difficult to integrate and harmonize with the school system, the variations of which are presented in Figure II.

**CHART II.** School Districts in the city of Buenos Aires.



**Source:** Prepared by the author based on data included in the CNE *Annual Reports*.

The most severe adjustment occurred during the 1897-1900 period, which led to an inequitable administrative distribution among the school boards. In 1904, the CNE decided to reduce the number of school districts for the following reasons:

On the other hand, the unjustifiable disparities in the number of schools under the jurisdiction of each school board should no longer persist. In some districts, there are only two, three or four schools, while in others there are as many as seventeen. This imbalance results in excessive expenditures that can and should be eliminated to increase the number of technical inspectors and school doctors. The goal is for each district to have at least one of each official, offering undeniable pedagogical and hygienic benefits. (CNE, *EMEC*, 1905, p. CL).

Subsequently, in 1915, the CNE increased the school districts because “...due to the extent and number of schools, the current school districts in this

Capital—Nos. 5, 6, 10, 12, 13 and 14—require subdivision for their better administration and to facilitate the fulfillment of their duties” (Arata, 1915, pp. 8-9). These pressures resulted in a heterogeneous composition of the school districts, as some had jurisdiction over two or more neighborhoods with sparse population but larger territorial areas, while others administered schools in one neighborhood or fewer.

Thus, in the Federal Capital, disparate realities coexisted among school districts, as reflected in the differential distribution of enrollment and attendance rates. In some districts, the enrollment rate was low and attendance irregular; the authorities identified several possible causes, including the distances between schools, the state of the roads, the unsanitary conditions of housing and the spread of diseases within local school clusters, families’ reluctance to have their children educated by the State, and the need for children to work from an early age. Meanwhile, in districts with higher population density and more advanced urban development due to their proximity to the city center, it was the school directors, district inspectors and technical inspectors themselves who called for immediate solutions, as the capacity of the schools was overwhelmed by the number of boys and girls seeking to enroll.

## **Adjustment of Measures: Reforms and Reductions**

The expertise, study and debate of the illiteracy problem, as well as the irregular rates of enrollment and retention, converged in the drafting and approval of a new regulation for the public schools of the Federal Capital.<sup>14</sup> Through this regulation, an attempt was made to introduce the necessary reforms to address an increasingly complex social situation, particularly the restructuring of school schedules. Starting in 1900, the alternating schedule was implemented, reducing children’s school attendance to two and a half hours, allowing for one session in the morning and another in the afternoon in the same premises, with the same teaching staff receiving a 20% salary

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14      Reglamento para las escuelas comunes de la capital federal y territorios nacionales (Regulations for Public Schools in the Federal Capital and National Territories). En CNE, *EMEC* (1900), N° 324, Sección Oficial: Reglamento para las Escuelas Comunes de la Capital y Territorios Nacionales, marzo de 1900, p. 170-186).

increase. Despite strong pedagogical criticism and resistance from families, the implementation was selective, with only certain schools adopting the change, prioritizing those with the highest demand. Additionally,

As elementary and secondary schools now include early grades, the board may authorize technical inspectors to reduce the number of schools in certain categories, while increasing the number of schools in others based on the number and grade of their students. If it were possible for only 5th and 6th grade students to attend the upper schools, 3rd and 4th grade students to attend elementary schools, and 1st and 2nd grade students to attend infant schools, the Federal Capital would only require 8 schools of the first category to meet the current and future needs of the population, along with 36 elementary schools and 200 infant schools. (CNE, *EMEC*, 1900, pp. 113-114).

A year later, that reform led to the modification of the programs for schools under the jurisdiction of the CNE,<sup>15</sup> which adjusted the curricular extension to fit the new schedules, in light of the “incessant growth of the school population, disproportionate to revenues; which led to the simplification of the common programs, in order to equitably distribute, the benefit of primary instruction” (CNE, 1902, pp. 49-50). In other words, the alternate schedule increased the availability of seats in schools for 1st and 2nd grades, while the curriculum adjustments reduced and prioritized content. These measures were communicated and implemented in coordination with the district school boards, which reported on seat availability by section and identified schools that could be merged, relocated or converted into infant schools. The logistics of this redistribution and these changes were neither simple nor free of controversy. In some cases, local residents expressed concern over the relocation or virtual disappearance of nearby schools, voicing their objections to the CNE on the grounds that “...such a measure does not seem to be based on a clear intent to rationally distribute the various public schools” and that “consequently, they will prefer to sacrifice their instruction to their safety” (CNE, *EMEC*, 1903, p. 186).

Around 1903, a citizens' commission was formed that disseminated propaganda regarding the negative consequences of implementing the

15 Programas y horarios para las escuelas comunes de la capital federal (Programs and Schedules for Public Schools in the Federal Capital). En CNE, *EMEC* (1901), N° 344, Sección Oficial: Programas y horarios para las escuelas comunes de la capital federal, octubre de 1901 p. 202-213.



alternate schedule. The group even submitted a signed petition to the Chamber of Deputies, aiming to raise awareness of “the inconveniences and harms that the alternate schedule causes to the home, children, the poor class and the teachers” (Argentina, Congreso de la Nación, 1903, p. 629). Despite this resistance, the expansion of the original capacity of state schools and the conversion of numerous elementary and high schools to nursery schools boosted enrollment and attendance figures and public schools already saw an increase of 10,000 newly enrolled students in 1902.

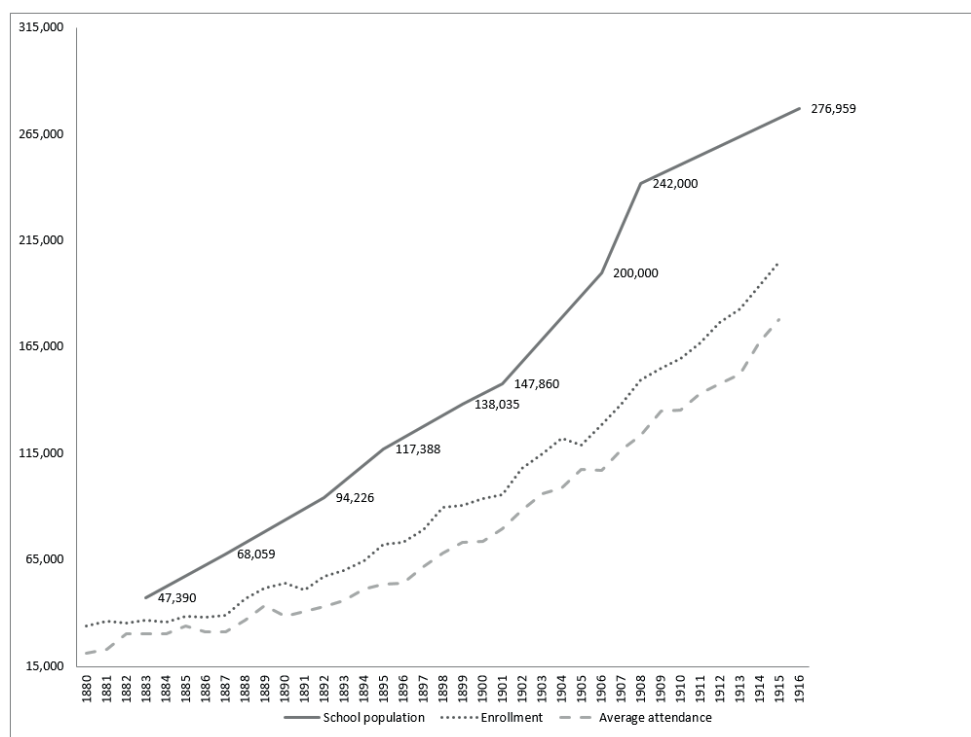
Both the technical inspection of the Federal Capital and an *ad hoc* commission issued unfavorable reports regarding the alternate schedule, recommending its replacement with the double-shift system, which would not begin until 1907. This system involved doubling the number of schools offering all six grades, thereby increasing the number of institutions able to accommodate one group of students in the morning and another in the afternoon, under a single administration but with distinct teaching staff. The Comisión de Horarios (Timetable Commission)—composed of specialists—and the Inspección Técnica (Technical Inspection)—convened to provide their opinion—also agreed on another recommendation: the advisability of postponing school entry by one year. However, the attempt to reduce compulsory schooling ultimately failed, as it did not receive the support of the educational authorities.

At the same time, pedagogical and general conferences that brought together inspectors, directors and teachers analyzed the causes of non-attendance, while school councils conducted a census of parents in order to explore alternate methods of persuading them to comply with the legal mandate of compulsory schooling. Among the reasons cited by families were the following:

a) Lack of money to purchase clothing, footwear and school supplies; b) insufficient time to get the children ready and send them to school; c) the need for older children to contribute to the household income through work, or to stay home and care for younger siblings while the parents work outside the house; d) a shortage of seats in public schools, according to newspaper reports; e) retention in factories where children were forced to work beyond the legal time (10 to 11 hours); f) illness. (Caffarena, 1916, p. 79).

In the same way that child labor and adverse evaluations of state education contributed to the decline in attendance recorded in the attendance sheets from the 4th or 5th grade onward, the poor condition of streets and school access routes—as well as the prevalence of infectious diseases—also impeded regular school attendance. As shown in Table 3, both enrollment and attendance progressively increased over the period, maintaining a prudent and relatively proportional gap between the two indicators.<sup>16</sup>

### CHART III. School Population, Enrollment and Attendance in the City of Buenos Aires.



Source: Prepared by the author based on data included in the *CNE Annual Reports*.

<sup>16</sup> The school population is defined as boys and girls aged 6 to 14. Enrollment and average attendance figures are derived from data from public, private, and annexed schools.

In the early years of the 20th century, efforts to improve the image and surroundings of schools were undertaken in coordination with the municipality, which contributed to maintaining the good condition of the streets leading to the school buildings. For its part, the CNE systematized the work recommended and mandated by the Cuerpo Médico Escolar (CME, School Medical Corps), which had established compulsory vaccination and revaccination of students since the late 19th century. This practice, framed within the social control policies implemented by the national State through the use of the school infrastructure (Lionetti, 2009), offered a certain guarantee of health and hygiene for children, families and neighborhoods. The conditions of confinement and daily overcrowding not only posed a risk for the spread of disease and epidemics but also undermined the image of the school.

In 1906, the CNE established the Oficina de Obligación Escolar y Multas (Compulsory Schooling and Fines Office) to enforce the provisions set forth in Law No. 1420. Through its action, increasingly precise diagnoses were made regarding the causes that prevented children from attending school. Among the most frequently cited was “the extreme poverty or lack of resources among families with numerous children”, a factor which “together with illness, stands out among the reasons invoked and verified in applications for exemption from fines” (CNE 1913, p. 485-486). The director of the Office, Eduardo Guien, proposed a shift to this issue, suggesting that.

If practice has shown that what prevents a multitude of children from attending school is the poverty that afflicts their parents, it becomes evident that the solution does not lie in the imposition of fines, but, rather, in other means that could be described as charitable and protective of childhood. Each passing year confirms the view that compliance with compulsory school should be achieved through persuasion, along with material aid provided by the State (tuition, supplies, free books), and by private societies cooperating that support schools or protect children—such as La Copa de Leche (The Milk Cup program), shoes and clothes—; and only when this set of measures has failed or been exhausted should coercive measures be resorted to, and only when circumstances warrant it (CNE, 1913, p. 486).

Thus, school boards conducted campaigns and tours in their districts to engage with families, posted signs informing them about the compulsory

schooling requirement and the availability of nearby schools, and facilitated the issuance of free tuition and the provision of school supplies and clothing for children in need. Similarly, with the enactment of Law No. 5291 on Trabajo de Mujeres y Menores (Women's and Minors' Work) in 1907, school authorities were provided with new regulations and provisions. It should be noted that child labor had been a longstanding issue since the late 19th century, but it had not been widely questioned; on the contrary, "lazy" or "abandoned" children were encouraged to work, as their attendance at workshops was seen as a safeguard against idleness and begging. As Scheinkman (2022) has demonstrated, child labor was widespread and promoted by employers and working-class families who relied on their children's economic contribution to supplement household income. However, this legislation did not include domestic service, which became a significant demand for children employed as servants or maids (Allemandi, 2015). The delays in decision making, and the execution of measures that included severe prohibitions suggest a lack of conditions to ensure school enrollment of children who had left factories or other occupations.<sup>17</sup>

Relying on new regulatory frameworks and reinterpreting the legislation in light of experience, the CNE decided in 1910 to reduce the minimum compulsory instruction to the contents of the curriculum up to the 3rd grade: reading and writing, language, basic notions of national history and geography, and civic education. However, the decline in enrollment and attendance continued to be significant as the grade levels increased. By the end of the examined period in this article, improvements had been made, diagnoses had become more accurate and more resources were allocated for the universalization of common education in a city whose growth and social complexity persisted.

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<sup>17</sup> There were efforts to enroll children under the age of 14 in night schools, along with a 1902 bill introduced by Congressmen Cané and Avellaneda advocating for the regulation of child labor and the implementation of compulsory schooling.

## Conclusions

The emphasis on compulsory schooling as both a guiding principle and an instrument for the expansion of the primary education system positioned Buenos Aires among the cities with the highest literacy indicators, driven by improvements in enrollment and attendance—although, as we have seen, its implementation faced significant challenges.

One of the greatest obstacles to schooling in the Federal Capital at the end of the 19th century was fulfilling the correlating duty of compulsory education: ensuring that schools were within reach of all children. In line with the population-based criterion set by Law No. 1420, the CNE prioritized the creation and construction of schools in the context of national state-building and the urban boom of the capital city. Yet, this policy alone was insufficient to guarantee school attendance. Limited public resources restricted budget allocations, and the dynamic growth of Buenos Aires—with its highly mobile population—affected the number and distribution of school districts, posing challenges to effective school administration. Future studies might further investigate the unequal distribution of enrollment and attendance by analyzing school districts as units of observation.

Both certain achievements and persistent obstacles prompted the study, planning, and implementation of reforms aimed at both reinforcing the mechanisms of compulsory schooling and at softening its demands. It is worth noting the early 20th-century understanding of the issue, which allowed for approaches to enforcement to shift away from coercion and punishment toward persuasion and social assistance as strategies to improve compliance. The reduction of the *minimum* compulsory instruction to the curriculum of 3rd grade acknowledged the limits of state intervention—unable to counter the prevalence of child labor.

The qualitative and quantitative improvements in the conditions for schooling throughout the period were remarkable. However, the numerical growth of the child population and the instability of its inhabitants prevented the increase in enrollment and attendance from resulting in a decrease in the number of children excluded from primary school.

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