

The Politics of Education Sector Reforms: Cross-National Comparisons

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Following the difficult decade of the 1980s and the adoption in many Latin American countries of far-reaching macro-economic reforms, policies and institutions for social protection and human resource development were given increased priority in the 1990s. For the last several years, the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center has analyzed processes of social policy formation and execution. Most recently, Robert Kaufman, of Rutgers University, and Joan Nelson, a senior scholar at the Wilson Center, led a team of analysts in a study of the politics of education and health sector reforms. This policy bulletin summarizes their findings on education sector reforms, drawing on case studies of reform efforts in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. In another bulletin, we offer Nelson and Kaufman's conclusions on the health sector. The full comparative essays will appear, along with the detailed case studies, in a volume edited by Kaufman and Nelson to be published in late 2003.

—Dr. Joseph S. Tulchin, Director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center

The unequal coverage and low quality of public education in Latin America has long been viewed as a major cause of the region's lagging economic growth and skewed distributions of income. By the early 1990s, a growing number of economists, policy specialists, and international lending institutions began to focus on improving the quality, equity, and efficiency of education

Many of the shortcomings of Latin America's educational sectors result from structural factors outside of the control of reformers.

Skewed distributions of wealth reduce the ability of low-income families to bear the opportunity costs of educating their children, and low returns to primary and secondary education weaken the incentive to keep them in school. Organizational and financing deficiencies on the "supply side" of the education systems, however, remain fundamental causes of poor quality and performance.

THE CONTEXT OF REFORM

In the decades following World War II, many Latin American countries rapidly expanded access to public schools, particularly at the primary level. Not only parents but also teachers and their unions, ministries of education, and politicians were enthusiastic about expanded access, which generates not only education but also employment, construction contracts, and patronage. By the 1990s, however, several trends encouraged greater emphasis on efficiency, quality and equity. High repetition and dropout rates were costly; fiscal pressures made increased efficiency imperative. More open economies raised the premium on high-quality labor to help Latin American products compete successfully in international markets. More and better education is also viewed as a key measure to reducing Latin America's extremely high inequalities and widespread poverty.

The turn or return to electoral democracy on balance encouraged education reform, but its impact was mixed. More open political environments encouraged policy debate and spurred broad national conferences on education policy. The desire to deepen democracy promoted a trend toward decentralization in



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many countries; education and health were powerfully affected by this trend. But democratization also empowered vested interests likely to resist reforms.

International organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, and an array of other global and regional institutions and

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networks were a third source of encouragement for reforms to improve the efficiency and quality of Latin American education systems. International intellectual influences bolstered controversial ideas like merit pay and promotion, increased autonomy at the level of individual schools, parent and community participation, and experiments with voucher systems and charter schools, to supplement more traditional approaches such as improved pre- and in-service training, improved texts and up-dated curricula.

In contrast to the earlier and highly popular expansion of access to schools, however, the kinds of education reforms needed to improve efficiency and quality, and to better address the needs of the poor, faced formidable political obstacles.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

Reformers

Despite increased civic interest in improving education, surprisingly few actors pressed for reforms

throughout the 1990s. Reform initiatives typically came from sector specialists within international and national organizations, officials concerned with macroeconomic reform, or in some cases, from top political leaders. In at least two cases—Nicaragua and Brazil—the main proponents of reform were ministers of education who had long advocated quality reform. In Argentina, the finance ministry pushed change to relieve federal budget pressures. In Mexico the president himself took the lead in pursuing education reforms. The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank were strong advocates of education reforms, but rarely initiated or controlled the design of specific programs.

Stakeholders

Teachers' unions are the most visible and important stakeholders in the existing educational systems, and they can wield great political power in defense of their interests. They generally oppose proposals to link pay and promotion to performance, and decentralization initiatives that would weaken their bargaining leverage with political authorities at the national level. Their capacity to block reforms, however, varies considerably among the countries studied in this project.

Elected politicians are also important stakeholders in many countries because teachers' appointments and promotions constitute a rich pool of patronage possibilities, and because teachers' unions control or influence large blocs of voters. State or municipal officials also often oppose or are ambivalent about increased responsibilities, fearing these will not be matched by adequate and reliable increases in funding. To the extent that governments seek to shift funds away from tertiary education, the beneficiaries of "free" public universities are another source of intense opposition.

Fence-sitters

Considering the relatively high priority accorded to education in public opinion surveys, one might expect pressures from the general public to exert strong influence on education reforms. Occasionally, public opinion can indeed be mobilized to support reformers, as during prolonged and particularly ill-justified teachers' strikes in Colombia and Bolivia. Yet usually the public played little direct role in encour-

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aging reforms. Parents are often very concerned about their children's school, but focus their attentions on the school, not the larger system. The middle-class parents most likely to be informed and vocal usually send their children to private schools.

Our case studies also showed almost no evidence of business group support for education reforms, despite increased awareness that high-quality labor improves capacity to compete in international markets. Indeed, recent research in northeast Brazil (Tendler, 2002) indicates that some business and industrial groups are skeptical about increased education, fearing that more schooling would ultimately raise wages.

THE POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization was the major structural reform in five of the six cases covered by the project. Despite or perhaps because of its many different meanings, decentralization appeals to a wide range of actors—from international development institutions to grass-roots activists, and from those concerned with deepening democracy to those primarily focused on increased efficiency. Yet decentralization initiatives are usually driven by motives broader than the desire to improve the quality and efficiency of education, and are often carried out without adequate preparation and attention to complex but crucial details. By the early 1990s, analysts and experienced policymakers recognized that where it had been tried, the anticipated benefits often failed to materialize. Effects vary tremendously not only among but also within countries. Contrasting results reflect differences in design, implementation procedures, national and local administrative and political commitment and capacities, and the influence of key stakeholders at both national and local levels.

In Colombia, the broadly representative Constitutional Assembly of 1991 mandated decentralization as well as increased shares of national and local revenues to primary and secondary education. Yet implementation was captured by special interests. Politicians and legislators were primarily concerned to avoid teacher's strikes and retain control over patronage. Larger revenues for education increased the number of teachers and their salaries, but produced no improvements in quality or effi-

ciency. Mechanisms intended to reduce funding disparities among and within departments (states) were largely ineffective, until radical revisions were introduced in 2001.

In contrast with Colombia, decentralization of secondary education in Argentina was driven almost entirely by fiscal considerations, and was prompted by the powerful Minister of Economy, Domingo Cavallo. However, slightly later initiatives from the legislature introduced measures intended to improve quality and increase funding. Implementation faltered as Argentina's economy and politics disintegrated in the late 1990s.

In Mexico, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was the main force for decentralization of primary and secondary schools, motivated in part by a real commitment to improved education and a broader agenda to modernize the state. He also sought more specific political objectives: to reassert presidential authority, calm disruptive disputes in the education sector, and reduce the powerful union's resistance to modernizing the ruling party. An imposed shift to more moderate leadership in the teachers' union allowed reforms. The interests, capacities, and political alignments of different state governors determined the varied state responses to new responsibilities.

Major changes in the education system generally require strong commitment from political leaders to overcome predictable stakeholder opposition.

Venezuela had three different governments during the 1990s, each with its own ideas regarding education reforms. Under the Carlos Andrés Pérez government (1989–1993), as in Colombia, decentralization was part of a larger effort to restructure government, modernize the state and enhance democratic accountability. In contrast to other cases, however, governors and mayors could choose whether or not to accept the transfer of education responsibilities from the central government. Negotiations between the states and the national government foundered over funding liabilities, and no transfers in the education sector were completed. The decentralization initiative was largely abandoned after the 1998 election of Hugo Chavez.

In Brazil, the provinces and municipalities had long been mostly responsible for administering primary



and secondary education. Reforms under the first Cardoso government (1994–1998) reflected a genuine desire to improve the equity and quality of education. The main reform vehicle was a major constitutional amendment (FUNDEF) that encouraged deeper decentralization from states to municipalities, while strengthening the federal role in setting standards and guiding education policies, and establishing mechanisms to increase education funding for poorer states and cities. Somewhat surprisingly, the measure speedily passed the usually contentious national legislature. Despite some initial resistance, FUNDEF has succeeded in increasing funds for poorer areas, modestly encouraging school autonomy, and promoting a number of other reforms.

In sum, outside objectives, rather than a focus on the needs of the education sector itself, usually spurred decentralization. Central governments retained responsibility for guiding policy (including, in most cases, the crucial area of personnel policies), monitoring and evaluation, and providing major financial support for the sector. But they generally did little to assist states and municipalities with their new responsibilities and to encourage further reforms. In several cases, misalignments between intergovernmental transfers of funding and responsibility continued to pose serious problems. Among our cases, only Brazil (where the sector had long been decentralized) encouraged deeper decentralization from states to municipalities, increased the equity of funding among and within states, and promoted additional qualitative reforms.

OTHER REFORMS AND SOME ROADS NOT TAKEN

Major changes in the structure and incentives of the education system generally require strong commitment from top-level political leaders to overcome predictable stakeholder opposition. In most of our cases, leaders backed decentralization of the educational system largely because they viewed it as serving broader political or economic objectives. Few other major reforms in education system structure or incentives could be linked as clearly as decentralization to broader goals. Therefore few other proposals won top-level commitment.

Nicaragua offers an illuminating exception. Decentralization of responsibilities to sub-national

governments was not part of the agenda, due to the country's small size, and the fact that in the early 1990s most mayors remained affiliated with the recently overturned Sandinista regime. However, the Minister of Education adopted and persistently pursued a radical program of school autonomy and community participation, with tacit backing from two successive presidents. Several motives inspired this approach, including a desire to counter-balance and erode Sandinista influence among teachers and their union, and more generally in the state apparatus. As in the cases featuring decentralization, a far-reaching education reform could be sustained because it was regarded as promoting urgent objectives reaching beyond the boundaries of the sector itself.

More conventional reform programs and policies, such as efforts to improve teacher training, update textbooks and improve other teaching materials, and streamline aspects of administration, were

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pursued in all of our cases. Such measures generally provoked little opposition, and were often important components of needed improvements. However, many aspects of education system reform made little or no progress. A number of countries adopted or strengthened national testing systems; however, these are virtually never used to identify poorly performing schools or teachers. School voucher systems and partial privatization along Chilean lines remained non-starters in most of the region. Greater school autonomy and community participation were widely endorsed in principle, but national and local education bureaucracies and teachers' unions viewed such changes as threats to their authority and control over resources. Neither school autonomy nor participation was a serious aspect of national reform efforts in Argentina, Colombia, or Mexico. In Brazil, the federal ministry used small earmarked grants to promote school autonomy and associated school councils; in the state of Minas Gerais these approaches were the centerpiece of far-reaching



reforms under a supportive governor, but were sharply curtailed when a new and hostile governor took office.

CONCLUSION

Although regional trends toward economic liberalization and democratization were important contextual factors, the design and implementation of education reform initiatives were shaped by more specific factors: coalition politics, the power of teachers' unions and other stakeholders, and the institutional context of bargaining between national and local politicians. Since education was not widely regarded as a priority issue, it tended to move forward to the extent that actors linked it to broader goals.

Many core features of the system, such as career and incentive structures, have seen little change because that would threaten the bedrock interests of groups that are essential to the system. Measures of educational outcomes, such as dropout rates, remain disappointing for the region. Notwithstanding the severity of these continuing challenges, however, there have been incremental efforts at improvement throughout the region, as well as the more ambitious initiatives discussed, and the potential long-term effect of such measures should not be underestimated.

The benefits of decentralization on education outcomes remain unproven. Decentralization does not necessarily promote education reform: it simply pushes much of the politics to local levels. However, decentralization does weaken control by central ministries and allows more local experimentation and innovation. Improved communications and more active national and international networks of education specialists will likely spread innovations gradually. With rare exceptions, change will not be rapid and dramatic. But the process is under way. •

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