

# LEARNING FOR ALL:

## An Urgent Challenge in Latin America

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### Introduction

In the last 15 years, education in Latin America has experienced mixed progress. On the one hand, the region has made important achievements with regard to school enrollment rates for children and youth. But, on the other hand, learning levels continue to be extremely low. Additional years of schooling are not resulting in higher learning or more skills. This document presents a brief introduction to these trends.

### More Children in School

Latin America has expanded its education coverage, particularly at the pre-primary level. Between 1999 and 2012, the percentage of children enrolled at this level—measured by the gross enrollment ratio—grew from 54% to 74% (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Costa Rica are among the countries where the enrollment rate grew the most. In these countries, less than half of children attended pre-school learning centers in 1999, but by 2012 the percentage already surpassed 60%.<sup>2</sup> This improvement places Latin America and the

Caribbean above the world average. However, there are still wide variations within the region. For instance, in Paraguay and the Dominican Republic, in 2012 the gross enrollment ratio in pre-primary education was below 40%.

The region has also shown progress in expanding primary school coverage. The adjusted net enrollment rate at this level grew from 87% in 1990 to 93% in 1999. Since then, it has grown by only one percentage point—to 94% by 2012.<sup>3</sup> This deceleration in the movement toward universal education is a trend that Latin America shares with other regions of the world,<sup>4</sup> and may have to do with the difficulty of reaching the most marginalized sectors of society.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, Latin America stood out in the last 10 years for improving access to primary education for the most impoverished children. Among the six countries in the world that most improved the primary school completion rate of the poorest quintile of the income distribution are Guatemala, Bolivia, Suriname, and in first place, Nicaragua—which expanded the rate from 16% to 66%. The region also experienced progress with regard to grade repetition and desertion. For instance, the percentage of children of all ages who repeated a grade in primary school diminished from 12% in 1999 to 5.7% in 2012.<sup>6</sup>

## Foreword

I am pleased to present “Learning for All: An Urgent Challenge in Latin America,” a report by Maria Oviedo, Ariel Fiszbein, and Federico Sucre of the Education Program at the Inter-American Dialogue.

This is the first of a series of publications that will serve as inputs to the Commission for Quality Education for All, an innovative initiative to support profound educational change in Latin America. The Commission, chaired by former Presidents Ricardo Lagos of Chile and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico, will draw attention to the low quality of education in the region and will propose an agenda to mobilize the interest and commitment of political and business leaders, the media, and civil society.

This report provides an overview of the current state of education in Latin America. While the region has made important progress with regard to school enrollment rates,

learning levels continue to be very low. Based on available data, the report presents a brief introduction to recent educational trends.

This effort is a product of the Education Program at the Dialogue, which aims to improve the quality of learning and skills development across Latin America. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone and are aimed at stimulating discussion about an important public policy issue.

**MICHAEL SHIFTER**  
President

**Latin America’s educational challenges go beyond expanding coverage and reducing drop-out rates, and are more linked to qualitative aspects of the educational experience, especially the quality of education.**

Secondary school coverage has also improved. The net enrollment rate at this level grew from 59% in 1999 to 73% in 2012.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, most countries in the region have high transition levels between primary and secondary school; what is more, only 4 out of the 27 countries with available data had a transition rate lower than 90% in 2010, with an average of 93%.<sup>8</sup> But these numbers hide serious problems, particularly the high levels of grade repetition and drop-out rates at the secondary school level. For example, the average rate of repetition in secondary school decreased only from 11.3% in 1999 to 9.4% in 2012. The fact that almost one in ten students fails the school year is a great obstacle to the goal of achieving universal secondary education. Meanwhile, the average rate of desertion barely decreased from 17.8% in 2000 to 15.5% in 2010, which means that every year, almost one in six students in the region abandoned secondary school.<sup>9</sup> Overall, in 2010 only half of Latin American youth between 20 and 24 years old had completed secondary school.<sup>10</sup> Why are so many young adults abandoning school? A survey administered by the Inter-American Development Bank to youth in eight countries in the region found that while child labor and household duties are factors that influence school desertion, the main factor is lack of interest. The study suggests that this lack of motivation is due to the fact that youth “are not convinced that education will give them a better future.”<sup>11</sup> In other

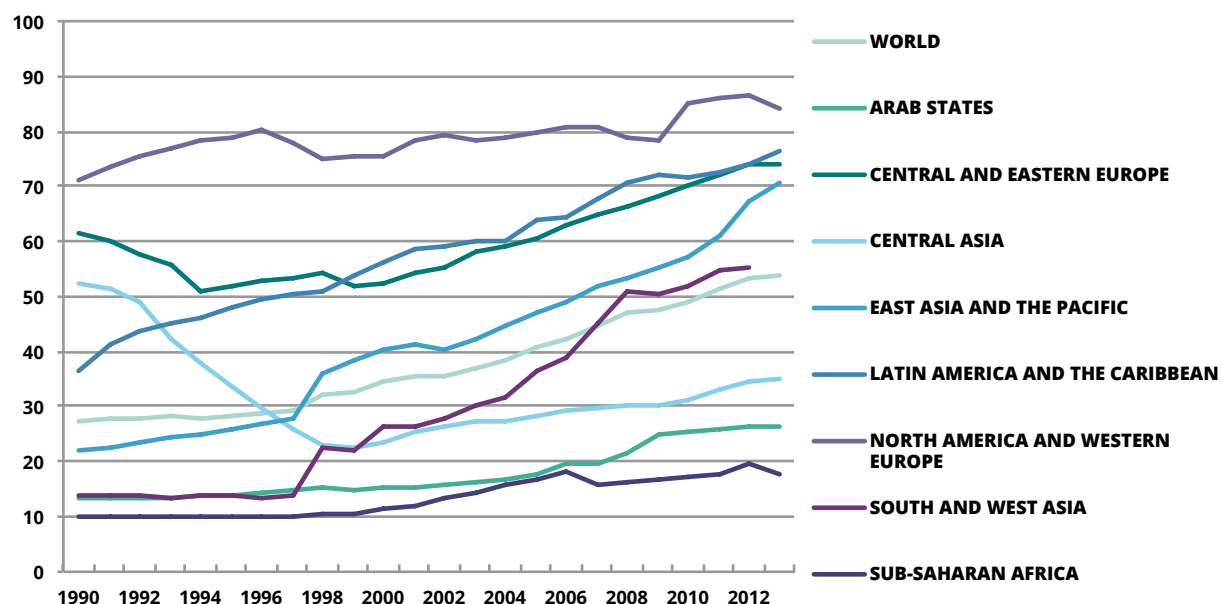
## IN 2010 ONLY HALF OF LATIN AMERICAN YOUTH BETWEEN 20 AND 24 YEARS OLD HAD COMPLETED SECONDARY SCHOOL.

words, “the perception about education and its relevance influences school abandonment.”

This is a sign that Latin America’s educational challenges go beyond expanding coverage and reducing drop-out rates, and are more linked to qualitative aspects of the educational experience, especially the quality of education. In fact, results from national and international examinations show that Latin America’s students are not learning at acceptable levels, and that the region is falling behind in comparison to the rest of the world.

**FIGURE 1. PRE-PRIMARY GROSS ENROLLMENT RATIO, WORLD AND REGIONS, 1990-2012.**

Source: Gross enrollment ratio, pre-primary, both sexes. UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre.



## How Are Students in the Region Performing?

In Latin America, an alarming number of students do not reach a level of performance adequate to their age or grade level. This is confirmed by results from TERCE, the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Examination administered by OREALC-UNESCO Santiago in 2013, in which 15 Latin American countries (plus the Mexican state of Nuevo León) participated. TERCE's results revealed strong deficiencies in reading, math and science among primary school students (see Figure 2). For instance, over a quarter of third grade students scored low on the reading exams (26.5%) and over a third (36.8%) in math. In science, almost half (46%) of sixth grade students had low performance.<sup>12</sup> In reading at the third grade level, for example, a student with low performance cannot locate information with a single meaning if it is not highlighted in the text, repeated verbally, and isolated from other information, nor can he or she recognize simple rephrasing of phrases—abilities that children of that age should have.<sup>13</sup>

The results from the latest PISA evaluation, administered in 2012, which tested 15-year-olds from 65 countries (eight of which were Latin American), revealed a similar picture. Almost half of the students from Latin America had a low performance in reading (45.8%) and

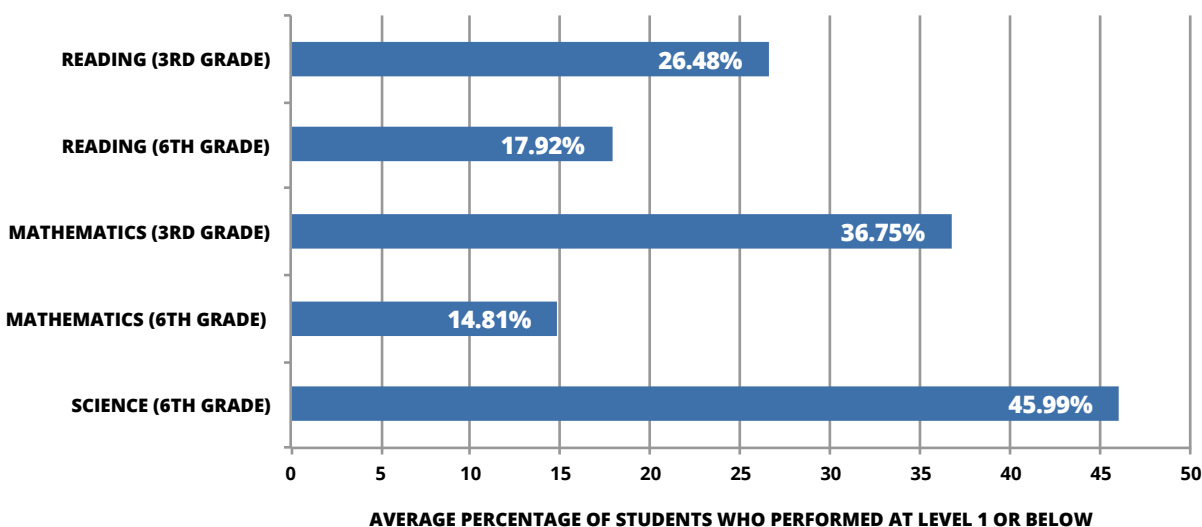
science (49.8%). In math, 63% of students had a low performance.<sup>14</sup> In other words, they did not reach the minimum learning level, which PISA defines as level 2 of the test. Students who do not reach level 2 cannot use “basic formulas, procedures or rules to solve problems using whole numbers.”<sup>15</sup> In comparison, the OECD average was only 23%.<sup>16</sup> In reading, such low performance indicates that a student cannot identify the main idea of a text or infer information that is not explicitly stated in the text. This suggests that a large number of youth, many of whom will be entering the labor force in only a few years, not only do not possess the minimum knowledge to be successful in the classroom, or the basic foundations to learn more complex concepts, but also lack the essential abilities required in a modern-day job.

This poor performance is coupled with a high degree of inequality in student performance in Latin America. An analysis by the Inter-American Development Bank found that in the Latin American countries that participated in PISA 2012, there is an average gap of 85 test points between students in the poorest quartile and those in the richest quartile, where a difference of 41 points is equivalent to a year of schooling (see Figure 3).<sup>17</sup> In other words, the poorest students in the region are the equivalent of more than two school years behind their richest peers.

In all, Latin America suffers from two related evils: it has poor student performance in general, and also particularly

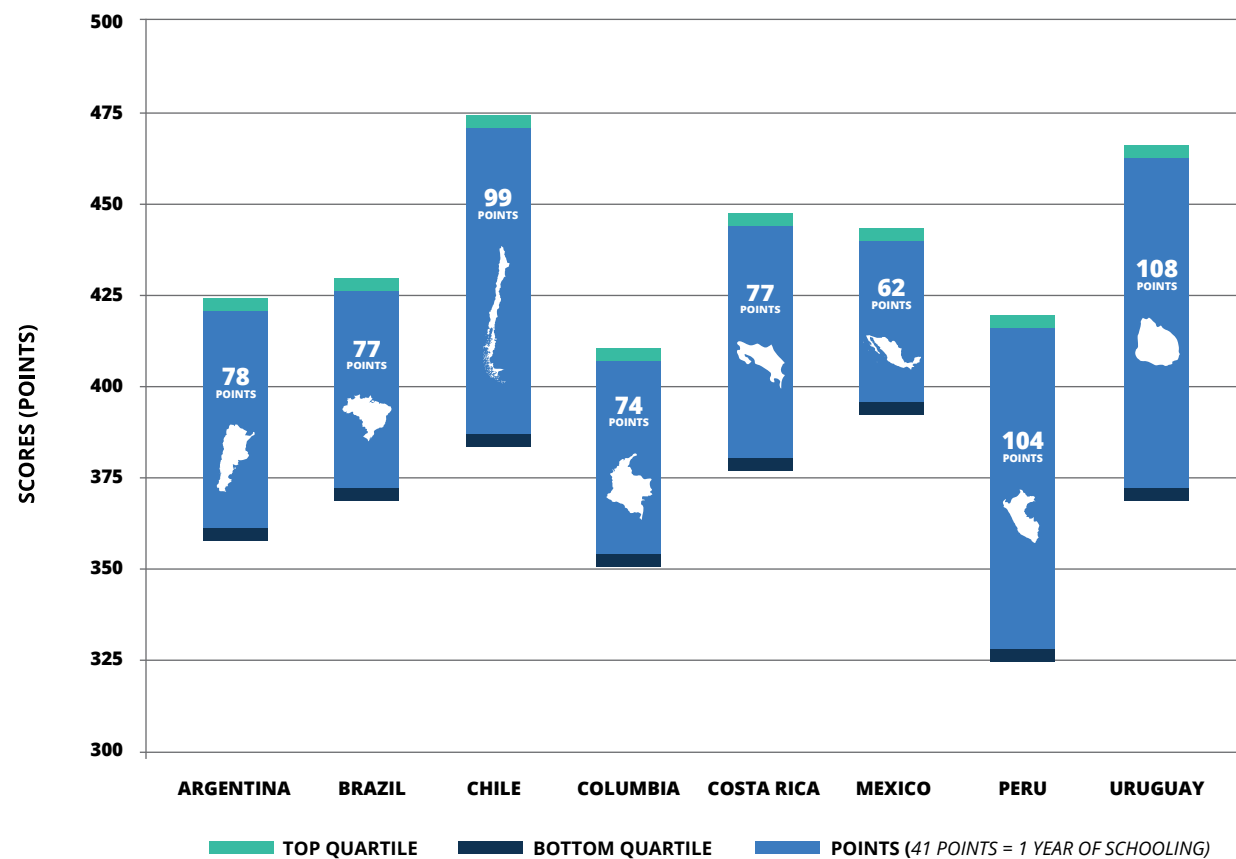
**FIGURE 2. LEVELS OF LOW PERFORMANCE ON TERCE EXAM IN LATIN AMERICA**

Source: Prepared by the authors based on first delivery of TERCE results.



**FIGURE 3. DIFFERENCE IN SCORES BETWEEN STUDENTS FROM RICHEST AND POOREST QUARTILES**

Source: Bos, M.S., Ganimian, A. J., Vegas, E. (2013). *América Latina en PISA 2012: ¿Cómo se desempeñan los estudiantes pobres y ricos?* Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.



weak performance among children and youth from the most vulnerable households. In effect, the levels of inequity in Latin America's learning outcomes are much higher than those observed in most of the other countries that participated in the exam. Seven out of the sixteen countries participating in PISA 2012 that had a math performance below the OECD average as well as below-average equity in their results were Latin American countries. Mexico was the only country with a level of equity in educational results above the OECD average.<sup>18</sup>

Argentina is an illustrative example of the inequality in education outcomes within Latin American countries. In Argentina, students from the northeast, the northwest, and Cuyo performed below the national average in math, reading and science in PISA 2012.<sup>19</sup> In math, for instance, the average student in the northeast of Argentina is more than one school year behind the average student in the city of Buenos Aires.<sup>20</sup> Students from Cuyo, the region with the lowest reading score in Argentina, perform worse than

students in Peru, the country with the worst performance of the 65 countries participating in PISA 2012.<sup>21</sup> Even within regions of Argentina, there are huge performance gaps between students of different socioeconomic groups. In the city of Buenos Aires, for example, the difference in the reading and science scores of students from the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups is the equivalent of almost four years of schooling.

Brazil also shows large variations in educational achievement between different regions. The latest national examinations, known as the "Prova Brasil" of the national System for Basic Education Evaluation (SAEB), examined the percentage of Brazilian students who achieved a learning level adequate to their grade. At a national level, only 40% of students reached a level of "competency" in language, or a minimum of 200 points on the exam. However, while in the southeast, south, and mid-west the percentage was closer to 50%, in the north and northeast, less than a third achieved this level.<sup>22</sup>

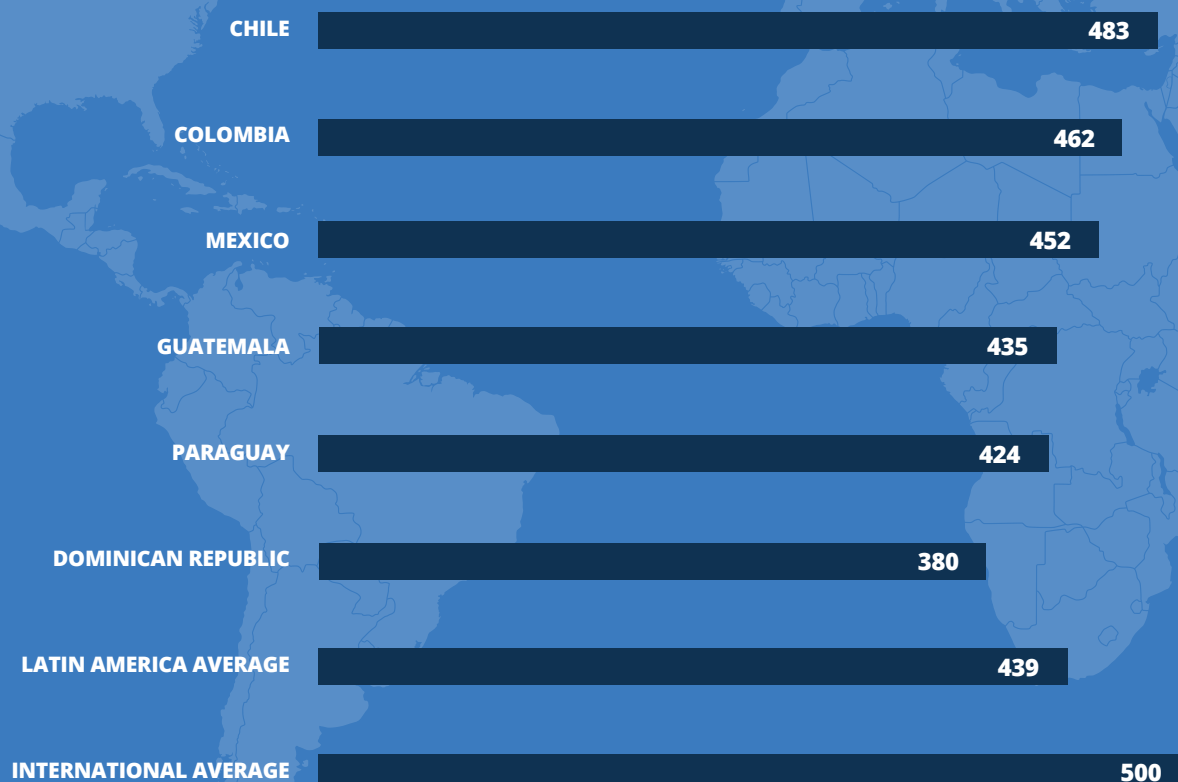
# How Does Latin America Compare with the Rest of the World?

International examinations reveal that Latin America is falling behind the rest of the world. In math, for instance, the average student in the region is over two school years behind the average student in the OECD. Additionally, the difference in scores between the average student in Latin America and in Shanghai, China—the leader in the rankings—is equivalent to five years of schooling.<sup>23</sup> In effect, in PISA 2012, all Latin American countries were among the twenty nations with the lowest scores in math, reading, and science, out of the 65 participating countries. Even Chile, the country with the best educational results in the region, was among those twenty.

Results from the latest Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), reveal a similar outlook. The TIMSS exam, administered every four years, tests students in fourth and eighth grade, in the areas of math and science. In 2011, students from 63 countries—plus 14 other entities used as benchmarks—completed the exam. That year, Chile and Honduras were the only participating countries from Latin America. Chile, even as the leader in the region, scored below the average. Its math score was very similar to that of Azerbaijan and Thailand, despite the fact that Chile's GDP per capita is almost double that of both countries. Honduras was one of three countries—along with Yemen and Botswana—that was allowed to have sixth grade students take the test intended for fourth graders, since the latter were expected to find the test too challenging. Despite this advantage, Honduras placed among the nine countries with the lowest scores on both tests.<sup>24</sup>

**FIGURE 4. COUNTRY AVERAGES FOR CIVIC KNOWLEDGE ON 2009 ICCS EXAM**

Source: IEA (2011). *ICCS 2009 Latin American Report: Civic Knowledge and Attitudes among Lower-Secondary Students in six Latin American Countries*. Amsterdam: IEA.



Aside from their weak knowledge in math, language and science, Latin American students also have poor knowledge of topics pertaining to civics and citizenship. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), also administered by the IEA, tests attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of political institutions and concepts such as human rights, freedom of the press, democratic processes, and openness to diversity, among others. In the 2009 study, the average score on civic knowledge in the six participating Latin American countries was more than half a standard deviation below the international average, of the 38 participating countries (see Figure 4).<sup>25</sup> This finding is worrying since those students with low civic knowledge also exhibited greater acceptance for authoritarian systems, civil disobedience, and corruption. In all, the region's education systems are not preparing youth for their role as citizens.

Without a doubt, the quality of education in Latin America is jeopardizing the growth of the region's countries. Researchers Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessman believe that the low student achievement in Latin America is precisely what has caused the slowdown of economic growth in the region. The researchers explain that in 1960, Latin America appeared to be on the verge of enormous economic growth. It was growing faster than the Middle East, the North of Africa, and East Asia. Since then, however, these regions have grown at faster rates and have left Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa behind, with low levels of growth and income per capita. The authors find that years of schooling do not explain the lag in Latin America's economic growth, but differences in learning do.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, in a recent OECD report, Hanushek and Woessman find that improving school quality can have large economic

**FIGURE 5. PROJECTED EFFECT ON GDP OF 3 EDUCATION POLICY OUTCOMES (IN % OF DISCOUNTED FUTURE GDP) FOR THE NEXT 80 YEARS**

Source: OECD (2015). *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

	SCENARIO 1: Every current student attains minimum of 420 PISA points by 2030	SCENARIO 2: Universal enrollment in secondary school at current quality by 2030	SCENARIO 3: Universal secondary school enrollment and every student acquires basic skills by 2030
Lower-Middle Income			
Honduras	24.5%	4.1%	43.1%
Upper Middle-Income			
Argentina	13.0%	1.0%	14.8%
Brazil	10.0%	3.5%	16.1%
Colombia	10.4%	4.4%	19.5%
Costa Rica	6.6%	2.7%	9.9%
Mexico	6.4%	4.2%	11.8%
Peru	17.7%	2.0%	23.0%
High-Income			
Chile	7.0%	1.3%	8.4%
Uruguay	10.4%	2.6%	14.0%
Average	11.8%	2.9%	17.9%



**IN PISA 2012, ALL LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES WERE AMONG THE TWENTY NATIONS WITH THE LOWEST SCORES IN MATH, READING, AND SCIENCE, OUT OF THE 65 PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES.**

benefits in the long run. The researchers calculated the projected effect on GDP of ensuring that every 15-year old in the world reaches a basic level 1 (or 420 points) on the PISA scale by 2030. This goal incorporates two components: reaching universal enrollment in secondary school, and also sufficient achievement for economic and social participation. They conclude that only reaching universal enrollment or only improving the academic performance of students already in school would yield large economic gains, but achieving both would have an even greater impact (see Figure 5).<sup>27</sup> Upper-middle income countries would achieve, on average, a 16% higher GDP every year over the next 80 years. Lower-middle income countries—which have lower enrollment rates and average scores—would have even higher gains: an increase of 28% in GDP per year over the projected period compared to what would be expected with the current skills level.<sup>28</sup> Honduras, for instance, would gain a 43% higher GDP per year over that time period. These findings suggest that Latin American countries could achieve enormous gains through policies that improve both enrollment and school quality.

## Progress in Learning

Despite generally low performance at a regional level, in recent years some countries have improved their learning levels. For instance, comparing results between SERCE (the Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Exam) and TERCE reveals that, on average, countries in the region

improved their scores on the third grade language test by 18 points. Nine out of the fourteen countries that participated in both studies had a significantly higher performance in TERCE than in SERCE. But Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay showed no differences in their scores, while Costa Rica, Mexico, and the Mexican state of Nuevo León scored lower on the third study.<sup>29</sup> On the third grade math test, the region improved by 31 points on average, but there were also large variations between countries.

Analyses of the PISA 2012 results give a less optimistic assessment of the educational trends in the region. A report by the Inter-American Development Bank, for instance, indicates that since the 2003 PISA examinations, the progress of the eight participating Latin American countries has been mixed, which is why it is not possible to conclude that the region has improved. The exam results are comparable in reading since 2000, in math since 2003, and in science since 2006. Taking this into account, in math, five of the eight countries showed no significant differences in results. In reading, three of the countries showed no significant differences, while in science, seven countries did not register significant differences in scores. In all three subjects, three countries stood out for their poor performance: Argentina and Costa Rica showed no significant changes in scores in any subject, while Uruguay scored worse in all subjects.<sup>30</sup>

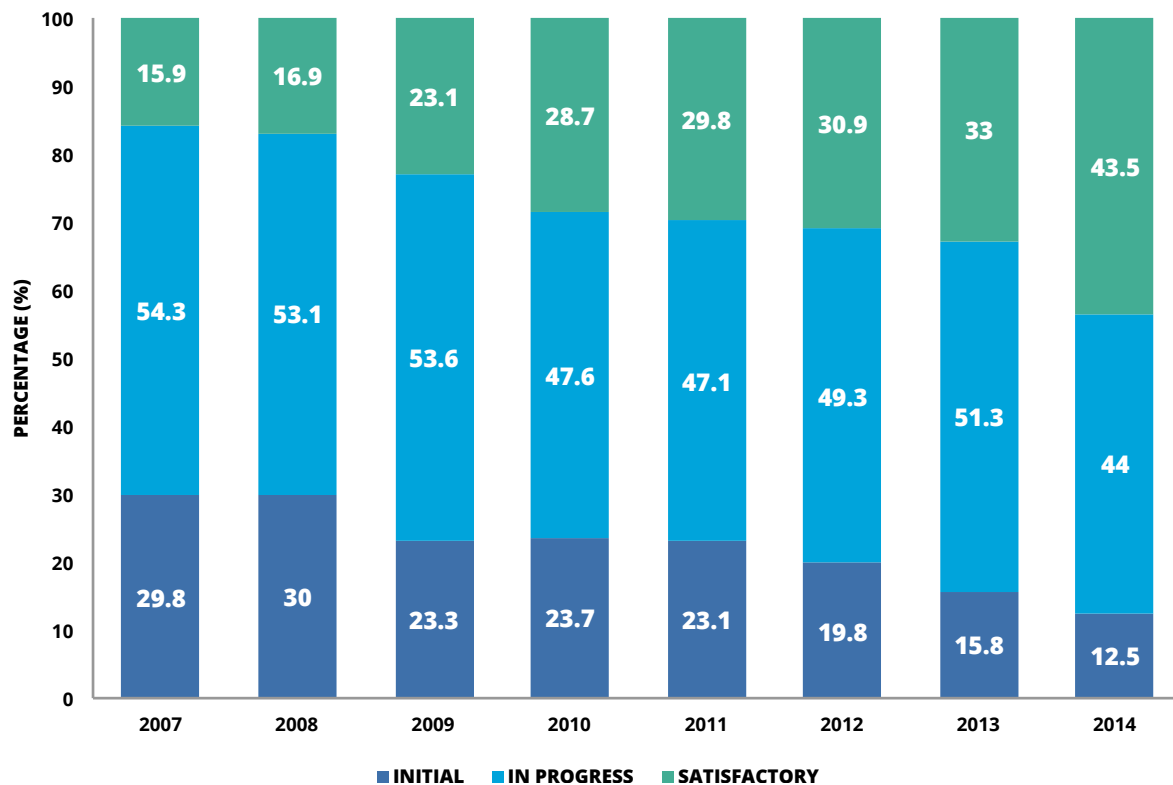
The same study points out that, despite the progress seen in some countries in the region, the pace of improvement is not fast enough to move the region out of the bottom third of countries with the poorest performance in PISA. Only a few countries in the region are advancing toward achieving the average score of the OECD: 500 points on the exam. But even the countries that are closest to this average and advancing the fastest would take over a decade to reach the OECD average. For instance, it would take Brazil 27 years to reach the OECD average score in math, and Chile 18 years to reach the average score in reading. On the other hand, other countries outside the region have progressed at a faster pace and will reach the OECD average score in under a decade.

One of the countries that best illustrates the stagnation of the region's education quality is Mexico. An analysis by Mexicanos Primero reveals that between 2000 and 2012, Mexican students improved their performance on the reading PISA exam by only 2 points, while in science they dropped 7 points.<sup>31</sup> Only in math was there a significant improvement—a total of 26 points—but it still only represents two-thirds of a year of schooling. Also,



**FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF SECOND GRADE STUDENTS IN EACH LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE (INITIAL, IN PROGRESS, AND SATISFACTORY) IN READING COMPREHENSION IN PERU (2007-2014)**

Source: Resultados de la Evaluación Censal de Estudiantes (ECE) 2014. Unidad de Medición de Calidad Educativa, Ministerio de Educación del Perú.



between 2009 and 2012, Mexico's scores dropped across all subjects. Mexicanos Primero estimates that at this speed, it would take Mexico 64 years to match the best performing country in math.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are countries in the region that showed surprising progress in education. Among them is Peru, which jumped the equivalent of nearly a year and a half in reading (57 points) between 2000 and 2012—more than any other country in the region.<sup>32</sup> This progress is also confirmed by results of the Censal Student Evaluation (Evaluación Censal de Estudiantes) of 2014, an exam administered annually since 2006 by Peru's Ministry of Education. A comparative study of the results from 2007 to 2014 found a positive trend in the country's quality of education. In reading, for instance, the percentage of second grade students with a "satisfactory" level of achievement has grown every year, but especially between 2013 and 2014 (see Figure 6).

In math, the percentage of second grade students with satisfactory achievement also grew, from only 7.2%

in 2007 to 25.9% in 2014.<sup>33</sup> While it is true that these performance levels continue to be low, and that Peru still had the lowest score in PISA 2012, its progress is proof that it is possible to achieve significant improvements in student learning in a relatively short period of time.

In fact, there are signs that reforms focused on raising the quality of teaching have improved educational outcomes in some countries. In the publication "What Are the Countries with the Greatest Improvements in PISA Doing?", researchers from the Inter-American Development Bank focused on the case of Brazil, which despite its high levels of inequity, is among the countries that have improved the most and the fastest since 2006. In math, for instance, Brazil has the fifth fastest growth rate among all 65 participants of PISA. The IDB found that during those years, Brazil implemented educational reforms, many of which are positively correlated to improvements in math scores. Specifically, the increase in teacher monitoring, the use of test results, and the reduction in the number of unqualified teachers are associated with the improvements in math.<sup>34</sup>

# CONCLUSIONS

Latin America has advanced significantly in terms of educational coverage and access, and has increasingly incorporated the most marginalized sectors into the education system. Despite this, students are simply not learning at acceptable levels. Without significant improvements in learning levels, the rising levels of schooling will hardly turn into the improvements in quality of life to which Latin American citizens aspire—and will probably be another source of frustration, instead of progress.



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