



Can Paraguay's Dysfunctional Education System Be Reformed?

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Editor's Note: This article is part of an ongoing series (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/series/15/education>) about education policy in various countries around the world.



Paraguay's high school students shout slogans against the education minister during a march demanding that the education budget receive 7 percent of the GDP, in Asuncion, Paraguay, Sept. 16, 2016 (AP photo by Jorge Saenz).

The Paraguayan government, led by freshly sworn-in President Mario Abdo Benitez, announced the launch of a national dialogue on education reform last month. Paraguay's public schools suffer from mismanagement, corruption and rural-urban inequality, but observers doubt that the new government is serious about addressing these issues. In an interview with WPR, Andrew Nickson, an honorary reader in public management and Latin American studies at the University of Birmingham, explains why the dialogue process in Paraguay probably won't lead to the kinds of drastic changes necessary to improve the country's education system.

World Politics Review: What is the current state of the education system in Paraguay?

Andrew Nickson: Paraguay's public education system is currently among the worst in the world. The 2016-2017 Global Competitive Index of the World Economic Forum ranked the overall quality of Paraguay's primary education system at No. 136 out of 138 countries, while the quality of math and science education was ranked No. 137 out of 138 countries. The country's 1992 Constitution says that the state has responsibility for managing the education system and stipulates that 20 percent of the budget should be spent on education. But the managerial competence of the Education Ministry is so low that even universities are approved at will by Congress. This has led to the phenomenon of over 50 scandalously low-quality "garage universities," so called because some operate from tiny household premises.

An education reform process was introduced in 1994 with World Bank assistance at a total cost of \$200 million, but there is general agreement that it has failed to improve outcomes. Around 65 percent of children do not complete secondary education—one of the highest dropout rates in Latin America—and

only 10 percent of students starting university education go on to graduate. Only about one-fifth of Paraguay's 1.5 million school children receive regular school meals. In the absence of a clear national education policy, regulations and funding vary considerably from one municipality to another.

The latest 2017 household survey (<https://www.ultimahora.com/analfabetismo-se-mantiene-torno-al-5-la-poblacion-y-no-hay-avances-n1702453.html>) showed that about 5 percent of the adult population, or roughly 280,000 people, are still illiterate, a share that has not fallen over the past decade. The level of functional illiteracy is much higher, as teaching methods are based on rote memory and use pedagogic materials unrelated to the lives of children in rural areas. The survey also revealed (<https://www.ultimahora.com/mas-25700-jovenes-dejaron-la-escuela-porque-no-quieren-estudiar-n1300799.html>) that 107,000 young people between the ages of 13 and 17 had dropped out of the education system between 2012 and 2016.

The official number of class hours per year is one of the lowest in the world, and the real figure is even lower because classes in rural areas are canceled at the slightest drop of rain. Teachers are still appointed on a patronage basis and are poorly motivated.

Meanwhile, teachers' real salaries have increased significantly, currently standing at twice the minimum wage for an eight-hour day, and with some of the longest school holidays in the world. Investment in school infrastructure has also increased markedly in recent years, but not for good reason—there are cases of school roofs collapsing due to corruption in building contracts, understandably inviting media condemnation. Educational outcomes as measured by internationally recognized test scores are very poor, among the lowest in Latin America. Successive ministers of education admit that the dismal results of the latest national evaluation tests for educational performance in math and Spanish—carried out in October 2015 at a cost of \$3.5 million and finally released in early 2018—are alarming.

WPR: How are the government's education policies informed by previous attempts at education reform in Paraguay?

Nickson: The government of President Mario Abdo Benitez, who just assumed office two months ago, has stated that education is a priority for his government and has convened a team of experts to come up with a plan in the coming months. However, a healthy dose of skepticism is warranted. Since 1989, successive presidents and education ministers have almost all come from elite families who never attended public schools. Abdo Benitez himself went to St. Andrews School, the most expensive bilingual (English and Spanish) primary and secondary school in Asuncion, the capital, and then studied at a university in the United States. Their understanding of the depth of the educational crisis is thus extremely limited, and as members of the elite, they have little personal interest in the radical change that is urgently needed. Rightly or wrongly, there is a growing belief among rural youth that the very low quality of the public education system is a conscious strategy by the elite to prevent the poor majority from demanding their rights.

One indication of this is that Abdo Benitez's government is committed to continuing the overseas scholarship program, BECAL, that was started by his predecessor, President Horacio Cartes. It has already cost \$50 million to send 1,150 students for post-graduate studies to top universities around the world, money that would have been far more effectively and equitably spent on improving basic education for the vast majority of children for whom access to a BECAL scholarship remains a pipe dream.

WPR: What outcomes, if any, can be expected from the recently announced dialogue on strategies for education reform? What are the main obstacles the government faces?

Nickson: The new government has announced a national dialogue for "educational transformation." It got off to a bad start when the Finance Ministry sought to lead the process, but the leadership has now rightly been switched to the Education Ministry. Initial fears that the process would be controlled by the World Bank have also been dispelled.

But dialogue is a strategy commonly used in Paraguay as a convenient mechanism for kicking the ball of policy reform into the long grass. Abdo Benitez is beholden to the powerful interests of the ruling right-wing Colorado Party, which operates a network of clientelism throughout the country. The overstuffed administrative structure of the Education Ministry, which oversees the work of 75,000 teachers throughout the country, remains byzantine, with 223 separate departments as of mid-2018. Last month, the Education Ministry's anti-corruption head revealed that 486 local elected politicians—municipal mayors and councilors—also held posts as teachers but many were just ghost workers, on the ministry payroll without doing any work.

Rampant politicization of the education system also threatens to hinder needed reforms. In October 2017, then-Education Minister Enrique Riera called on all teachers to vote for his faction in the Colorado Party's primary to choose the candidate for the 2018 presidential election. He reminded them that all 18 regional heads of the ministry were members of the Colorado Party, and his faction promised a wage increase if it won. A national structure of educational supervision has existed for decades, separated into administrative and pedagogic supervision, but its prime role is to maintain party networks throughout the country. The introduction of meritocratic selection and promotion of teachers and administrators in the Education Ministry would disturb that arrangement, threatening the ruling party's political support. For this reason, Abdo Benitez's government will tread carefully in advancing any reforms that question the all-powerful teachers' unions that remain closely tied to the Colorado Party, albeit with the pretense of independence at the national level.

Another crucial underlying and unresolved issue that hampers educational reform is the peculiarly Paraguayan problem of "false" bilingualism. The constitution recognizes two official languages: Spanish and Guaraní. Although Guaraní is the main language—especially in rural areas, where it is spoken by over

80 percent of the population—it is a repressed language. This is reflected in the education system, which pays rhetorical lip service to teaching in Guarani, but in practice still discriminates harshly against the implementation of genuinely bilingual education. Despite numerous academic studies underlining this fact, the state still does not recognize the relationship between low educational outcomes in rural areas and language suppression.

The disparity in the quality of private and public education is increasing rapidly, perpetuating social inequality over the longer term. Poorer children suffer from the lack of education in Guarani, which stands in stark contrast to the high quality of bilingual education in English and Spanish provided by private schools in Asuncion. These schools, which cater to only around 5 percent of the secondary school age cohort, are rapidly improving. As a result, access to BECAL overseas scholarships is heavily skewed in favor of the top decile of the population, which will further reinforce economic and social exclusion in the future.

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