

**Task Force  
on Education  
Reform in  
Central America**

*Tomorrow is Too Late*



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# MISSION

The Task Force on Education Reform in Central America was created in early 1999 by the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL) with the goals of examining the state of education in the sub-region and making recommendations for improvement.

The Task Force is comprised of prominent leaders, entrepreneurs, educators, politicians, and other professionals from its member countries. In May 1999, they met in San Salvador, El Salvador to outline a plan of action. Inspired by the 1998 report by PREAL's International Task Force on Education, Equity, and Economic Competitiveness, *The Future at Stake*, they set out to draft a similar document that would identify the particular challenges faced by Central American educators.

The initial report was prepared by Central American consultants Humberto Belli (former minister of education of Nicaragua and a member of the Task Force) and Darlyn Meza (former vice-minister of education of El Salvador), both highly experienced in regional education issues. They visited each country of Central America to conduct interviews, review bibliographical sources, and gather statistics and other data on educational advances in the region. Their report was discussed and revised by Task Force members at their November 1999 meeting in Antigua, Guatemala with the assistance of PREAL technical staff.

This document is the result of that collaborative effort. It describes the current state of education and makes recommendations that constitute a point of departure for forming a national and regional consensus on education reform.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**T**his report is the result of the research, deliberations, and recommendations of the members of the Task Force on Education Reform in Central America. Its content is based on a review of various studies, regional statistical data, and interviews with ministry of education officials and prominent entrepreneurs and politicians along with specialists from non-governmental organizations and universities.

Many people contributed to the report through interviews and discussions. In addition to the members of the Task Force, we would like to thank Sandra Arauz, Gerardo Becerra, Juan Bosco Bernal, María Antonieta de Bográn, Miriam Castañeda, Rosa Elena Cerdas, Walfredo del Valle, Wende Duflon, Josefina Gamero, Alicia Gurdíán, Aurora Gurdíán, José Luis Guzmán, Joaquín Samayoa, and Tulio Tablada. Their work was invaluable in preparing this document.

This project was made possible by the strong support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), the GE Fund, and the Canadian International Development Research Center (IDRC). The continuous and flexible funding they provided to the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL) proved crucial in developing the information and institutional network needed for the project.

Everyone agrees that education is crucial to the progress of Central America and its people. Yet current efforts to improve education fall far short of what is needed. Educational development in Central America, Panama, and the Dominican Republic is behind that of South America, which itself trails world indices. More than a third of the population has no access to minimum levels of instruction, and most of those who do enjoy access receive very low quality education.

Reversing this situation will require exceptional effort and commitment. The future depends on our actions: we can either allow our countries to reap the benefits of the new century by opening the door to development, or we can face societies and economies that are increasingly fragile, unjust, and unstable.

The Task Force on Education Reform in Central America seeks to contribute to the reform effort by offering parents, governments, educators, business leaders, political leaders, international donor agencies, and civil society four key recommendations for improving education in the sub-region:

## RECOMMENDATION #1

**Transfer to parents, teachers, and communities a greater share of responsibility for managing educational systems and administering schools.**

Changing and improving education in the region will require drastically different management strategies to ensure school effectiveness, efficiency, and development. Turning schools into autonomous organizations imbued with their own culture, vision, and sense of mission is essential for the successful management of resources and the improvement of academic achievement.

Central America, Panama, and the Dominican Republic are teeming with promising innovations in school autonomy. Their achievements need to be consolidated and replicated. Recent experience demonstrates that educational communities are capable of substantial progress if the management of human and material resources is transferred to the schools themselves.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

**Increase public investment in education to a minimum of five percent of GDP and allocate the new funds to primary and secondary education.**

In order to improve education significantly, most countries should dramatically increase their investments at the primary and secondary levels. In at least five countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras—current levels of public investment are grossly inadequate and fall well below those of other parts of Latin America. Leaders in government, politics, and the private sector need to explore and adopt realistic but bold means of increasing funding.

### RECOMMENDATION #3

**Revitalize the teaching profession by linking salaries to job performance, improving pre-service training, and promoting more and better in-service training programs.**

Current salary and incentive structures value seniority and academic credentials over performance, making it difficult for schools to retain and reward good teachers as well as to replace those who perform poorly. Wage increases are important, but they must be accompanied by legal reforms that link them to job performance and student achievement.

### RECOMMENDATION #4

**Establish a common system of educational standards and performance assessment, and disseminate findings widely.**

Countries should establish well-defined, broadly discussed educational standards. They should implement systematic tests of academic achievement and establish benchmarks to evaluate the impact of reforms. Standards and test results should be disseminated to parents and society in a simple, transparent manner. Governments should establish a regional, independently administered system of academic achievement tests that allows comparisons across countries. All countries should participate in global testing programs, such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) or the Latin American Laboratory for the Evaluation of Education Quality sponsored by the UNESCO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC).

# EDUCATION CANNOT WAIT

Quality education promotes the development of human potential and helps individuals become productive members of society. Education gives individuals the ability to enrich and improve their environment and to collaborate peacefully and responsibly with others. Education reduces mortality and morbidity rates, increases adaptability, and contributes to better decision-making. Democratic stability increases as levels of education rise.

At the dawn of a new century, few issues generate greater consensus than the belief that education is the most important determinant of development. Human resources—the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of a country's people—have become increasingly important. Some studies conclude that up to 40 percent of the growth differential between East Asia and Latin America can be attributed to education—especially to high quality primary education.

No country has achieved significant economic progress without expanding education coverage and improving quality. Nearly all of the fast-growing economies of East Asia had achieved universal enrollment in primary education by 1965. They subsequently improved quality by establishing high standards and by steadily increasing investments per student.

Open economies, globalization, and the rise of technology have spurred demand for workers who are skilled in math and science and can adapt to changing situations. Costa Rica's primary source of income has become the manufacture of computer chips and high-technology products principally because its labor force is skilled in English and math. This success is no accident. For the past two decades, Costa Rica has had Central America's highest level of investment in education thus putting itself in a unique position to benefit from the opportunities created by the growth of the technology industry.

Good education is also a decisive factor in the quest for equity and the eradication of poverty. A lack of education virtually condemns individuals to a life of misery. Good education, on the other hand, is the best formula for improving wellbeing and social mobility.

## II. WE ARE FALLING BEHIND

At a time when education is widely acknowledged as the most decisive factor for national progress, indicators for Central America, Panama, and the Dominican Republic compare poorly with the rest of Latin America—and even worse with high-growth countries elsewhere. This places the sub-region at a great disadvantage despite considerable progress over the past 30 years and particularly over the past decade.

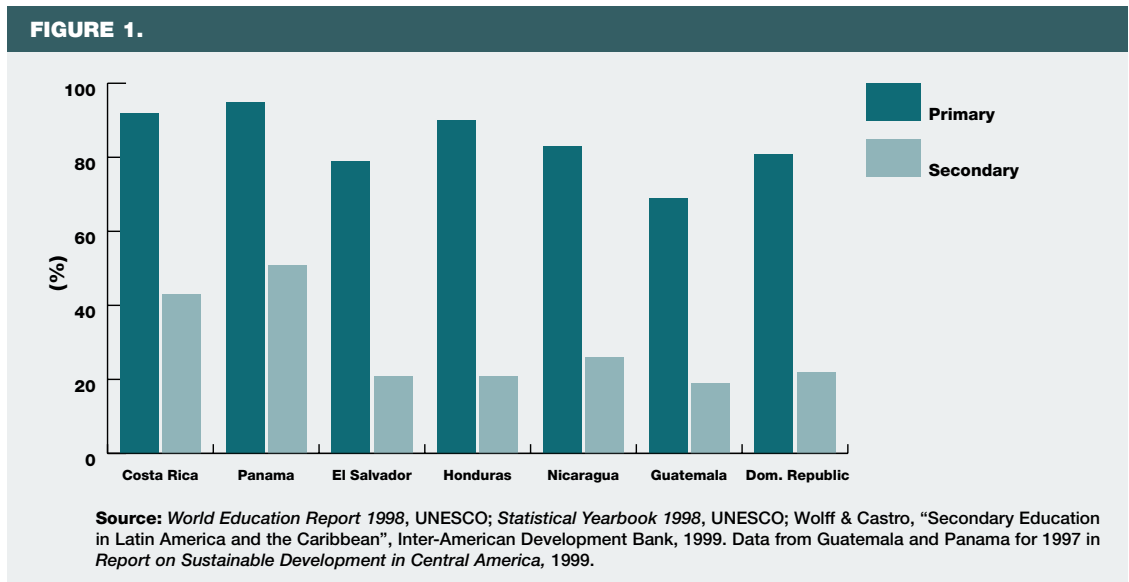
Most Central American countries have yet to achieve universal elementary education. Save in Panama and Costa Rica, illiteracy rates remain high and stand as a fundamental symptom of educational underdevelopment. (Table 1).

### COVERAGE

Coverage at the primary level is inadequate and varies greatly from country to country. Only three of seven countries have enrollment rates above 90 percent. For the other four, rates range between 69 and 83 percent. Secondary education fares no better. Panama's enrollment barely exceeds 50 percent, followed by Costa Rica with 43 percent; elsewhere, rates stand between 19 and 26 percent. Clearly, much remains to be done, and a significant investment in infrastructure must be made.

(Figure 1).

Primary and Secondary Net Enrollment Rates by Country, 1995

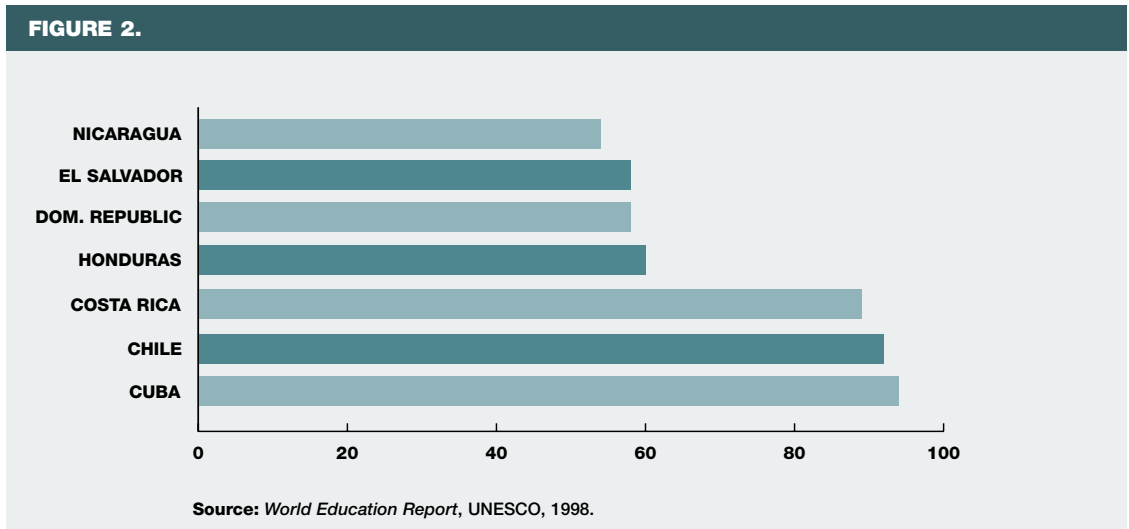


**TABLE 1.**  
Illiteracy Rates among Population 15 years or Older, 1970 and 1997

	1970	1997
Costa Rica	12.0	4.8
Panama	19.0	8.9
Dom. Republic	33.0	17.4
El Salvador	43.0	23.0
Honduras	45.0	29.3
Guatemala	56.0	33.4
Nicaragua	m	36.6

**Sources:** 1970: Human Development Report 1994, UNDP. 1997: Human Development Report 1999, UNDP.

Percent Cohort  
Reaching Fifth Grade, 1994



Available data also indicate that the sub-region lags behind others in completion of primary studies. In Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras, fewer than 60 percent of children who start school reach the fifth grade. This directly affects students' ability to perform creatively and competitively in modern societies. Only Costa Rica performs comparably to the most educationally advanced countries of Latin America (i.e., Cuba and Chile). (Figure 2).

Not only do few Central American children ever reach the fifth grade—and even fewer complete primary education—but the time it takes them to do so far exceeds the norm. In four of the region's countries, it takes an average of ten years to complete six years of schooling.<sup>1</sup> Statistics in rural areas are even worse.

## QUALITY

Indicators of educational quality paint a similarly disturbing picture. Many business, political, and civil society leaders are dissatisfied with the quality of primary and secondary school graduates, and a number of educators agree.

These perceptions are confirmed by recent national test scores that indicate an average level of student achievement in Central America well below the expectations of those who designed the tests and of those who seek to compete successfully in the global economy. These tests also show that achievement levels vary greatly among students and that too many students from disadvantaged groups test particularly low.

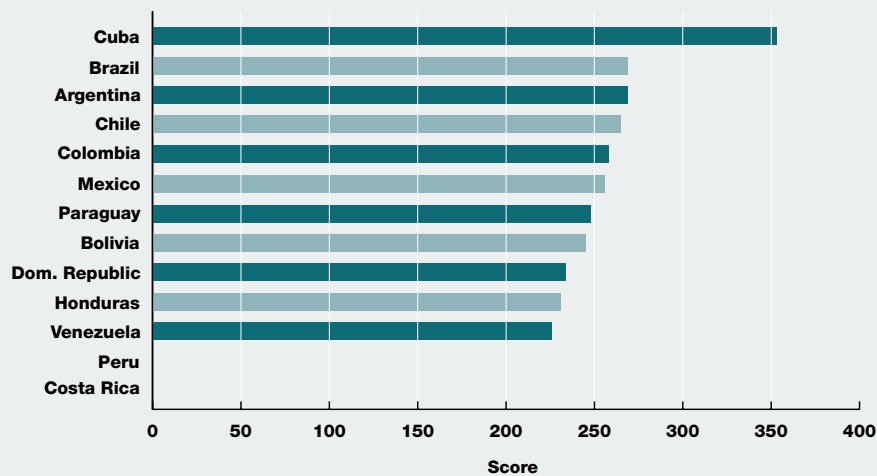
<sup>1</sup> IADB, Primary and Secondary Education Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1999.

For example, the results of a recent UNESCO/OREALC test suggest that students from Honduras and the Dominican Republic lag substantially behind the rest of Latin America. **(Figure 3)**. These two countries should be commended, however, for participating in the test and allowing the results to be published.

### EQUITY

Deficiencies in access and quality strike hardest at the poor, who spend less time in school and are offered a lower-quality education. Educational inequities become quite apparent when schooling rates for disadvantaged and higher-income groups are compared. **(Figure 4)**.

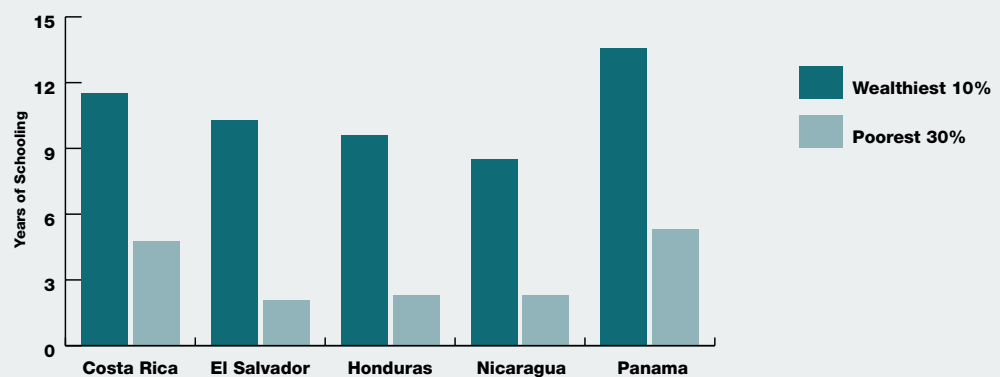
**FIGURE 3.**



**Note:** Peru and Costa Rica declined to authorize publication of test scores.

**Source:** First International Comparative Study by the Latin American Laboratory for the Evaluation of Education Quality, UNESCO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC).

**FIGURE 4.**

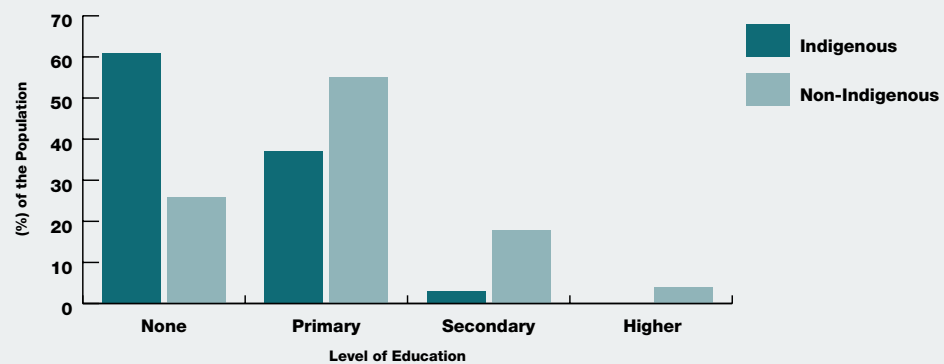


**Source:** *Economic and Social Progress 1998-99*, Inter-American Development Bank, Appendix, Table 1.2.III, Education. Based on household surveys conducted between 1994 and 1996.

Inequality is particularly concentrated among indigenous communities, which account for 23 percent of Central America's population and which face serious limitations in terms of access to education. Existing information, while dated, reflects a situation that has not improved significantly over time. The graph below illustrates the situation in Guatemala, which has the region's largest indigenous population. (Figure 5).

Guatemala: Education Completed by Ethnic Origin, 1989

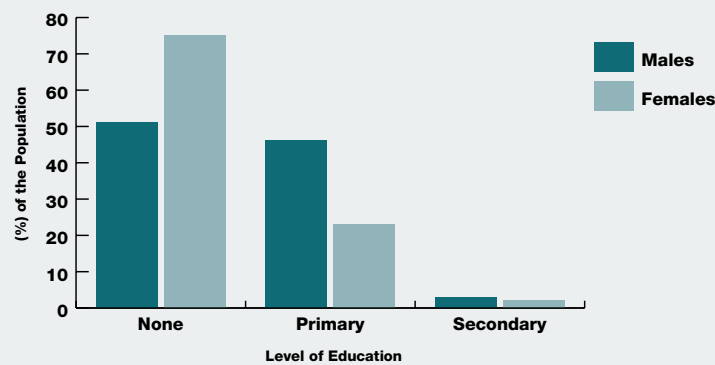
**FIGURE 5.**



Source: Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, "Native Populations and Poverty in Latin America." World Bank, 1998.

These inequalities are compounded by gender differences. Half of indigenous men had no education in 1989, compared with three quarters of indigenous women. Likewise, while nearly 50 percent of indigenous men have some primary education, the same is true for only one third of indigenous women. (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6.**



Source: Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, "Native Populations and Poverty in Latin America". World Bank, 1998.

Inequalities also show up in public spending on education since funds tend to be poorly allocated within education systems. Substantial resources are allocated to higher levels of education while coverage and quality of primary and secondary education remain low. (Table 2). Since higher education serves the middle and upper sectors of the population in particular, this pattern of spending discriminates against the poor. It is worth noting that no data are available for Nicaragua, which has traditionally provided generous public funding for higher education.

**TABLE 2.**  
**Public Spending Per Student: Higher vs. Primary and Secondary Education, 1997**

	Ratio
Spain	0.9
El Salvador	1.2
Canada	1.6
Chile	1.9
Dom. Republic	2.0
Mexico	3.4
Costa Rica	3.5
Panama	3.5
Honduras	5.0
Guatemala	5.4
Nicaragua	m

Source: Sancho A., "Spending on Education in the Americas and Spain". PREAL, 2000. Unpublished.

# III. DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

Understanding the causes of educational deficiencies and challenges in Central America, Panama, and the Dominican Republic requires some context. The region is noted for sharp contrasts, complex historical and cultural idiosyncrasies, and widespread poverty. Two Central American countries lead Latin America in education while four rank at the bottom. Along with rich ethnic diversity—including indigenous, Afro-Caribbean, Asian, mestizo, and European populations—the region harbors great disparities in culture and income. Three countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua—have endured bloody civil wars and complex peace-building processes. More recently, the whole region has begun to move toward institutional and economic integration.

In this context, education issues are defined by four key problems:

- Education is managed by centralized, bureaucratic, and frequently politicized government institutions that absorb significant resources and often slow down much needed innovation and reform;
- Investment in education is inadequate and unequal. While this is due in part to widespread poverty, it also reflects a lack of serious national commitment to making education a high priority and to making it more accessible to the poor. The result is inefficient management and low coverage for indigenous populations and the rural poor;
- The teaching profession has deteriorated, in part because of wage schemes that fail to take performance into account; and
- Educational standards have not been put into place and assessment systems have not been consolidated, thus limiting efforts to assess quality, performance, and the real impact of policies.

## 1. INEFFICIENT MANAGEMENT AND TOO LITTLE POWER IN THE HANDS OF PARENTS, PRINCIPALS, AND TEACHERS

The traditional model of educational management is more a part of the problem than part of the solution. This is evident in several areas:

(i) Management has generally been in the hands of governments that behave in a centralized, bureaucratic, and politicized manner. Most education ministries build and equip schools, establish personnel policies, hire (but seldom fire) teachers, select textbooks, establish curriculum, develop tests, and decide on other academic and administrative matters. The views and needs of those who direct and manage the schools locally—and particularly those of parents—are seldom taken into consideration.

(ii) Education ministries tend to be amorphous institutions overloaded with responsibilities. Despite relatively large staffs and budgets, the ministries' performance falls well below the standards of any private corporation. One manifestation of this inefficiency is the high number of non-teaching staff on the payroll of most ministries. A survey of ministries showed, in the worst case, a ratio of six technical-administrative employees to every teacher and, in the best case, a ratio of one to one. Ministers frequently change and are appointed based on political rather than professional criteria. The public servants with the longest running careers tend to be teachers, who are relatively poorly paid, often lack the specific training needed to stay current in their profession, and are rarely promoted or dismissed on the basis of performance.

(iii) Schools, the institutions that provide services directly to the community, normally lack the autonomy to make staffing decisions or judge how best to use resources and budgets. The responsibility and authority of school principals are similarly constrained.

(iv) Parents and other education consumers are notoriously excluded. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the natural right of parents to participate in their children's education, parents often do not know what they should demand or expect from the system.

(v) Supervision, which tends to involve a large number of people, is mostly a formality. In order for supervision to be effective, standards, instruments to measure performance, and a system of incentives linked to performance are required. They do not exist. An additional problem is that supervisors, who are often also teachers, are reluctant to report failings because of a misguided sense of solidarity.

(vi) The vagaries of national politics lead to frequent changes in authority and senior leadership. Since education reform requires time and stability in order to be effective, these changes can hamper or even cripple reform initiatives.

In short, politicized state institutions, the absence of parameters for measuring personal and institutional performance, the lack of accountability to the local community, ineffective supervision, and inconsistent policy application make the effective implementation of educational policies and reform very difficult.

The late 20th century is noted for the significant strides made in terms of democratic governance and the market economy and for the increased role of the individual in both of these systems. These changes have led to several consequences, including:

- decentralization of public activities and services;
- transfer of public companies and services to the private sector;
- elimination of government and private monopolies and strong encouragement of competition; and
- greater opportunity for those who use services to choose from a range of options.

Despite these trends, educational systems continue to be state monopolies subject to the hierarchies and clientelism of old.

Some countries have managed to break away from this pattern by introducing innovative programs that transfer a sizable share of decision-making power to school boards composed of teachers, school authorities, and parents. **(Box 1)**.

However, except for Nicaragua, which has broadly extended school autonomy, most programs of decentralization continue to be restricted to areas where schools did not previously exist.

**BOX 1.**  
**School Autonomy and Community-Based Education Management Programs in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala**

**SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN NICARAGUA**

The school autonomy effort that started in Nicaragua in 1993 may well be the most radical decentralization plan ever tried in the region. The scheme is particularly notable in that it gave broad decision-making powers to school boards with parent participation and that it was implemented throughout most of the school system in a relatively short time. Over 80 percent of secondary students and close to 50 percent of primary students are now enrolled in autonomous schools. Boards are responsible for making staffing decisions, hiring school principals, choosing textbooks, and managing budgets. Funding comes primarily from monthly government transfers based on enrollment. Such demand-based financing has led teachers to encourage students to stay in school and has resulted in dropout rates that are much lower than those for non-autonomous schools, including private schools.

**COMMUNITY-MANAGED SCHOOLS IN EL SALVADOR AND GUATEMALA**

**El Salvador: Education with Community Participation (EDUCO)**

Transferring school administration to the community, especially to parents, is the most important accomplishment of the 1990s in Central America. These programs have allowed countries to increase rural coverage, especially at the preschool and elementary levels. Phased in since 1991, EDUCO schools are administered by rural parents' associations that receive government funding for teacher salaries and school operation. EDUCO schools currently have an enrollment of over 200,000 students which, on a national level, constitutes 52.7 percent of pre-schoolers, 24 percent of first graders, 16 percent of second graders, and 11 percent of third graders.

**Guatemala: National Autonomy Program for Educational Development (PRONADE)**

This program is a government initiative designed to improve access to education for the one third of Guatemalan children not attending primary school. Started in 1993, it seeks to increase coverage and improve the quality of education in rural areas during the first three years of primary school. It also works to encourage decentralized, participatory administration of schools in order to make more efficient use of resources. Funds are given with few restrictions to legally organized communities in charge of local schools, thus encouraging and promoting autonomy among communities. Management is through Educational Autonomy Committees (COEDUCA) and Educational Service Institutions (ISE). PRONADE schools are located in poor rural areas, and 80 percent of those enrolled are from predominantly indigenous communities. Current enrollment stands at 42,000 preschool and 237,000 elementary school students.

## 2. INSUFFICIENT INVESTMENT IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Central America is under-investing in its children. The share of GDP allocated to education in most of the region is well below levels of investment in industrialized countries. More seriously, there was no clear trend toward increased investments in education between 1980 and 1997. (Table 3).

**TABLE 3.**  
**Public Spending on Education as Percent of GNP**

Regions	1980	1995
OECD	5.2	5.1
Sub-saharan Africa	5.1	5.6
Latin America & Caribbean	3.8	4.5
East Asia/Oceania	2.8	3.0
Southeast Asia	4.1	4.3
Countries	1980	1997
Costa Rica	7.8	5.4
Panama	4.9	5.1
Honduras*	3.2	3.6
Nicaragua	3.4	3.9
El Salvador	3.9	2.5
Dominican Republic	2.2	2.3
Guatemala	1.9	1.7

\*1995.

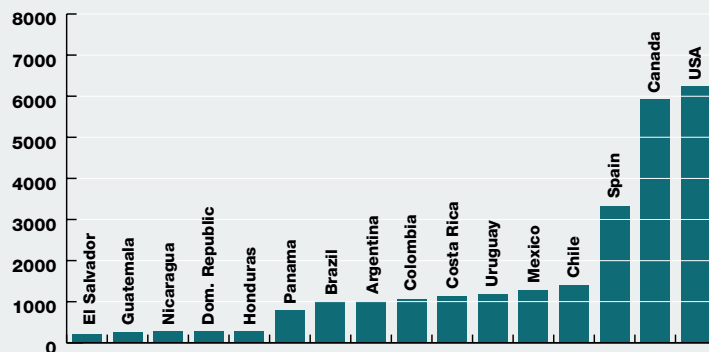
Source: *World Education Report 1998*, UNESCO and *World Development Indicators 2000*, World Bank.

Central American governments invest less per student in primary and secondary education than do governments in South America, even after adjusting for differences in the cost of living. (Figure 7). Only Panama and Costa Rica compare with levels of investment among countries in South America. This gap is particularly serious since South American levels are themselves quite low. Chile—the South American country that invests the most per student—allocates just half as much as does Spain and less than a quarter of what the US and Canada allocate.

To be sure, increased spending does not guarantee better education, particularly if not accompanied by far-reaching reforms. But the gap between Central America and the rest of Latin America is great enough to argue convincingly for an increase in order to reach at least minimum levels of investment.

Public Spending Per Student in Primary and Secondary Education (\$PPP), 1997

**FIGURE 7.**



**Source:** Sancho A., "Spending on Education in the Americas and Spain", PREAL, 2000. Unpublished.  
**Note:** Figures in US dollars corrected for purchasing power parity (\$PPP).

### 3. DETERIORATION OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION

There is a generalized perception in the region that teacher quality has deteriorated and that teacher absenteeism is a serious and growing problem. Many remember with nostalgia a time when public schools offered quality education and discipline, and teachers were highly respected members of the community.

The issue is complex. The economic and social crises that swept most countries with varying degrees of virulence during the '80's led a significant number of teachers—often the most qualified—to shift to other occupations or even to other countries.

The expansion of primary school enrollments created a demand for large numbers of new teachers, many of whom began work without basic teacher training. In some countries the number of self-taught teachers approaches 30 percent.

In addition, the new teachers were more likely to come from social and family backgrounds where the attitudes and values associated with efficiency and modernity were less firmly rooted.

One of the factors most relevant to the deterioration of the teaching profession is salary level, though opinions regarding the nature of the impact vary. Some studies have found that, once certain advantages enjoyed by teachers have been taken into account, salaries are not so low. Compared with other workers with similar backgrounds, teachers tend to work fewer hours per week, have more vacation time, enjoy greater job security (in some countries, public school teachers are almost tenured), and have steadier salaries.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it is not clear whether salaries are sufficiently high to attract and maintain teachers of the quality necessary to produce well-educated children.

<sup>2</sup> X. Liang, "Teacher Pay in 12 Latin American Countries" LCSHD, World Bank, 1999.

But there are other important factors, including distortions in salary structure and composition as well as the absence of an appropriate system of incentives. Teachers in the public system receive the same salary every month regardless of their punctuality, absenteeism, or how much their students learn. Largely because of union pressure, their salaries depend chiefly on seniority. Most existing labor legislation makes it virtually impossible—or at least extremely difficult—to dismiss a teacher. The strength and activism of some unions make school authorities very cautious in their efforts to institute necessary reforms.

Teacher training centers also bear some responsibility. Many continue to use obsolete methods that emphasize theory over practice. Too many instructors simply relay material by dictating from texts or notes and expect student-teachers to learn by rote. This method does not train teachers to imbue students with the curiosity needed for individual learning. In-service training mechanisms, when available, have little to do with the weaknesses and needs of schools, provide no incentives to apply what has been learned, and are rarely available to teachers in isolated rural areas.

#### 4. INADEQUATE SYSTEMS OF STANDARDS AND EVALUATION

Neither regional nor national standards have been implemented in the sub-region. Nor does there exist a permanent, well-institutionalized mechanism for measuring student performance. None of the countries have established national standards that serve as a benchmark for developing curricula and designing teaching materials. There is little awareness of the role that standards play or their utility in modern approaches to pedagogy.

Assessment systems do not permit monitoring of student performance over time or link results to causal factors. Their objectives, emphases, and procedures are rarely discussed with or understood by those who use them.

Despite this negative appraisal, the recent initiative by the Central American Cultural and Educational Coordination (CECC) to formulate an initial set of national and regional standards for primary education in mathematics, science, and language is an important step in the right direction. It is the only undertaking of its kind in Latin America.

It is also important to note that over the past five years nearly all Central American countries have made an effort to measure academic performance, some with funding support from international donor agencies. Nicaragua and El Salvador have undertaken testing programs, and Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Panama, and Costa Rica have conducted large-scale tests (covering all or a sample) of students in various grades on a variety of academic subjects. **(Table 4).** Most of these countries have now decided to set up regular systems of performance assessment.

**TABLE 4.**  
**Student Assessment Systems**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Year of Initiation</b>	<b>Subjects Evaluated</b>	<b>Grades</b>	<b>Scope</b>
Costa Rica	1986-88	Language, Mathematics	3, 6, 9 End of Secondary	Sample
Dom. Republic	1991	Language, Mathematics, Natural and Social Sciences	4, 8 Basic Education	Universal
El Salvador	1993	Language, Mathematics, Social Sciences, Health, Environment	1 – 6	Sample
Guatemala	1997	Language, Mathematics	3, 6	Sample
Honduras	1997	Language, Mathematics	3, 6	Sample
Nicaragua	1997	Language, Mathematics	4 (Primary), 3 (Secondary), 2, 4, 6, 9, 12	Sample
Panamá	1997	Language, Mathematics, Natural and Social Sciences	3, 6 (Primary), 3, 6 (Secondary)	Universal

**Source:** Rojas and Esquivel, 1998. Updated in conversation with authors.

Yet in almost every case there is no clear policy dictating how evaluation results can and should be used. Tests of academic achievement have not yet become a part of the accountability policies that are being demanded by various groups. There has been no discussion of the type of decisions that might be based on these results, and there is little consensus on the intrinsic value of assessing student performance. As a result, these programs are especially vulnerable to changes in government and even in senior ministry personnel.

## 5. PROGRESS OF EDUCATION REFORM IN CENTRAL AMERICA, PANAMA, AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Despite these problems, Central America, Panama and the Dominican Republic have made important efforts recently to promote education reform. Unfortunately, not all have had the strength, consistency, and persistence necessary to produce concrete and lasting results. The table below summarizes progress in each country. (Table 5).

**TABLE 5.**  
**The State of Education Reform by Leading Indicators and Country**

	El Salvador	Costa Rica	Guatemala	Honduras	Panama	Dominican Republic	Nicaragua
<b>Proposal for National Reform</b>							
Consultation Process	3	2	3	2	2	3	2
Ten-Year Plan	3	2	1	1	2	3	1
Reform of All Levels of Education	2	2	1	1	2	3	1
<b>Administrative/Management Measures</b>							
Reform of Legal Framework	2	2	2	1	2	2	1
Information Systems	1	2	2	1	1	2	2
Supervisory System Adjustment	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Decentralization and Community Participation</b>							
Regional/Departmental							
Decentralization	3	2	2	2	2	2	2
Parent-Run Schools	3	0	3	2	0	0	3
Transfer of Resources to Schools	3	2	3	0	2	1	3
<b>Curricular Reform</b>							
Textbook Development/							
Distribution	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Curriculum Modernization	3	2	3	1	3	3	3
Reform of Teacher Training							
Systems	2	1	1	1	2	2	1
Innovative Training Models	1	1	1	2	2	2	1
New Curriculum Standards	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Standard Achievement Tests	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Computerization	1	3	2	1	2	3	1

**0 = Undefined    1 = Planned    2 = Initial Stage    3 = Advanced Stage**

**Source:** Interviews collected through interviews with ministry personnel and education professionals in the respective countries. Own elaboration.

# IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

## RECOMMENDATION #1

### **Transfer to parents, teachers, and communities a greater share of responsibility for managing educational systems and administering schools**

Profound changes in educational management are needed. Better policies and increased investment will bear fruit only if accompanied by efficient implementation mechanisms. Otherwise, the best-intended efforts will flounder and the education gap will not be closed.

The traditional model that casts the state in the role of nearly exclusive and absolute manager and administrator of education should give way to a new model that places the school and the community at the center of decision-making.

Schools need management that is vigorous, dynamic, and autonomous. This means strengthening the role of principals, training them appropriately, and transferring significant management and administrative power to schools. Funding should be based on the number of students enrolled. Groups running schools should have the power to hire and fire teachers. Schools should be held accountable to the communities they serve and to society in general for the resources they use and the results they produce.

Education ministries should identify those functions that they themselves will continue to perform directly as well as those that can be more efficiently performed by other institutions or by the private sector. While some functions may remain centralized, others may be performed more successfully at the local level and many more may be delegated to private or other non-government

organizations. These include curriculum planning, training of teachers, administrators, and technical personnel, school management, outcome evaluation, and technical education. Under this model, ministries would become lean organizations built around small teams of professional, well-paid staff.

In some cases, national education councils that bring together representatives from government, civil society, and business may be very important. **(Boxes 2 & 3)**. These education councils could play a major role in shaping educational policy and reform and in forging consensus on them. They should be designed for relatively fast and streamlined decision-making.

Special attention should be paid to improving systems of educational statistics and indicators, along with systems to assess student and school performance. The performance of ministries and other government agencies should be independently reviewed on a regular basis.

**BOX 2.**  
**Business Leaders in Support of Elementary Schools and Education Reform in the Dominican Republic**

EDUCA, founded in 1990, is a non-profit organization bringing together 200 prominent business and professional leaders. It seeks to improve the availability and quality of elementary education and to ensure implementation of education reform. EDUCA promotes participation by all social sectors in the education process, follows up on the national education agenda, and implements experiences that can be replicated or expanded upon.

EDUCA works toward four specific goals:

- Educating the public on the importance of elementary education;
- Promoting education reform and participating in the drafting of the Ten-Year Plan for Education;
- Providing services to low-income Santo Domingo schools; and
- Promoting parent, community, and business participation in schools.

One of EDUCA's leading achievements is the inclusion of business and other sectors of civil society in seeking new solutions for problems in education and in implementing education reform.

**BOX 3.**  
**School Education Councils (CDEs) in El Salvador**

The creation of 2,387 School Education Councils (CDEs) in 1997 spearheaded a nationwide effort to encourage participatory and democratic management of schools, thus effectively decentralizing educational services formerly provided by the ministry of education.

This is an effort by central authorities to transfer responsibilities to the community so as to resolve severe public school management issues. The model is based on the rural school management system used in the Program for Education with Community Participation (EDUCO).

However, in contrast to EDUCO's parent-based Community School Associations, CDEs are designed to manage government resources more efficiently by involving school principals, teachers, students, and parents in school-based organizations.

Specifically, CDE tasks include:

- Identifying school needs;
- Prioritizing those needs;
- Allocating and managing funds;
- Approving the annual school plan; and
- Approving the school budget.

## RECOMMENDATION #2

**Increase public investment in education to a minimum of five percent of GDP and allocate the new funds to primary and secondary education.**

Ensuring quality education for all will require investments significantly above traditional levels. Better management is important, but not enough. It is also important to encourage community participation in funding education—without jeopardizing the right of economically disadvantaged groups to free education—so that families can complement public funds. Spending should rise to OECD levels, with an additional amount allocated to make elementary education universal.

Targeting the poorest sectors and fairly apportioning the budget throughout levels of the education system is crucial. Subsidies should be commensurate with the means of intended beneficiaries.

In all cases, it is important to estimate the cost of proposed increases and to analyze alternative strategies for financing them. This implies setting quantifiable goals and specific timeframes. The practice—now widespread—of announcing goals and priorities that only exist on paper should be avoided. Establishing quantifiable goals based on a thorough review of the necessary investment is a healthy way of alerting government and civil society to the magnitude of the effort required.

In particular, special attention should be given to reallocating public resources already available and establishing fiscal incentives such as tax deductions for companies and individuals that contribute to education.

## RECOMMENDATION #3

**Revitalize the teaching profession by linking salaries to job performance, improving pre-service training, and promoting more and better in-service training programs.**

Revitalizing the teaching profession should become a top priority. Doing so will require amending labor legislation to incorporate a system of incentives that promotes accountability in performance, the use of resources, and student achievement. Salary increases should be linked to the achievement of established objectives. Local boards or groups composed of teachers, community leaders, and parents should be empowered to make the decisions on awarding these incentives.

This process can begin at the earliest stages of training with the best student teachers, or those in high-demand specialties, being awarded better entry-level salaries.

New labor policies should be complemented by an equally thorough revision of the teacher training curriculum. New teachers should learn to teach students how to learn rather than following the old model of teaching how to memorize. School principals should receive appropriate management training. In-service training should be revised with equal rigor and should take into consideration the potential of new technologies. **(Box 4).**

**BOX 4.**  
**In-Service Training Program for Primary-School Teachers in the Dominican Republic**

This program is a component of the Project for the Development of Primary Education (PRODEP). It aims to provide training for all teachers, to increase enrollment, and to reduce grade repetition and dropout rates.

The nationwide initiative has trained over 10,000 teachers during the two training periods completed to date. National universities, centers for advanced learning, and teacher training schools were contracted to implement the program. Teachers are trained using total immersion during the first month, followed by a 14-month program in which they teach during the week and attend training sessions on Saturdays.

The program and materials were designed by participating teacher training schools, universities, and education secretariat specialists. The World Bank provided funds, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) also gave support. The initiative became the most important component of the PRODEP program in terms of resource allocation (42 percent of funding to October 1994).

Recent studies (SEEC, 1996) have shown that the program achieved its initial objective of improving teacher skills and helped develop new attitudes and behavior within the teaching profession. Teachers significantly improved their performance, as shown on a test based on the materials covered in elementary school. Especially significant was the progress made by teachers with the weakest skills, which indicates that the program has indeed served those who had the greatest need.

#### RECOMMENDATION #4

**Establish a common system of educational standards and performance assessment, and disseminate findings widely.**

Countries should establish clear educational standards, institute systematic national testing, and evaluate the impact of educational policies. Measuring student academic achievement will provide important data for assessing performance at both teacher and administrative levels. **(Box 5).**

National standards should reflect what students should know at the end of each grade and, to the extent possible, the fundamental attitudes and values they should demonstrate in learning. Parents should be made aware of the standards—using simple and clear language—so they know what to

expect (and demand) from their child's school. It is extremely important to involve a broad cross-section of society in the formulation and regular updating of standards.

For reasons of scale and resources, common standards should be established for the whole of Central America. Doing so would facilitate comparison of results and be an appropriate complement to current regional integration efforts.

Countries should establish clear and shared objectives for their assessment systems, including

their role in promoting greater accountability for results. Only after these policies have been established can decisions be made on which kinds of tests, analysis, and dissemination are most appropriate.

Countries should establish a regional, independently administered system of achievement tests that facilitates comparison among countries and should then widely disseminate the results. Equally important, they should participate in international tests such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Latin American Laboratory for the Assessment of Educational Quality.

#### **BOX 5.** **Systems for Measuring Student Achievement in Costa Rica**

Costa Rica has established a program that evaluates several different variables including the role of assessment, the institutions involved in system development and administration, and the significance of assessment within the larger education system. The program has focused on many different areas since its implementation in 1986.

The current assessment system includes two key components:

- (a)** Placement examinations that test knowledge or analytical skills (third and sixth grades), preliminary screening (entry to first grade), cognitive problem-solving skills (ninth grade), physical aptitude; and
- (b)** Comprehensive examinations given at the conclusion of General Elementary Education and High School, the completion of Cycle II of General Elementary Education, and as a follow-up to open education.

Responsibility for test design and validation lies with the Research Institute for the Improvement of Costa Rican Education (IIMEC) at the Catholic University of Costa Rica as well as with regional authorities and the Quality Control Division of the Ministry of Public Education. In May 1997, the ministry established the National Center for the Evaluation of Education (CENE-EDU) under the Superior Council of Education. This Center assumed all responsibility for assessment projects that until that time had been overseen by IIMEC.

Schools are used as sample units in national assessments. Samples are sorted by relevant variables (type and size of institutions and geographical region).

## **NOW IS THE TIME TO ACT**

**Q**uality education is necessary if we are to take full and creative advantage of the future. The dynamics of globalization leave no room for postponing or foot-dragging. We face a situation akin to that in "Alice in Wonderland" in which one must walk just to avoid losing ground and run in order to move forward. If we are to progress, we must break free of deeply rooted lethargy and resistance.

Ministries of education are often more part of the problem than part of the solution. Government employees fear they will lose power and influence. Unions, concerned with job security and salaries that are not linked to performance, tend to block significant changes in the prevailing system.

Universities have remained at the margins of education reform. When not totally ignoring reform proposals, they often oppose them while showing a remarkable inability to generate new policy ideas. Finally, parents have left the sensitive and fundamental issue of their children's education in the hands of a bureaucracy that fails to consult them.

Any hope for education reform depends on mobilizing civil society to exert the pressure required to bring about change in the shortest possible time. The Task Force calls upon all sectors of society to contribute to a reform movement that will determine the future of their nations.

## **TO POLITICAL LEADERS**

Education reform and improvement are the most crucial challenges we face as we begin a new century. You must build a new consensus around increasing investment in education and overcoming the obstacles to a fundamental overhaul of the

education system. You must act in statesmanlike fashion, setting aside partisan interests, to make education a national policy objective.

## **TO EDUCATION AUTHORITIES AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS**

You have a vital contribution to make in modernizing education management and strengthening the state's role as the guarantor of equity and the protector of the right of disadvantaged groups to education. Reform will provide fresh resources for education and strengthen the role of the state by focusing efforts on key issues and norms. Transferring responsibility to parents and other non-government sectors will significantly enhance your efforts to provide good education. Local communities can be great sources of material and human resources, undertaking supervisory and administrative tasks while helping resolve many of the issues traditionally left to ministries.

## **TO THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

Business leaders are most keenly aware of how the quality of education affects productivity and competitiveness. It is therefore important that you marshal your resources and influence in favor of reform and that you urge governments to delegate educational and administrative tasks that can be more efficiently handled by private institutions. Private sector involvement in national education councils or other participatory bodies is very important. You should insist on a greater role in drafting educational legislation and policy and in selecting senior education personnel.

## **TO PARENTS**

As parents, you have the principal responsibility for your children's education. You are entitled to influence decisions made on the quality and type of education your children receive. Until now, your concerns have seldom been taken into account. You can participate in school boards and petition local authorities and politicians for your right to “voice and vote” in managing schools. You should support the efforts of teachers and insist that schools provide information on their goals and on your children's performance.

## **TO SCHOOL TEACHERS**

You should participate directly in reform by supporting a new educational model that grants teachers and parents a decisive role in school affairs. Your support and effort are crucial in doing away with low-wage compensation schemes that fail to take performance into account in favor of a system that rewards effort and academic excellence. It is equally important that you realize and fulfill your position as role model for students and that you continually update your own skills through regular training and education.

## **TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND FUNDERS**

As key actors in providing technical assistance and funding, you have a special opportunity to help implement new models of education management. On the one hand, you can assist education ministries in the expanded capacity they will need for their new roles. Similarly, you can ensure that non-governmental organizations—research centers, consulting firms, and universities—assume a greater share of education-related functions and responsibilities. You can help ascertain the costs of education reform, develop consensus around concrete approaches, and confirm that strategies stem from—and closely match—the interests of beneficiaries. You can also aid in the effort to implement and consolidate regional systems of standards, performance assessment, and progress monitoring and help generate education statistics and indicators that are reliable and relevant.

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PREAL seeks to promote an informed regional dialogue on education policy, make education reform a priority in the regional agenda, create an environment for consensus, and publicize successful experiences in education.

PREAL associated research and policy centers exist throughout the region. Centers conduct research, organize debates, and promote a public dialogue on education policy and reform.

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