

# Development Discussion Papers

## *Central America Project Series*

### **Education in Central America**

Benjamín Alvarez, Joan Dassin,  
Larry Rosenberg, and David Bloom

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# DEVELOPMENT DISCUSSION PAPERS

## CENTRAL AMERICA PROJECT SERIES

A PROJECT OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY, INCAE AND  
THE CENTRAL AMERICAN BANK FOR ECONOMIC INTEGRATION



### Education in Central America

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#### Abstract

Central America has achieved substantial gains in access to primary and secondary education. But educational quality remains low and sharp inequalities in educational supply and output persist, both within countries and between Central America and other regions. Nor has educational expansion managed to alleviate extensive poverty and income inequality in most Central American countries. Nevertheless, education reform is a potent channel for promoting income growth and the reduction of economic hardship in the medium and long term. It can also produce short-term political and social benefits, such as increased community participation in school management and reform. The strong conviction that education reform is a powerful tool for social justice, a history of successful reforms over the past decade, and the heightened engagement of the for-profit and not-for-profit private sector in education will positively influence Central America's ongoing education reform efforts. In addition, Central America is well-positioned to take advantage of new development thinking that stresses the importance of building local capacity, developing knowledge management systems, implementing institutional reforms, enhancing learning resources, and building public-private partnerships for education reform.

**Keywords:** reform strategy, inequality, demographics, history of reform

**JEL codes:** I20, I21, I22, I28, N36

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**Benjamín Alvarez** has conducted research on education and human development in several countries of the Americas and Europe. He is a consultant for the World Bank, USAID, and PREAL (Program for Educational Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean). e-mail: [alvarezz@msn.com](mailto:alvarezz@msn.com)

**Joan Dassin** consults on education policy for foundations, government agencies and international organizations. She was formerly Director of Latin American and Caribbean Programs for the Ford Foundation and Representative for the Ford Foundation Brazil Office. Her research interests are in education reform, educational technology, and international development policy. e-mail: [jdassin@bellatlantic.net](mailto:jdassin@bellatlantic.net)

**Larry Rosenberg** is Project Manager of the Task Force on Higher Education at the Harvard Institute for International Development and formerly advised the Ministry of Education in Nicaragua. e-mail: [lrosenbe@hiid.harvard.edu](mailto:lrosenbe@hiid.harvard.edu)

**David Bloom** is Deputy Director of the Harvard Institute for International Development and Professor of Economics and Demography at the Harvard School of Public Health. email: [dbloom@hiid.harvard.edu](mailto:dbloom@hiid.harvard.edu)

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### **I. THE REGIONAL CONTEXT**

It is no surprise to educators that education is important for every aspect of human development. What is surprising is that policymakers worldwide now share a virtually unquestioned belief in the singular importance of high-quality education for promoting economic growth and competitiveness, for reducing poverty and inequality, and for improving the quality of life. Once a low-priority policy area, or one thought of in strict social policy terms, education now occupies a central place on most countries' national agendas. Over the past decade, international and regional organizations have devoted unprecedented attention and resources to education reform.

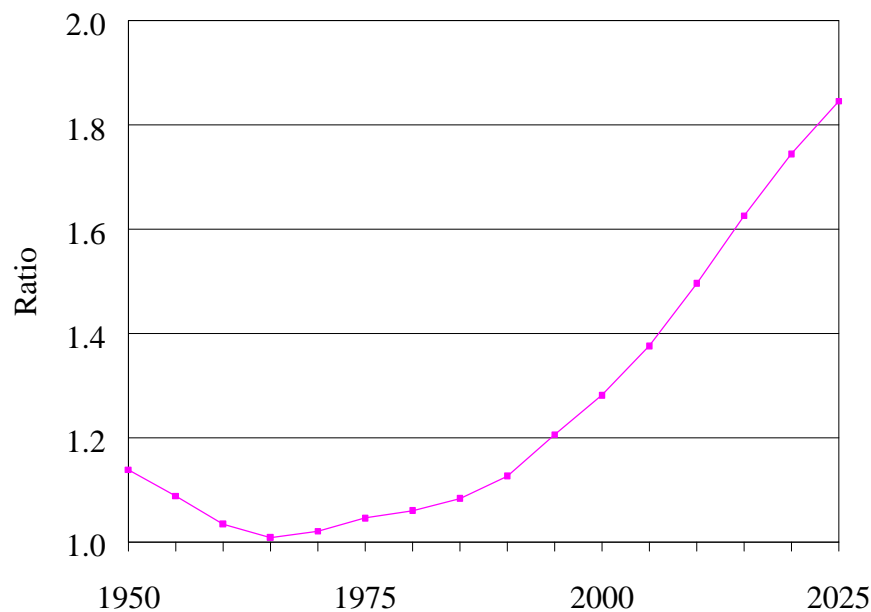
This shift in attitude stems partly from global trends that have shaken standard assumptions about practices in education to their core. Widely embraced economic models that stress competitiveness in worldwide markets have increased the demand for workers with better reading, mathematical and scientific, problem solving, and computer skills. Democracy, human rights, civil justice, and citizen empowerment—although threatened by ethnic conflict and endemic violence in trouble spots around the world—are quickly becoming universal aspirations. With its potential to develop tolerance, cooperation, and a more robust concept of citizenship, education is equally important in these areas.

The knowledge explosion fueled by the information and telecommunications revolutions has also given education new scope and purpose. Previously unimagined access to the world's store of knowledge has led to totally different conceptions of teaching and learning. Education is no longer identified so closely with children or young people and confined to schools. Rather, educators now see lifelong learning as appropriate and necessary for people in multiple contexts. Cultural institutions, such as museums and libraries, and natural and "virtual" learning environments of all kinds have become learning resources for a greater number of people at more stages of life than ever before, thereby advancing the frontiers of human development.

Demographic trends also highlight the importance of education. Like most developing countries, those in Central America are undergoing a demographic transition in which the population's age structure is changing rapidly. As figure 1 shows, the share of working-age

individuals (ages 15-64) in the population will be increasing rapidly during the next few decades. Experience in other parts of the developing world, particularly East Asia, has shown that this increased share of working-age people can have a large, positive impact on economic growth and on people's living standards (Asian Development Bank, 1997). However, this will only happen if workers have the skills required by private and public enterprises in a world that increasingly values adaptability and quick learning. If a country's education system fails to provide such skills, the potential demographic "gift" inherent in having a large share of working-age people becomes instead a growing mass of unemployed people. Education is the key to determining which of these scenarios prevails.

**Figure 1. Ratio of Working-Age to Non-Working-Age Population, Central America, 1950-2025**



*Source:* Authors' calculations based on United Nations (1996a).

Yet if education is a catalyst for economic, political, and human development, its fruits are still well beyond the grasp of the majority of developing nations. Most still suffer from the accumulated education deficits of the past: the legacy of inadequate coverage, quality, and equity at all levels. Latin America is a case in point. Despite substantial gains in literacy, gender equality, and access to primary education, in 1990 nearly a quarter of all Latin Americans older than 25 still had no formal education. Approximately half had had some primary schooling,

while fewer than 17 percent had attended secondary school and some 8 percent had had access to higher education. Even after more than three decades of efforts to increase education levels, by the early 1990s the average Latin American adult had received less than five years of schooling (IDB 1998, p. 47).

With some important differences, patterns of education in Central America are representative of conditions found throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC).<sup>1</sup> For example, younger people will have a better chance to acquire higher levels of education than did their parents and grandparents. Nonetheless, girls and young women in Central America still have lower access to primary and secondary schools than their counterparts in most South American and Caribbean countries. As a rule, school systems in all LAC countries are highly stratified, with social class—connected in multiple, subtle ways with race and ethnicity—as the major fault line.

In Latin America as a whole, poor children—who are found in disproportionate numbers among indigenous groups and populations of African descent—drop out of school more often and sooner than their more affluent counterparts. They also advance more slowly because of high repetition rates and poor quality education, and enroll much less frequently in higher levels of education. Thus while the poor are more likely to drop out soon after entering primary school, the rich go on to higher education.

This distinctively Latin American pattern—high initial access to primary school, a relatively high proportion of university students for the countries' development level, and low attendance at intermediate levels of education—has important consequences for income distribution and poverty in the region. Contrary to earlier estimates, data from household surveys for the 1990s show significantly lower returns to primary education than in other regions. Returns are only slightly higher for secondary education and greatest for university education. While this does not mean that public expenditure on education in Latin America should focus on higher education—which typically is already oversubsidized—it demonstrates that in today's global marketplace, access to low-quality, public primary education has relatively little impact on the average worker's earning power. Indeed, his or her financial prospects would only change significantly with access to a university education (IDB 1998, pp. 51-52).

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, 'Central America' refers to five countries: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

Patterns of educational access in LAC matter so much because income differentials in LAC are more pronounced than in any other part of the world. Five percent of the region's population lays claim to a quarter of national income, with the sharpest drop being between the top decile and the next lowest 10 percent of income earners. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the poorest 30 percent of the region's population earn only 7.5 percent of its total income. Despite the control of rampant inflation and nearly a decade of major economic reforms—including the expansion of regional trade, privatization, restructuring to increase productivity, and the resumption of growth in most countries in the region—income concentration has remained virtually unchanged for the last two decades. A third of the population, more than 150 million Latin Americans, earn less than US\$2 per day, the minimum to cover basic consumption needs. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that if income distribution matched the region's level of development, poverty in Latin America would be cut in half (IDB 1998, pp. 12-23).

Yet the vast majority of Latin American schools provide neither a mechanism for reducing income inequalities nor a vehicle for social mobility. On the contrary, the region's education systems operate in a kind of dysfunctional equilibrium that perpetuates, rather than alleviates, persistent poverty and inequality. Turning these schools around will require concerted, long-term action on several fronts. First, local educators, policymakers, and the international community will have to sustain the many ambitious reforms currently under way. This is often difficult under economic policies that require tight control over public expenditures. Second, communities and families will have to step up their demand for better quality education. This requires effective social mobilization and meaningful institutional change in the education sector. Finally, all actors involved, from the loftiest to the most humble, will face the dual challenge of reshaping Latin American education to play new roles in economic, political, and human development, while at the same time overcoming the systems' multiple inherited deficits.

The text that follows discusses the major features of education systems in Central America in relation to the rest of Latin America and to other developing regions. It argues that despite measurable improvement on most indicators, education systems in Central American countries generally lag behind those of their neighbors in South America and the Caribbean. At the same time, significant intraregional differences are apparent among the Central American countries, which vary widely in terms of their overall development and resources. To remedy the deficits in

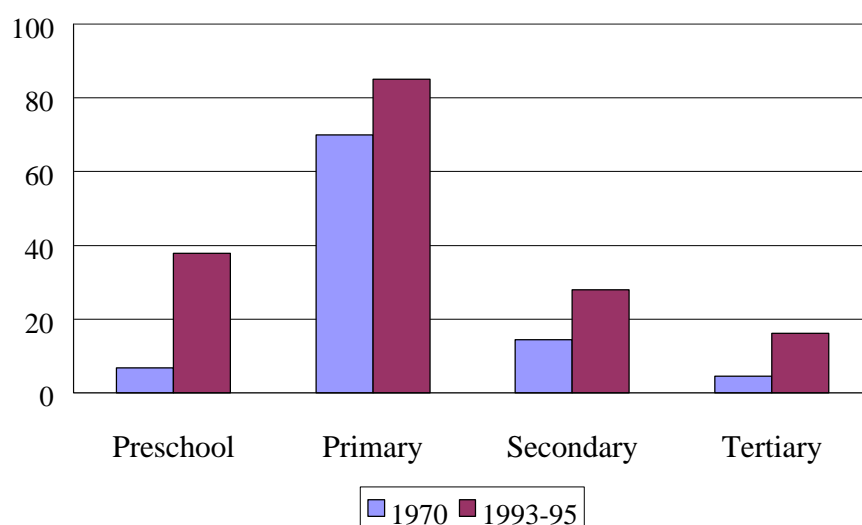
their education systems and attain hemisphere-wide goals in the sector, Central American educators and policymakers will have to key into emerging trends that are now driving education reform and that indicate strategic areas for investment.

## II. EDUCATION IN CENTRAL AMERICA: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

### Education Levels

Like countries throughout Latin America, those in Central America have substantially improved their education systems. Most important, they have expanded educational opportunities for children and adults, as reflected in changes in access to the different levels of the educational system since 1970 (figure 2). However, because the baseline levels varied so widely, sharp differences persist among the Central American countries in terms of educational attainment (table 1). Important differences are also apparent within individual Central American countries, reflecting inequalities between urban and rural areas and among various social and economic segments of the population. Because of these intraregional differences, the Central American countries compare both favorably and unfavorably to the rest of the region.

**Figure 2. School Net Enrollment Rates by Education Level, Central America, 1970-95**  
(percent)



Source: UNESCO 1997.

**Table 1. Enrollment Rates, Central American Countries, Various Years**  
(percent)

Country	Preschool enrollment rate (1998)	Primary completion (first-grade entrants) (1990)	Secondary net enrollment rate (1994)	Tertiary enrollment rates (1994)	Education Index UNDP (1994)
Costa Rica	92	89	43	27.7	0.86
El Salvador	31	58	21	19.1	0.66
Guatemala	32	36	28 <sup>a</sup>	12.3	0.52
Honduras	14	60	21	10.7	0.68
Nicaragua	20	47	27	11.2	0.64

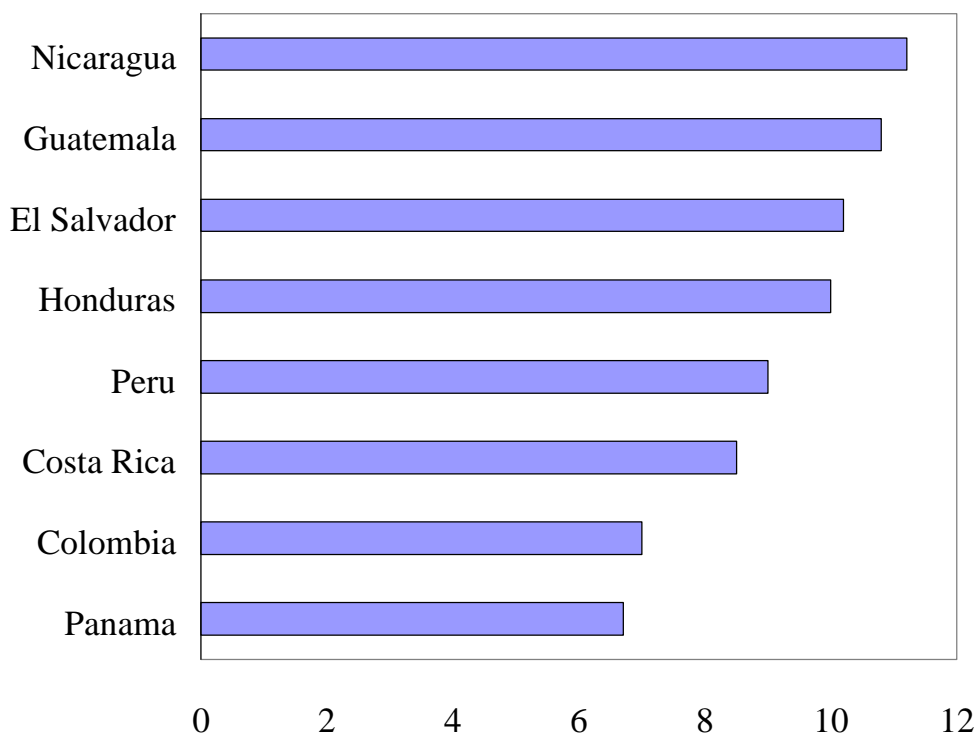
a. Gross enrollment ratio.

Sources: García Guadilla 1997, UNDP 1994, UNESCO 1997.

Increased access to preschool has helped improve both equity and quality in Central American primary education. In Costa Rica preschool enrollment rates increased from 39 percent in 1980 to 92 percent in 1995, while during the same period in El Salvador they rose from 11 to 31 percent. (Note the 3:1 differential between the two countries.) However, differences in preschool attendance between rural and urban populations and between rich and poor children persist in countries such as Costa Rica and Nicaragua (World Bank 1999). Of the 1,507 preschools in Guatemala in 1991, only 270 were located in rural areas (Myers 1995). Costa Rica is closer to Argentina, Chile, Cuba, and Jamaica in the development of preschool education than it is to Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, which have the lowest preschool enrollments in the LAC region.

Primary education is now available for most children in Central America. However, although more Central American children attend primary school than in the past, their average performance does not satisfy their teachers. Hence primary school students in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua spend more time to complete primary school than their peers in most other Latin American countries, taking ten years or more to complete the first six grades of education figure 3. In El Salvador, for example, only 4 percent of primary school children graduate from primary school without repeating a grade.

**Figure 3. Average Number of Years to Complete Primary School, Selected Latin American Countries**



Source: IDB (1996).

Primary completion rates vary substantially within Central America. They are low for El Salvador (58 percent), Guatemala (36 percent), Honduras (60 percent), and Nicaragua (47 percent), compared with Costa Rica (89 percent). Guatemala and Nicaragua have some of the LAC region's lowest primary school completion rates (IDB 1996, p. 278).

Elevated repetition and dropout rates at the primary level depress net enrollment rates for secondary education in the Central American countries. With the exception of Costa Rica, these are below 30 percent, among the lowest in the hemisphere. These rates are far behind those in other Latin American countries such as Chile, Peru, and Uruguay. The gap is even larger when the Central American countries are compared with Spain (with a net secondary school enrollment rate of 75 percent) and Portugal (73 percent), or with Asian countries such as Korea, which has achieved universal secondary education.

Consistent with the overall Latin American pattern, higher education enrollment ratios in Central America are above the average ratios found in other developing regions. However,

substantial variations exist within the subregion and LAC as a whole. Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua form a group with Paraguay as countries with modest quantitative development of higher education; Cuba, Colombia, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic belong to an intermediate group; while Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay, with their relatively high enrollment rates, form yet another group.

Compared with countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the development of higher education in Central America as a whole has been extremely limited. As a result, the region is peripheral to the international circuit of knowledge, as reflected by science and technology indicators. For example, in 1994 El Salvador had 0.04 researchers per 1,000 members of the labor force, compared with 0.46 in Bolivia and 3.07 in Spain. Most patents for inventions and new products in the subregion are granted to nonresidents, and the inventiveness coefficient of Central American countries (the number of patents granted to residents per 100,000 inhabitants) is among the lowest in the hemisphere.

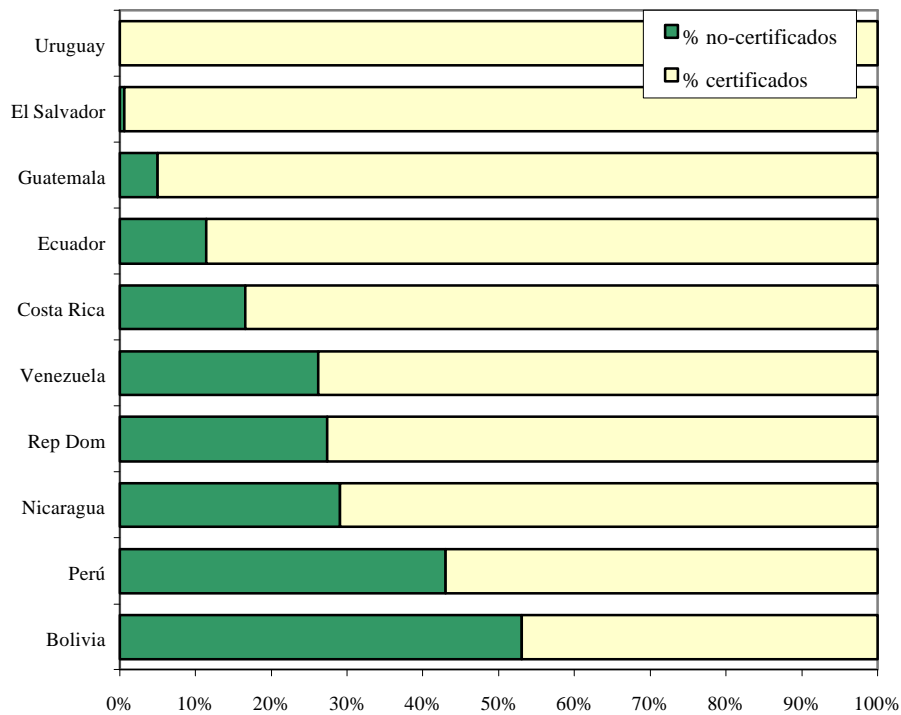
At the most general level of education, adult literacy rates have increased in all Central American countries. This reflects general educational improvement, and is also a result of targeted programs, such as literacy campaigns run by national governments and non-formal education programs run by various nongovernmental organizations. Literacy rates are above 65 percent for all Central American countries, although rates differ significantly for men and women and for urban and rural populations. Nevertheless, these rates are below the average of 86.7 percent adult literacy for the LAC region as a whole.

### **Educational Supply**

The Central American countries have made a sustained effort to improve educational inputs, and thereby achieve increased efficiency, relevance, and accountability to local communities. All have introduced substantial changes in their basic education curricula. They have implemented training and professional development programs for teachers and have developed and distributed new textbooks. However, methods of teacher preparation and teachers' levels of professional qualifications and working conditions still vary widely. In Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua primary school teachers are prepared in traditional secondary-level normal schools, while in Costa Rica and El Salvador all teachers are required to hold a university degree.

Despite formal requirements, teachers in most Latin American countries are sometimes hired with no pedagogical qualifications. These unqualified teachers (the *empíricos*) constitute a substantial component of the teaching force. In Bolivia, for example, more than half of primary school teachers have no certification, even in cases where the teaching certificate requires only the equivalent of a high school diploma. Teacher training is also a critical issue for Central America. Figure 4 compares the percentages of non-certified teachers in selected Latin American countries.

**Figure 4. Percentage of Certified Versus Non-Certified Teachers, Selected Latin American Countries**



Source: Authors' telephone survey (1998).

Teachers' salaries also vary considerably. A beginning primary school teacher in El Salvador receives a basic salary for 25 to 30 hours per week of more than US\$300 per month, substantially more than her counterparts in Argentina and Colombia receive for the same number of classroom hours. Teachers in Honduras and Nicaragua—generally with only a teaching certificate—may receive less than US\$200 per month.

### **Public Expenditure on Education**

In countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, the school-age population constitutes more than 30 percent of the total population. However, in 1994 those countries' public expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP)—1.6, 3.7, 2.2, and 3.9 percent, respectively—was lower than that of other countries in the Americas, such as Bolivia (5.4 percent), Mexico (5.3 percent), and the United States (5.3 percent), even though all of the latter have a substantially lower percentage of children and young people in their populations. The education expenditures of all the Central American countries are lower than those in the industrial countries, which average 5.1 percent of GDP, and lower than comparable expenditures in other developing countries (3.9 percent of GDP on average).

### **Persistent Inequalities**

Like the rest of Latin America, the five Central American countries have been unable to resolve pervasive inequality problems. These include inequalities in (a) access to school, especially for indigenous populations and girls; (b) school readiness; (c) quality of educational supply; and (d) learning outcomes. An illustrative case would be that of a poor Guatemalan youth aged 15-19, who is likely to have lower school attainment in comparison not only with his or her upper- and middle-income national counterparts, but also in comparison with poor youngsters in Zimbabwe. This is the case even though Guatemala is ranked 12 places above Zimbabwe in the United Nations Human Development Index. Eight out of ten poor youngsters in Zimbabwe have received at least five years of formal education, while in Guatemala only two out of ten have had the same number of years in school.

The outcomes of education are similarly unequal. Until recently, the Central American countries, with the exception of Costa Rica, did not have a system in place to measure and monitor educational outcomes. El Salvador organized a student learning assessment system in 1993; Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua did so only in 1997. Recent comparative empirical evidence (UNESCO/OREALC 1999) indicates that school achievement by third and fourth grade Honduran students is below the median attained by their counterparts in other Latin American countries. Even Colombian students, who scored poorly in international comparisons of school

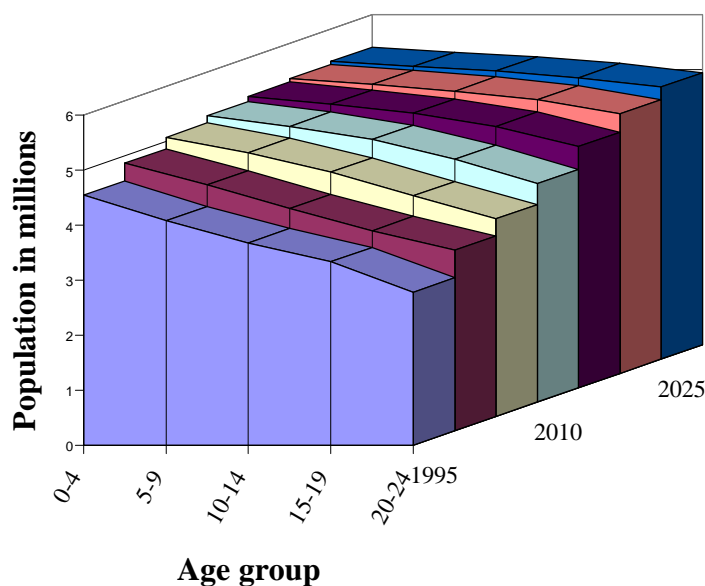
achievement (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 1997), significantly outperformed the Honduran children tested.

### **Closing the Gaps**

Central American nations are trying to close their educational gaps by committing to specific goals and continuing their reform efforts. Nonetheless, the agreement made at the 1998 Summit of the Americas to achieve universal access to primary education and 75 percent enrollment in secondary education by 2010 will be difficult for some countries to honor. To meet these goals, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua will have to simultaneously double (and in some cases triple) their current primary school completion rates and their secondary school net enrollment rates. Within Central America, only Costa Rica will be able to focus on expanding and improving secondary education as a main post-Summit priority.

These tasks will be all the more difficult because of the projected increases in school-age population in the region (figure 5). Even though the working-age population will be growing faster than the school-age population, the latter will still be increasing, particularly at the upper end of the spectrum. Between 1995 and 2025, the 0 to 4 year-old population will grow by 19 percent, while the 20- to 24-year-old population will grow by 78 percent.

**Figure 5. Projected Increases in the School-Age Population, Central America, 1995-2025**



*Source:* Authors' calculations based on United Nations (1996b).

Making progress toward the 1998 Summit goals will depend on continuing nearly a decade of reform efforts. A number of positive factors will influence the ongoing reforms:

- Despite significant differences between the Central American countries, educators throughout the subregion share a common philosophical assumption that education reform is a powerful tool for social justice. This has led to a strong consensus about specific goals for reform, such as increasing equity, quality, efficiency, and the relevance of education systems.
- The peace accords that ended the conflicts of previous decades have accelerated education reform in most Central American countries.
- The Central American countries have succeeded in involving various stakeholders in educational reforms. For example, the education reform in El Salvador involved all stakeholders in planning and designing the country's new education system and used the experience of local communities to manage rural schools. Both El Salvador and Nicaragua have convincingly demonstrated the strengths and possibilities of parents and communities who are encouraged to assume responsibility for their children's education, although in Nicaragua such efforts have been weakened by *de facto* requirements that parents contribute financially to their children's public school education.

- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a major role in education reform. In Honduras alone, more than 100 NGOs work with the public sector to promote social and human development. These organizations complement, and sometimes supplement, the role of the formal school system. NGO activities range across a wide spectrum of methods and content, from the use of established educational technologies, such as educational radio in Honduras (Instituto Hondureño de Educación por Radio), to experimentation with advanced educational technologies (Fundación Omar Dengo in Costa Rica). Other NGOs in Central America conduct comprehensive youth development programs (Desarrollo Juvenil Comunitario in El Salvador). Still others promote environmental awareness (Fundación la Verde Sonrisa in Nicaragua), carry out educational research (FEPADE in El Salvador), and administer action-oriented projects for street children (Corporación de Desarrollo Integral Comunitario in Guatemala).
- Private initiatives in support of public education have emerged. For example, the Salvadoran newspaper *El Diario de Hoy* disseminates educational materials to primary schools. The Pantaleón Sugar Refinery of Guatemala supports schools for its workers' children, and the Fundación Ricardo Ernesto Maduro is a key actor in Honduran educational reform activities. Increasingly, private sector businesses are recognizing that they can have an important role in providing the education sector with training techniques, as well as with political and financial support. These contributions are helping to bridge the gap between schools and the workplace.
- Multilateral financial and U.S. bilateral institutions are continuing to invest in Central American education. For example, in 1996 the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) allocated a total of US\$384 million (including both active and pipeline projects) for education reform in four Central American countries: US\$142 million for El Salvador, US\$144 million for Guatemala, US\$34 million for Honduras, and US\$64 million for Nicaragua. As of February 1999, the IDB alone had seven projects under way in the five Central American countries, totaling US\$268 million in Bank financing and US\$366 million in total project costs (Gajewski 1996; personal communications with IDB staff).

- Education grants and loans to Central America constitute a relatively small percentage of overall U.S. bilateral and multilateral spending for education in the LAC region (8 percent of the total expended by the USAID, IDB, and the World Bank in 1996). Nevertheless, the impact of the funds on these small countries is considerable. Most of the grants and loans target primary and secondary education. Typically, they support modernization as well as improvement of educational inputs and infrastructure. To this end, the funds support the strengthening of public sector management and administrative capacity and the establishment of evaluation and assessment mechanisms. They also finance teacher training, textbooks and materials, and school infrastructure. Most recently, preschool and higher education and educational technologies have also become important areas for international grants and loans.
- The 1998 Summit of the Americas has provided a strong impetus for increasing education spending in the region. To implement Summit accords on education, the IDB, World Bank, and USAID have projected expenditures of US\$8.3 billion in LAC for 1998-2000. The bulk of the funds will go toward education reform, including enhancing local community control (US\$3.6 billion) and training for teachers and educational administrators (US\$1.2 billion). Other significant investments will be made for textbooks and other educational materials (US\$873 million), information and distance learning technologies (US\$857 million), and technical and vocational training for workers (US\$708 million).

These auspicious factors have provided a positive climate for education reform throughout Central America, with each country pursuing its individual course in education reform (Arrién 1999). For example, in El Salvador projects such as EDUCO and SABE pioneered educational reforms that included a broad national debate. In Honduras the new Organic Education Law of 1996 and the launching of the project PROMEB are establishing the conditions for intensive reform of the educational system.

Yet all of the Central American countries are still far from reaching adequate educational levels for the majority of their populations. Raising primary school enrollment rates for underserved populations such as indigenous girls, improving the quality of primary education so as to reduce repetition and increase completion rates, and moving more young people through secondary education are still the most immediate goals. At the same time, school systems in the

Central American countries—like those everywhere in both the industrial and developing world—will have to meet the challenges posed by global economic transformation and the emergence of the next century’s knowledge-based societies.

### **III. NEW DIRECTIONS AND STRATEGIC PROGRAMS FOR EDUCATION REFORM**

#### **Trends in Education Reform**

New thinking will guide the ongoing education reform efforts in Central America and in the broader Latin American region. Indeed, the principles underlying education reform have evolved markedly from the views prevailing a decade ago. Once translated into actual policies and programs, this new thinking will shape the next generation of reforms.

Several significant new trends are already emerging, with important implications for project design and evaluation. These trends and their practical applications merit careful discussion and consideration by Central American policymakers and educators and the international community. They include the following:

- *Local actors will increasingly drive reforms.* Traditionally, education reforms in LAC countries have followed a deductive, top-down approach whose benefits are expected to descend to the beneficiaries through a cascade effect. Yet reforms driven by local actors are proving to be more responsive to local needs and more sustainable over the medium and long term. These processes, in turn, depend on building and maintaining local capacity for continuous reassessment and change. This translates into an ongoing need for qualified human resources, including education officials, teachers, and parents, and effective and broadly representative community organizations, all tied to schools with strong bonds of cooperation and mutual support. Central America’s experience with community participation and school autonomy is an example of what can be achieved when self-development processes are explicitly encouraged.
- *Among the local actors, teachers are increasingly seen as key players.* The current trend is to move away from the highly specific, centrally developed curricula of the past that were simply delivered to teachers for implementation. In the future, teachers will be more involved in decision making about curricula. Another important new focus is on upgrading the

teaching profession at the pre-service and in-service levels. Salary levels have been improved in some cases, and non-salary incentives are also becoming popular as ways to attract capable individuals to the profession and promote their continuing professional development. These considerations are particularly important for Central American teachers, who tend to be less well trained and more poorly compensated than their counterparts in the region's richer countries.

- *Reforms will be less “cookie cutter” packages and more tailored to the differing needs of particular countries and even of regions within them.* Although all the Central American countries face daunting educational challenges and none has been fully able to resolve old problems (such as educating the poor), their education systems are in markedly different stages of evolution. As a result, one scheme for all the countries cannot respond to different national and sub-national circumstances. On the contrary, parallel paths of change encourage individual development, local participation, and mutual learning. The great diversity of cultural traditions in Central America underscores the need for diverse approaches to education reform.
- *The new tailored reforms will depend heavily on up-to-date information and analysis.* The development of varied strategies and policies to achieve shared education goals must necessarily be based on a rich supply of information about and analysis of a range of education problems and conditions. It also requires the extensive use of social science tools to translate this information into cost-effective, beneficial public policies. Most important, formulating such customized policies requires a well-trained research community with strong ties to local institutions and good access to international scholarly resources. This is critical because reforms will be locally driven, but informed by worldwide experience. However, with some notable exceptions, the Central American countries have few high-quality research institutions and scholars with advanced training.
- *The new reform efforts will be of longer duration, broader scope, and greater depth than in the past.* New thinking is evolving about the dimensions of educational reforms. For example, experience indicates that educational reform is a long-term, social learning process rather than the imposition of a new set of laws. As short projects do not have the potential to affect local communities in a sustainable way, national governments and international

agencies will need to consider taking on long-term commitments. The longer-term interventions increase the potential for learning by including pilot and demonstration projects whose successes and failures can be fed back into reform cycles. Such sustained reforms are particularly difficult for the Central American countries that have traditionally suffered from political instability and a critical lack of financial resources for social investment. Education reform also has to go deeper than was previously thought. Education for the future needs to affect society profoundly, imparting to individuals of all ages opportunities to participate actively in their own education. This participation, in turn, will enhance schools' capacity to foster democratic principles, such as respect for human rights and increased tolerance of cultural diversity. This last point is explicitly stressed in the 1998 Summit of the Americas Declaration. For Central America, a region just now beginning to reconstruct its national societies after decades of civil war, this challenge is particularly critical.

- *Reforms will look beyond schools to enhance learning opportunities.* In the new knowledge society, educators will draw on learning resources from multiple institutions and environments, both physical and virtual. Technology in the form of diverse media will permit as yet unimagined access to the world's heritage of libraries, museums, scientific data, and cultural and artistic expression. The challenge for developing countries—especially those with the fewest financial resources—will be to harness the learning potential of these multiple resources in a cost-effective manner. The Central American countries are rich in cultural traditions, particularly among indigenous populations. Yet they tend to have fewer established cultural institutions than the wealthier LAC countries, and with the exception of Costa Rica, less installed technological capacity.
- *Sustainable reforms will depend on public-private partnerships.* Responsibility for public education is not limited to the public sector. In Central America and elsewhere in LAC, national governments are forging successful partnerships with state and local governments to improve education at all levels. Government agencies, in turn, are beginning to collaborate with private sector businesses, which are increasingly seeing both the economic and social benefits of more active involvement with schools. In addition, institutions from the not-for-profit private sector—comprised of numerous grant-seeking and grant-giving foundations, independent organizations, and other charitable organizations—are distinguishing themselves

both as service providers and as mechanisms for mobilizing educational demand. Multiple interactions among these actors not only strengthen the education sector, but also contribute to building civil society as a whole.

### **Strategic Interventions**

These trends suggest that strategic interventions could be made in areas outlined in the following paragraphs.

**BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY.** The 1998 Summit agreement advocates strengthening institutional capacity at the local and school levels as an important strategy for achieving the region's educational goals (*Santiago Summit of the Americas Documents*, 1998, pp. 1-4). In Central America, interventions in this area will benefit from the strong tradition of mobilization at the local level that characterizes several countries in the subregion. This tradition has already proven important for the success of Nicaragua's "autonomous schools" and El Salvador's EDUCO schools. Insofar as they are increasingly seen as the vital human resources without which reform at the school level cannot occur, teachers merit special attention in local capacity building programs.

Examples of activities for this strategic area could include education leadership institutes designed to provide school administrators and education officials at the local level with improved leadership and management skills. To assist teachers directly, mapping the diverse institutions and requirements for teacher training in Central America would help to identify the most effective pre-service programs and the elements needed to improve them. Effective in-service programs that provide teachers with updated methods, skills, and knowledge of education reform processes could also be identified and strengthened.

**DEVELOPING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS.** Education officials, educators, and researchers throughout the world agree that effective education policy should be research driven. Reliable, up-to-date data and analysis are essential for adapting or tailoring policies as closely as possible to local conditions and for determining which policies will be most effective before they are implemented on a large scale. Developing and managing knowledge and information systems are therefore critical aspects of education reform. Moreover, to increase national analytical

capacity in the education sector, research and training institutions in Central America must participate in policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

Examples of activities for this strategic area could include the formation of policy analysis networks. Such networks, based at local and regional institutions in Central America, would increase the supply of policy analysis and applied research and also serve as training vehicles. Network members would conduct research to help guide policy and investment decisions in the education sector. Ideally, the research would be comparative in nature, informed by social science methodology, and would provide research and training opportunities for younger scholars and policy analysts.

**IMPLEMENTING INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS.** The understanding that educational reform is a long-term, social learning process has resulted from the success of interventions designed to open formerly closed school management systems to greater community participation and review. These interventions have come to be seen as sets of institutional reforms that democratize governance and financial decision making in schools, without sacrificing educational quality and consistency. On the contrary, reforming legislation, school statutes, and everyday practices to increase accountability, transparency, and public participation in school-level management and administration has produced excellent results in countries as diverse as Brazil and El Salvador.

Examples of key activities in this strategic intervention area include legislative and practical reform to facilitate the creation of school-community councils, the election of school officials, the imposition of public control over hiring and firing decisions, and the dissemination of public information about resource allocation that affects schools. In a similar vein, policies could be developed to make test results public and to create non-salary incentives for teacher performance that involve recognition of merit by local communities.

**ENHANCING LEARNING RESOURCES AND EXPANDING LEARNING CONTEXTS.** This strategic area is key to enhancing learning for both school-age groups and the general population. Without systematic exploration of learning resources and learning contexts beyond schools, Central Americans will fail to benefit from the world's knowledge revolution. This will have dire consequences for the countries' competitiveness in today's information-driven economies.

Cultural institutions such as libraries and museums, along with natural settings and virtual learning environments created by diverse media, particularly computers with Internet connections, open a whole new world of learning resources and contexts.

The challenge for Central America—countries that are among the poorest in Latin America—is to explore the most cost-effective ways to take maximum advantage of these resources. This will invariably mean coming to terms with the relatively high (although declining) initial cost of placing educational technologies in schools and making them widely available to multiple users. Another imperative is to use information and communication technologies to provide educational resources for the most vulnerable populations in the Central American countries, such as indigenous groups and women.

Integrating new technologies into primary and secondary education carries great potential for increasing the pace of students' learning. Computer-based instruction, for example, can offer students access to stores of knowledge and to new methods of learning. In addition, the excitement that young people around the world feel in relation to computers holds out the possibility that Central American students may be motivated by their very interaction with computers to advance more rapidly than in the past. Nonetheless, while technology-focused initiatives hold great potential for allowing Central America to overcome its past education deficits, they require special attention to teachers, who also need to become computer-savvy learners if educational technology is to be effectively integrated into everyday classroom practice. Technological solutions cannot become a substitute for improving teacher quality or a means to bypass low-quality teachers.<sup>2</sup>

**BUILDING PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS FOR EDUCATION REFORM.** This strategic area is key to the sustainability of education reform. The more consensus business leaders, government officials, educators, and community leaders can create about the goals of education reform, the greater the probability that the reforms will enjoy long-term political and financial support. In addition, private sector businesses need to play an active role in letting schools know how best to prepare students for today's workplace. Community organizations and intermediary NGOs are also critical partners for delivering educational services, such as preschool and adult education,

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<sup>2</sup> A provocative alternative view holds that improving teacher quality in Central America is a very long-term task, and that technology-based learning offers a pathway to rapid improvements in educational performance, even in the absence of higher-quality teachers. Detailing what such an initiative would involve is beyond the scope of this paper.

that may be beyond the reach of the public system. NGOs also help channel families' demands for better education to local and national education officials.

Working in collaboration with government and educators, business can help to put educational change on the public agenda and can be effective in keeping it there, because its time horizon is often longer than that of politicians. Public and private actors can work together to define what skills and knowledge are important, and then establish specific benchmarks for what education should accomplish. Given the increasing importance of international commerce and of knowledge-based activities that transcend national boundaries, partnerships of businesses and educators will need to move toward adopting international standards for educational outputs.

Business, in particular, can take other actions for which it is well suited. First, it can work to ensure that the results of education reforms and test results are open to the public. This would help enlist public support for reforms that will benefit both business and a country in general. More broadly, business can encourage the development of a culture of accountability. Those formally responsible for improving education must be able to inspire confidence that the reforms they are pursuing are reasonable and likely to be feasible; they must be supported in their efforts; and there must be frequent evaluation of whether an education system is improving at an acceptable rate. Business can use its resources to equip at least some schools with better technology, and thus work to link teachers and students to the vast resources available through the Internet. Finally, business can work to shape the debate on education reform in such a way that it does not become a liability for the government in power, but rather, becomes a forum that encourages the best efforts of both public and private entities.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Central America faces enormous challenges in revamping its education systems to meet the needs of new economic models that stress global competitiveness and high productivity. Economic returns to low-quality primary and secondary education are clearly insufficient to alleviate extensive poverty and income inequality. Moreover, improving the quality of education to the point where even these levels of education are accessible to everyone and also meet internationally recognized standards for academic achievement will take decades.

The implications of this situation are that the Central American countries will have to commit themselves to long-term education reform, even though such investments are unlikely to

produce immediate economic benefits. However, education reform does produce short-term political and social benefits, as well as real advantages for individuals. Moreover, participatory education reform creates impressive social capital for communities and organizations.

Despite their accumulated educational deficits, the Central American countries have a number of important assets for pursuing long-term education reform. First, the societies as a whole have expressed strong interest in improving their education systems. Second, because the countries are small and in close proximity, they can share experiences, expertise, and resources. Third, the countries have a long tradition of regional cooperation and have established well-functioning diplomatic mechanisms and regional organizations for this purpose. Fourth, they have already carried out successful educational reforms that involve local community participation. These reforms are viewed as important development models throughout Latin America.

This situation suggests that Central America has a reasonable window of opportunity for improving education. If it fails to take advantage of this opportunity, it faces the prospect of falling even further behind the rest of Latin America. Moreover, if it undertakes efforts that fail to narrow educational disparities both with respect to other parts of the world and within individual Central American countries, its overall development will also suffer. Conversely, because education is such a proven and powerful instrument for social and economic progress, significant and long-lasting development gains are well within Central America's grasp.

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