

The State of Teacher Policies in Central America and the Dominican Republic



By Federico Sucre and Ariel Fiszbein

I. Introduction

There is growing concern in Central America and the Dominican Republic regarding the quality of education. Despite the importance of teachers for learning, the recruitment, selection, training, retention, and support of teachers in most of the countries in the region are still inadequate.

This policy brief summarizes the main findings and recommendations of a regional report on the state of teacher policies in Central America and the Dominican Republic. The regional report is based on national studies prepared by research teams in El Salvador (FUSADES), Guatemala (CIEN), Honduras (FEREMA), and the Dominican Republic (EDUCA). These studies, which seek to foster informed debates among stakeholders, systematically describe the state and reach of teacher policies in the education systems of their countries.

II. What Did the Regional Report Do?

In all four countries, the organizations analyzed the state of teacher policies in nine common dimensions, grouped into three categories:

A) Preparing the Field for Effective Teaching: This category explores whether the country has the fundamental preparatory elements to achieve quality instruction, such as clear expectations, adequate class time, and solid teacher training.

B) Attracting, Hiring, and Retaining Talented Teachers: This category explores whether the existing education systems are able to select and retain the best candidates for teaching, and whether it supports teachers to improve their own practices.

C) Managing for Good Performance: This category explores whether teachers are evaluated on a regular basis, whether they are recognized for good teaching performance and face consequences for consistently weak behavior, and whether schools are assigned resources (both human and physical) to provide high-quality instruction to the most vulnerable children and youth.

This policy brief presents the most relevant findings detected at a regional level, supported by examples from each country. It also summarizes the main recommendations that came out of the national studies, and indicates areas in which teacher policies can improve.

PREAL Policy Briefs provide non-technical summaries of key topics in the field of education policy.

This policy brief presents the main findings of four national studies on the state of teacher policies in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. The studies, conducted by research teams in each country, analyze teacher policies in nine dimensions. This brief explores regional tendencies and common challenges regarding the teaching profession, and suggests possible lines of action to guide better policies.

This summary was made possible by support of the Inter-American Development Bank's Institutional Capacity Strengthening Thematic Fund (ICSF), established with contributions from the government of the People's Republic of China. However, the contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and the Inter-American Dialogue.

III. What Did the Study Find?

The following analysis presents a synthesis of the four country report cards, and our own evaluation of teacher policy tendencies in the region:

TEACHER POLICY INDICATORS					
Preparing the Way for Effective Teaching	ES	GU	HO	DR	Region
Clear expectations for students and teachers The four countries have mechanisms that establish which skills students must develop at every level and in every discipline. They also have teacher standards, but implementation continues to be a challenge.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Maximizing the opportunities for classroom learning Some initiatives seeking to address the issue of absenteeism have produced improvements in the last years, but in a general sense, we do not see any systematic efforts to maximize the use of time for learning.	X	X	✓	X	X
Training high-quality teachers Some reforms seeking to improve teacher quality have emerged (accreditation systems and accountable agencies). But there still is too little regulation and weak quality control by the authorities.	✓	✓	X	✓	✓
Attracting, Hiring, and Retaining Talented Teachers					
Selecting the best Candidates to be teachers There has been some progress in defining teacher selection processes, but these are not sufficiently rigorous, and their implementation is still weak. The teaching profession is perceived as one of low prestige.	✓	X	X	✓	✓
A structure that attracts and retains the most talented Average teacher salaries are generally competitive in the local labor market, and are generally paid on time. However, these are not associated to good or bad performance or to students' learning.	X	X	X	✓	X
Supporting teachers to improve teaching practices Countries do not provide opportunities for collaboration among teachers. School directors are not selected based on academic or pedagogic leadership, and they rarely receive any training. The use of data on student performance to improve pedagogical practices is insufficient.	X	✓	X	✓	X
Managing for Good Performance					
Regular and high-quality teacher assessments The systems designed to evaluate teachers are weak and suffer from poor credibility. These evaluations are not independent, and they do not take student learning into account.	X	X	✓	X	X
Recognizing good performance and tackling poor performance School administration systems do not recognize good performance, nor do they establish mechanisms to address weak performance. Countries do not fire ineffective teachers.	X	X	X	✓	X
Providing high-quality education to the neediest High-quality education is not guaranteed for the most vulnerable populations. Some countries have instituted incentives for teachers to work in underprivileged regions, but these are generally weak and poorly structured.	?	✓	X	X	X

✓: The issue has been addressed successfully – X: Adequate conditions are not yet in place

? : There is not enough information/evidence – ✓ dotted: There has been progress in the right direction, but not enough

1. PREPARING THE WAY FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING

A. Clear Expectations for Students and Teachers: incomplete improvements

All four countries have mechanisms that determine the skills that students must develop, although there are variations between countries regarding coverage at different education levels and disciplines. El Salvador and the Dominican Republic are the most advanced in this respect. Guatemala and Honduras, meanwhile, have areas that lack clear definition at the secondary level. In Honduras, for instance, the curriculum includes education standards in Mathematics, Spanish, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences for students in first through ninth grade, but standards at the secondary education level are still pending.

Teacher standards also differ in terms of definition and enforcement. The Dominican Republic is the country with the most developed set of standards on aspects such as what good teaching is, and what is expected of teachers at different grade levels, subject areas, and/or fields of knowledge. Honduras, on the other hand, seems to have the least developed system. Beyond what the national curriculum specifies, the system does not specifically define what teachers must know and know how to teach content effectively.

The four countries studied also face serious challenges with regard to the enforcement of their teaching standards. These challenges include: a lack of awareness of the standards and their importance (El Salvador, Dominican Republic); the existence of inadequate mechanisms to monitor the extent to which the defined teacher competencies are compatible with the practices in the classrooms (Guatemala); and the lack of teacher support material to aid teaching and learning in the classrooms (El Salvador).

B. Maximizing the Opportunities for Classroom Learning: a pending task

The four countries face important challenges concerning teacher absenteeism and the efficient use of class time. While there have been some initiatives that have sought to tackle the issue of absenteeism (which, particularly in Guatemala and Honduras, have made improvements in recent years), at a general level there are no perceivable systematic efforts to maximize the use of class time for learning.

Traditionally, students in the region have had fewer school days than what is required by law. In Guatemala, for instance, in 2010 and 2011, the average number of completed school days was between 90 and 120 days, out of the required 180 days. Even though the situation improved considerably in 2013 and 2014, it is estimated that in some education centers, at least 30 days of the school year are not met. All four countries lack a system to monitor and control the attendance of teachers and school

directors, or the number of school days completed, even in cases where there are control mechanisms on paper.

Since official mechanisms for the monitoring of teacher attendance and the completion of school days do not exist, civil society organizations have begun to develop alternative strategies. For instance, the organizations “Transformemos Honduras” in Honduras and “Empresarios por la Educación” in Guatemala have started to implement techniques and digital platforms to report effective school days as part of an initiative of citizen involvement that collects updated information that authorities can use to take action.

However, despite these efforts to reduce absenteeism and increase the number of school days, countries have still not been able to maximize learning opportunities in the classroom. While there is no systematic monitoring of the use of time in the classrooms, studies show that on average, a day of instruction is lost per week, while the target set by international standards is 85% of instruction time.

C. Training High-Quality Teachers: an emerging transition

All countries recognize their own deficiencies in their teacher training systems, and they are making efforts to improve. They have begun to make reforms to improve the quality of teaching, such as: the supply of training at the tertiary level (fully in place in El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, and in progress in Guatemala and Honduras), the establishment of accreditation systems (in El Salvador and

Guatemala), and the creation of responsible agencies in all four countries.

Nevertheless, regulation and quality control of teacher training institutions by national authorities is still inadequate.

For instance, in El Salvador (one of two countries that has an accreditation system), only six out of seventeen higher education institutions that offer initial teacher training have been accredited. The Dominican Republic, which has twenty-five institutions offering teacher training programs, also does not have a structured system of accreditation and certification.

The regulatory weakness and the lack of planning of the teacher training systems are reflected on the imbalances of the teacher workforce. For instance, for over a decade, normal schools in Honduras have annually produced primary school teachers in numbers that surpass by two or three times the number of job openings that become available each year. In 2014, in seven of the country's eighteen regional departments, 12,199 teachers applied for work, but only 641 spots were offered in pre-school, primary school, and secondary school, which means that for every twenty graduates, there was only one job opening available.

Another factor that negatively impacts the quality of teacher training is the mismatch between the training offered and the content of the curriculum. In the Dominican Republic and Honduras, for example, there is a weak association between what the national curriculum says, what aspiring teachers in early training programs learn, and what they end up

teaching their own students once they graduate. Furthermore, some countries do not require classroom practice before obtaining the teaching certification (Dominican Republic), and some that do require it have varying numbers of hours depending on the training institution (Honduras).

2. ATTRACTING, HIRING, AND RETAINING TALENTED TEACHERS

A. *Selecting the Best Candidates to Be Teachers: promising signs of change*

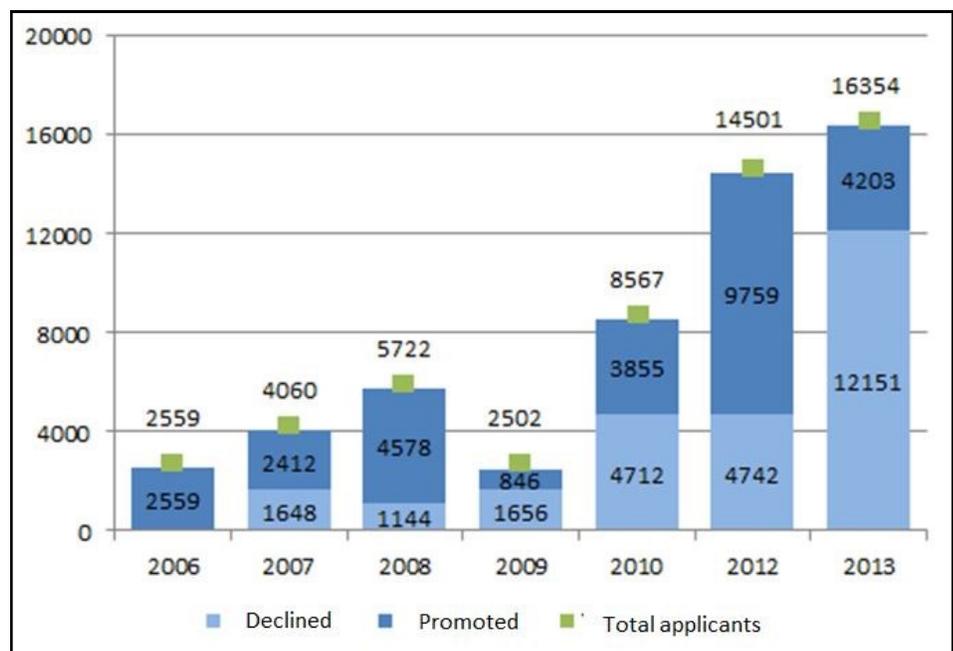
There has recently been some progress in the creation of teacher selection processes that are more selective and that help bring the best teachers to the classrooms. All four countries have designed, either competitive job application processes to fill teaching vacancies in the public sector (Guatemala, Dominican Republic), or standardized exams that evaluate an applicant's mastery of

academic and pedagogical competencies as a prerequisite to becoming a certified teacher (El Salvador, Honduras).

The Dominican Republic, for instance, has begun competitive job application processes to fill vacancies in the public sector. This process, which reached a high of 16,354 applicants in 2013 (see **Graph 1**), is divided into three stages: a) a logical reasoning exam, (b) an exam on pedagogical knowledge and planning skills in specific areas of interest, and (c) an interview or final oral exam. Due to this increased rigor, in 2013 only a third of applicants were promoted to the second stage of the process.

Nevertheless, there are limitations in the implementation of the selection processes to fill teaching vacancies. In some countries (El Salvador, Guatemala), priority is given to candidates with the most seniority in

Graph 1: Total applicants, promoted, and declined in the job application process of the Ministry of Education of the Dominican Republic, 2013.



Source: Inter-American Dialogue y EDUCA (2015).

El estado de las políticas públicas docentes: República Dominicana. Grafico 3, p. 19.

the system, while in others (Honduras) political manipulation seems to have a significant influence in the assignment of jobs. For instance, in a survey of students in their last year of studies at the Farabundo Martí National Pedagogical University (UPNFM) in Honduras, only 5% of students said that their academic performance influenced their job prospects, while over 90% of them said that affiliation with the political party in power was the most influential factor in finding a job as a teacher. Moreover, the hiring processes in these countries do not include interviews or evaluations of pedagogical skills in the classroom.

B. A Structure that Attracts and Retains the Most Talented: salaries are not everything

Today, average teacher salaries tend to be competitive in the local labor market—though not necessarily when compared internationally—and are generally paid on time. In the Dominican Republic, the current salary of a part-time teacher (four hours) is 32% higher than the average salary of workers in the economy who work full-time (eight hours), while the salary of a secondary school teacher who works full-time (eight hours) is 53% higher than the average salary of a university graduate who also works full-time. The flexibility of work hours, job stability, and additional benefits associated with the teaching profession are also attractive aspects of teaching.

However, wage increases are not linked to teachers' performance or to student learning. In Guatemala, for instance, wage increases of 8-12% between 2013 and 2015 were applied equally to all teachers in the system, without rewarding those who stood

out or penalizing those who underperformed. Efforts to reward good work performance have failed, at least partially, due to protests from teachers' unions (Honduras, El Salvador). Currently, wage increases in all four countries are given on the basis of seniority, by obtaining diplomas or degrees, or by holding management positions.

In addition to the issue of wages, the four countries lack clearly defined paths for teachers' professional development, let alone opportunities for professional advancements and promotions. Teachers progress professionally by moving to administrative and managerial positions (thus moving away from the classroom). The Dominican Republic is making strides in the implementation of a new teaching career certification system based on horizontal growth, professionalization, and meritocracy.

C. Supporting Teachers to Improve their Practices: insufficient efforts

The four countries offer teachers very limited opportunities to work with more experienced colleagues (through tutoring sessions) or with colleagues at their same level of experience (sharing practices). In the Dominican Republic, coaching for teachers only takes place during the first year as faculty members, and opportunities for group work are only available to teachers who work full-time.

The academic and pedagogical leadership of school directors is very limited. Directors, whom are seldom selected through competitive, structured systems, very rarely get trained to carry out their duties. In El Salvador, for instance, the legal framework sets the director's

administrative duties above his or her pedagogical leadership. However, the law does not even require director positions to be filled by staff or faculty with formal training in educational administration. Moreover, the evaluation of directors is virtually inexistent in all four countries.

The use of data on student performance to improve pedagogical practices is still insufficient. In El Salvador and the Dominican Republic, statistical reports are produced but are not used to strengthen the educational processes. In Honduras and Guatemala, results from standardized student examinations are available online. These provide information on learning achievement by school, grade, section, and even by student, contributing to decision-making in the school and in the classroom.

3. MANAGING FOR GOOD PERFORMANCE

A. Regular and High-Quality Teacher Assessments: inconsistent systems

Teacher evaluation systems in all four countries have low credibility, do not take student learning into account, and are generally neither regular nor systematic. For instance, Guatemala's Teachers Statute ("Estatuto Docente") requires an annual evaluation of teachers, but this is not a systematic evaluation with tools that allow to effectively personalize the support given to teachers based on their results. Honduras recently began a teacher evaluation process that includes three aspects: (a) reviewing teaching performance, (b) observing in-class teaching using the Stallings observation system in a national sample, and (c) administering an examination of knowledge. If scaled

adequately, this could turn into an effective model.

An essential aspect of teacher evaluation systems is the transparency and credibility of the entities responsible for designing, applying, and analyzing the instruments. In the four countries studied, existing evaluations are not independent. Only the Dominican Republic (in 2008) conducted a bidding process and delegated the teacher evaluation process to an external company in order to guarantee transparency. It is expected that in 2015 there will be another evaluation of teacher performance and certification.

Studies show that there are weaknesses in the use of results from teacher evaluations to make concrete improvements. In Honduras, for instance, despite the progress made in recent years, data from evaluations has still not been used to correct and improve teaching. In some countries, reports on the evaluations have been produced (e.g. Dominican Republic), but these are not being utilized to give teachers feedback in an effective way.

B. Recognizing Good Performance and Tackling Poor Performance: lack of meritocracy

None of the countries has mechanisms to deal with poor performance. With a few serious exceptions, such as prolonged absences or abuse of minors, administration systems rarely fire ineffective teachers. In some cases, there are training mechanisms for deficient teachers, but these are rarely implemented. In the Dominican Republic, for instance, even though the current legislation states that teachers showing poor performance must undergo a year of training followed by a re-evaluation and possible dismissal if they not pass, these regulations have not been effectively implemented.

Likewise, good performance is not recognized. Wage increases and other forms of acknowledgement are not linked to indicators of performance. As a general rule, teachers in the region, regardless of their performance, can only increase their wages if they earn new academic degrees, assume management

positions, reach sufficient seniority, or double their workload (work two school periods in a day).

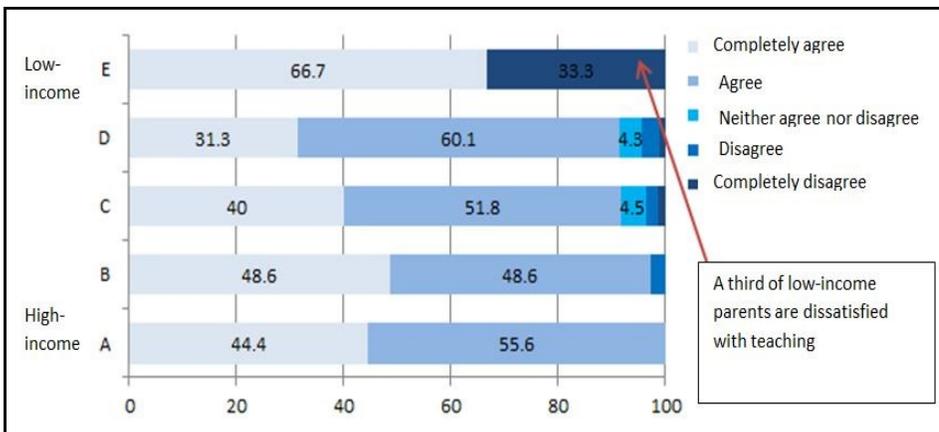
The Dominican Republic is establishing a system of teacher certification and promotion that intends to improve the competencies of educators, professionalize their work in the classroom, and dignify their work conditions. The proposal is to evaluate the following criteria: performance competencies, disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, professional development, professional responsibilities in the school, and experience. Teachers and school directors will be able to request certification evaluations voluntarily, and will be able to advance their careers horizontally. Moreover, the different categories that the system assigns imply different wage levels, comparable to those offered to other professions that are highly valued by society.

C. Providing Quality Education to the Neediest: few compensatory efforts

None of the four countries has policies that prioritize attention given to students from more vulnerable populations. Data on schools and teachers in these areas is scarce. The information that is available oftentimes comes from parents, whom in the case of the Dominican Republic express dissatisfaction with the quality of their children’s teachers (see **Graph 2**).

Some countries (e.g. El Salvador, Honduras) have monetary incentives for teachers to work in vulnerable areas, but these incentives are generally weak and poorly structured. In Honduras, for instance, regulations have incentivized work in rural areas by providing advantages in the way

Graph 2: Teachers were able to make my children learn their subjects (Survey). Santo Domingo & Santiago, Dominican Republic. 2014.



Source: *El estado de las políticas públicas docentes: República Dominicana*. Gráfico 8, p. 28.

work years are counted (working three years in these areas is equivalent to working 5 years in urban areas). But despite the incentives, these regions usually only receive teachers who have recently entered the system and are less experienced, and whom sometimes have not yet graduated.

Most commonly, teachers do not receive the support they need to serve youth who are poor, rural, indigenous, and/or at risk of violence. Rural schools oftentimes have multi-grade classrooms, but teacher training systems and teacher support materials are designed for educators who teach only one grade. Some countries have advanced initiatives to support bilingual education (e.g. Honduras, Guatemala). In Guatemala, for instance, there have been attempts to train bilingual educators. However, it is unclear whether this has truly translated into a higher number of qualified bilingual teachers in schools with a high percentage of indigenous students, or if these efforts are producing higher student learning.

IV. Lines of Action for Better Teacher Policies

Beyond the priorities for reform in every one of the countries studied (available in the regional report), we believe that the state of teacher policies in the region shows many common challenges, which might also apply to countries not covered in this project. The following considerations seek to reflect on these common challenges and offer a unified perspective on how to address them.

- i. **Complete the definition of educational standards** for students and teachers in all grade levels and subjects, and guarantee that the curricula and early teacher training programs are designed based on these standards.
- ii. **Increase effective class time** by fulfilling the number of days and hours that are assigned to pedagogical activities, and by training teachers to use class time efficiently.
- iii. **Make initial teacher training more demanding**, better aligned with teacher and student standards, and also more practical, so that graduates finish their studies having had experience in the classroom.
- iv. **Make entry into the teaching profession more competitive and selective**, so that only the best candidates enter the classroom.
- v. **Offer more opportunities for professional advancement** without the need to abandon the classroom, and ensure that there are competitive salaries in a framework of growing professionalization.
- vi. **Provide teachers with strong support and coaching**, especially in their early years of teaching, and prepare school directors to fulfill their role.
- vii. **Administer independent, rigorous teacher evaluations** based on objective and transparent criteria that take into account student performance, and supported by a well-defined system that helps identify problematic areas and find solutions to ensure high-quality teaching.
- viii. **Design rewards that recognize the effort**, dedication, and good performance of teachers, and act with determination in cases of abuse or corruption.
- ix. **Define special policies for the training and stimulation of teachers who work with vulnerable populations** and with indigenous peoples, including instruction in their native language.

Experience shows that many good public policies fail at the stage of implementation. Therefore, it is crucial that, moving forward, we strongly emphasize the details of implementation of all new public policies and take corrective measures when necessary, before these policies lose legitimacy due to their lack of impact or concrete results.

By highlighting the areas where there was progress, as well as those where there was none, this report aims to draw attention to teacher policies in Central America and the Dominican Republic, and seeks to stimulate debate, build consensus around common objectives and activities, and set the basis for change.



Inter-American Dialogue
1211 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 510, Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202-822-9002 / **Fax:** 202-822-9553
Email: education@thedialogue.org
Web: thedialogue.org/agenda/programs/education