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# PANAMA'S GREAT CHALLENGE: REFORMING THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

*Sabrina Harris*



*Esta es la oportunidad de garantizar el presente y el futuro de nuestras generaciones.*

— Martín Torrijos

## **Introduction**

Panama is striving to become a flourishing democracy, to build a stronger economy, and to reduce poverty among its population. The attainment of these goals, however, is being hindered by significant deficiencies in the country's educational system. Recognizing that a solid education and the skills it generates are key to economic growth and poverty reduction, the Panamanian government has become very involved in efforts to reform its educational system. For example, the Ministry of Education has developed a program ("the Government Program") stretching from 2004 to 2009, which is intended to tackle several of the many challenges that Panama's educational system is currently facing. (Gobierno Nacional) Over the last

decade, both the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) have sponsored education projects to assist Panama in improving the quality of its educational system. With their most recent projects, these agencies are attempting to improve both the quality and coverage of education in Panama. At the same time, they are also focusing on traditionally disadvantaged groups (such as the indigenous population) in order to close existing gaps in education.

After providing a brief introduction to Panama's educational system and its history, in this article I examine why the system is in need of reform and what the most pressing areas for reform are. I then analyze the main reform efforts currently led by the World Bank, Panama's Ministry of Education, and the IDB

in order to examine how the country seeks to address various educational issues. While any assessment of the effectiveness of these projects can only be preliminary, past experiences can give an indication as to what one can expect in terms of the outcome of these reforms.

## Historical Background

In order to explain the roots of the current challenges to Panama's educational system, I provide in this section a brief overview of its history. Soon after gaining independence from Colombia in 1903, Panama implemented a system of public education. This system, however, segregated students by social class. As the First Panamanian Educational Assembly declared in 1913, "Education should be different in accordance with the social class to which the student should be related." ("Education") This elitist system, which largely perpetuated social inequalities, was replaced in the 1920s by a more inclusive one while Panama was under U.S. influence. Universal primary education became one focus of the government's efforts to drive down illiteracy rates throughout the country. Although initial improvements were made, a few decades later gains had slowed significantly, and a great disparity in literacy rates persisted. This disparity was especially pronounced between the urban and rural populations. In 1998, for example, a study showed that "94 percent of city-dwelling adults were literate, but fewer than two-thirds of those in the countryside were." ("Education") Additionally, rural areas in Panama are inhabited mostly by the indigenous people, who are therefore disproportionately affected by educational inequality.

At the same time, the Panamanian constitution establishes that "all have the right to an education" and that "educational institutions, whether public or private, are open to all students without distinction of race, social position, political ideology, religion." ("Right to Education") Not only do all Panamanians have the right to an education, but it is also their duty to obtain at least a basic education; in other words, primary education is compulsory. After completing the six-year cycle of primary

school, students can take either of two educational paths: an academic or a vocational one. Almost three quarters of the student population chooses the academic route, consisting of two three-year cycles of general and then of more focused studies. The vocational route, on the other hand, provides students with the technical skills needed for direct employment. In order to attend university, students have to obtain the *bachillerato* (awarded after completion of the upper cycle of the academic course of studies), which is an emblem of middle-class status. ("Education") In this article, I focus on elementary education through the completion of high school. These years are the ones that lay the foundation for higher-level education, and they are thus key to the political, economic, and social development of Panama.

## Current Challenges of Panama's Educational System

Panama's educational system is today still plagued by significant inequalities in both coverage and quality of education between urban and rural areas. Coverage of education refers to the degree to which students in a specific geographical area have access to schooling. While universal access to education and high education quality are both important goals, reformers face a constant trade-off between the two since resources are limited. An additional constraint comes into play because changes in the quality of education are extremely difficult to measure. (Sanguinety, p. 35) It is easier to document the building of more schools and classrooms than it is to assess the impact of improved teaching methods. As the reform efforts analyzed below illustrate, however, Panama is seeking to address both issues of coverage and quality to improve its educational system.

### Lack of Coverage in Education

Rural regions tend to be inhabited mostly by poorer families as well as by Panama's various indigenous peoples, both of whom continue to be greatly disadvantaged in terms of access to education. Rural and indigenous pop-

ulations often live very far away from the nearest primary school. At the same time, they need their children for work at the farm to assist with their subsistence agriculture. These circumstances lead to far lower primary school completion rates, especially among the indigenous population. In 2002 only about six percent of Panama's non-indigenous population failed to complete primary education, compared to more than 45 percent of the indigenous people. ("Quantity without Quality...", p. 11)

When it comes to middle school coverage, the situation is even worse. As the IBD Report on the reformulated Educational Development Project notes, "There are no opportunities in rural or indigenous areas for students who have completed primary school to advance to the middle school level." ("Short Procedure," p. 5) For example, the Kuna, one of Panama's indigenous groups who live on the islands off the country's northeastern shore, have only very limited access to schools unless they move to the mainland. During a conversation I had with a group of Kuna in May 2006, one Kuna woman explained that there are fifty different communities on the islands, and most have an elementary school. However, there are only six middle schools and just one high school available to these students. If a family does not live on an island with a school, the child will either not go to school, instead helping the parents make a living, or will be sent off to another island with a school and live with a foster family. The one high school available has a concentration only in agriculture. Therefore, if a student wants to pursue another field, he or she must move to the mainland of Panama. While such an inadequate infrastructure dramatically limits the Kuna's access to education, they are just one example of a group facing this problem. There are numerous other indigenous groups and rural areas that lack adequate schools and for whom education beyond the elementary level is barely accessible. As a result, Panama's primary school enrollment rate is 97 percent, while middle school coverage is only 64 percent. Additionally, the illiteracy rate among those aged 15 and above is seven percent in urban areas and 16 percent in rural and indigenous areas. ("Short Procedure," p. 4)

## The Importance of Education

Education is crucial for the development of both Panama's economy and its democracy. Studies have shown that increased spending on education positively affects a country's business climate and that the resulting improved performance by at-risk students allows them to make greater contributions to the economy. (Schweke, p. 2) In addition, it is also important to invest in the right areas. According to Schweke, major improvements that should be considered are reducing class sizes, introducing technology into the classroom, and improving teacher training as well as accountability structures. (Schweke, p. 2) Closer analysis of Panama's education reforms illustrates how the country is addressing some of these problems.

Additionally, education is a major factor in determining the level of civic engagement and political participation of the people, which in turn are essential for a healthy democracy. Recent studies conclude that educated people are more likely to be involved politically and civically than those with less education. (Zukin, p. 133) Some scholars, such as Nancy Burns, even go as far as to label formal education as "the single most important resource for political participation." (Burns, p. 8)

The consequences of the current deficiencies of Panama's education system are thus far-reaching. The rural (poor) and indigenous peoples especially face extreme difficulties in an effort to improve their standard of living and to advance in society. At the same time, they are not contributing to Panama's economic growth as much as they could if they had a better education. Having recognized the need for universal primary education, the UN established that one of its Millennium Development Goals should be to "ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling." ("Achieve Universal...") Current reform efforts overseen by the Panamanian government also focus on this issue of inequality of schooling between urban and rural areas and between non-indigenous and indigenous populations. A later section in this article addressing the reform efforts of the Ministry of Education will highlight the steps it is taking in this regard.

## **Lack of Quality in Education**

A second major problem of Panama's educational system pertains to student achievement levels. For example, more than 40 percent of Panamanian students did not fulfill expectations in national tests in 2004, but rather performed below the goals set for their grade level." ("Short Procedure," p. 5) While Panama has yet to participate in regional or world-wide tests of basic education that allow for comparison with other countries, especially with its neighbors, this percentage is alarming. Regional data, however, that compare Panama to its neighboring countries are available at the university level. With regard to performance on the Academic Aptitude Test (ATT) taken by students applying to university, Panamanian students lagged behind the regional average by 130 points and behind Uruguayan students (who scored the highest overall) by 315 points. ("Short Procedure," p. 6) These numbers are strong indicators of the poor quality of Panama's educational system.

## **Educational Expenditures**

Public education expenditures have been decreasing in Panama over the last few years, with only about eight percent of total government expenditures going to education in 2003 compared to almost 21 percent in 1996. ("Quantity without Quality...", p. 43) Over the same time, average spending on education for Latin American countries overall has dropped by only one percentage point, from 16 percent to 15 percent. In 2002 the U.S. devoted 17 percent of total government expenditures to education, compared to Panama's eight percent. ("Human Development Reports") While it is alarming that Panama is devoting a decreasing percentage of its expenditures to education, the manner in which the funds are allocated is also a problem.

A breakdown of where the funding goes shows that only 20 percent of education expenditures are used for new investment (like schools, technology, etc.) while most expenditures go towards salaries. A lack of innovation (with regard to new technologies, improved teaching methods, etc.) and a great number of

poorly equipped schools are two of the results of this spending pattern. Furthermore, expenditures per student are strikingly low at both the elementary and secondary school levels when compared to the university level. And while most funding overall goes to primary schools, the investment per student is still comparatively low. For example, in 2002 and 2003 three to four times as much money was spent per student in higher education than that spent in primary education, while the world average ratio is between two and three. ("Quantity without Quality...", p. 22) As a World Bank report noted, "Public resource allocation for education in Panama has the effect of heightening disparities in income distribution." ("Panama...", p. iii) Almost twice as much funding goes to the richest 20 percent of Panamanians as goes to the poorest 20 percent of the population. The underlying reasons for this disparity come from the fact that funding is primarily allocated for higher education, but very few students from disadvantaged backgrounds pursue higher education. Less funds are available for lower level education, which is precisely where the poor and minority students are greatest in numbers. ("Panama...", p. iii)

## **Panama's Experiences with Previous Education Reforms**

In 1995 the World Bank put together an extensive report analyzing educational issues in Panama and providing recommendations for improving the system. Although its assessment was made before Panama's government cut spending on education, the World Bank report indicated the need for additional resources. One of its main conclusions was that "the existing system must become more cost-effective, and innovative ways must be sought to achieve educational goals." ("Panama...", p. iv) In order to achieve these goals, the report further suggested "utilizing the private sector where possible, introducing user charges where feasible and reorienting the sizeable scholarship and loan program away from one based almost exclusively on merit, towards one based primarily on need." ("Panama...", p. iv) The main challenge to successful implementation of these goals has been that education in Panama

has traditionally been subsidized by the government (including education at the university level) and that the introduction of fees would not be politically feasible. Furthermore, those who are most vocal and politically powerful also tend to be those who are well off, placing the poor at a disadvantage in the competition for resources. The World Bank recommendations also included the expansion of school coverage, especially in rural and lower-income urban areas, improvement of the quality of basic education, and a reallocation of resources from higher education to basic education.

The report provided the foundation for a later collaborative effort between the World Bank and the Panamanian government. The World Bank's First Basic Education Project for Panama ran between 1996 and 2002. The project consisted of three main components: improving educational quality and expanding access to education, expanding preschool education, and the strengthening of Panama's Ministry of Education. ("Implementation Completion Report...", p. 2)

In 2003, a year after completion of this project, the World Bank published the results. Significant improvements in coverage and quality of education had been made. At the same time, these initial successes also taught that disadvantaged populations need to be targeted more specifically in order to have the greatest impact on those with the greatest needs.

### **The World Bank's Second Basic Education Project in Panama**

To continue these initial efforts, a second World Bank project has already been put into place and is scheduled to be completed in 2007. Its goals are similar to those of the original project, but with greater effort directed toward disadvantaged groups. Enhanced teacher training, provision of textbooks and other instructional materials, poverty-based scholarships, and renovation of school buildings are all part of this project. In remote areas where schools are not available, distance learning (*telebásica*) will be provided. Additionally, the project seeks to further decentralize the Ministry of Education in an effort to expand

information and assessment systems throughout the country. Decentralization is also intended to give local communities more power and flexibility (and thereby ownership) with regard to education.

A preliminary status report from 2006 indicates that the project is largely on schedule despite early delays in implementation. The report specifies further that those areas in most need for change are "the activities linked to school construction and decentralization of management, where ... the milestones are still below target." ("Status of Projects...", p. 1838)

### **Reform Efforts through the Ministry of Education**

Education projects such as those described above can only be successful if the national government fully endorses them. In addition to supporting agencies like the World Bank, Panama's Ministry of Education has also taken an increasingly active role in reforming the educational system with a program of its own that started in 2004 and will run until 2009. For example, to increase coverage the Ministry of Education plans to build 395 additional classrooms for 11,900 preschool children. The plan also calls for 26 new primary schools to be built for 1,300 students and 50 *telebásica* (distance) schools, benefiting over 2,000 more students who live too far from the nearest school. (Gobierno Nacional, p. 43) Furthermore, about 1.5 million textbooks with didactic guides are being distributed. The project also calls for restoration, expansion, and repair of schools.

Another reform effort, addressing the lack of quality in Panama's educational system, is *Conéctate al Conocimiento* ("Connect to Knowledge"). This program is a presidential initiative which started in early 2005 and is being carried out through the Governmental Innovation Secretariat of the Presidency (SENACYT). The project's mission is to create "an innovative and integral quality education in all of Panama" in order to "promote meaningful learning through the integration of innovative educational technologies in the schools." (Barrios) To achieve these goals, *Conéctate al Conocimiento* provides a two-week program of

teacher training whereby teachers learn to employ a scientific method of teaching focused on investigation and application. (“Short Procedure,” p. 10) Then teachers are trained to translate this knowledge into hands-on activities and projects in the classroom.

To provide additional incentives for the improvement of education, a national system to evaluate teaching will be created. It will measure students’ academic performance on national and international tests. Part of this goal is also for Panama to take part in the PISA studies, which assess the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds every three years via tests given in various countries. In an effort to improve education among the indigenous population, bilingual education in both Spanish and their native tongue will be fostered through the distribution of textbooks in both languages, to be given out to 200 selected centers throughout Panama. (Gobierno Nacional, p. 48)

Yet another reform effort taken by the government is to simplify and decentralize the bureaucratic aspects of the educational system, including the distribution of funds to schools. This will be done to increase ownership of the project by local communities, which ensures that they feel they are part of the process. As scholars such as de Cerreno have pointed out, “Schools are more likely to be responsive to the communities in which they exist, and parents and students are more likely to involve themselves in the school system if they can have a greater impact.” (p. 6) Furthermore, decentralization will also allow parents and the local community to hold teachers and other officials more accountable for their actions (Grindle, p. 41)

High schools will also modify the areas of concentration they offer to include, for example, an industrial concentration in telecommunications and one in maritime ports and transportation. Such additions are a reaction to demands by the job market for students with an education in these areas as Panama’s economy develops. Beyond that, close connections with companies will be formed in an effort to prepare students for their careers beyond school: 77 enterprises have already “adopted” 328 schools, benefiting a total of 75,000 students by providing them with hands-on instruc-

tion and experiences. (Gobierno Nacional, p. 51) Overall, these various strategies of the Ministry of Education address the major challenges facing Panama’s educational system. These efforts are being financed through a combination of government expenditures and loans from such international organizations as the IDB and World Bank, as well as private sector contributions.

Since the project has not yet been completed, it remains to be seen how successful these approaches prove to be. However, according to Irvin Halman, Director of the Panamanian Chamber of Commerce, “There has been progress in replacing sub-standard infrastructure for schools, the introduction of English as a second language, better leadership and communication processes leading to administrative improvements, training in conceptual maps and technology, among others.” (Halman)

## **The Educational Development Project through the IDB**

Another large-scale attempt to improve Panama’s educational system is the Educational Development Project (PRODE) led by the Inter-American Development Bank. In 1998 the IDB had launched its first project, which targeted the efficiency and coverage of Panama’s educational system. These efforts proved to be largely unsuccessful, however, since eight years later only 32 percent of the approved amounts had been disbursed. (The normal execution period for these projects is less than five years.) The problems regarding the project’s implementation can be attributed to the IDB’s operating largely independently of the Ministry of Education, as well as the lack of clarity about the functions of this agency and how it was expected to collaborate with the Ministry of Education. The IDB also acknowledged that, because its country strategy for Panama had changed since the design of its project several years earlier, the project needed to adapt to the new problems facing the educational system in Panama.

Therefore, in early 2006 the IDB decided to reformulate the original project to deal with some of these problems. As the IDB’s reformu-

lation document states, the purpose of the updated project design is to focus especially on poor rural and indigenous populations “to ensure that activities financed by the project are aligned with the Ministry’s priorities, and to increase the level of ownership of the project and commitment to it by the officials of the Ministry of Education.” (“Short Procedure,” p. iv) Clearly, the IDB has shifted its focus to pay special attention to the most disadvantaged groups in Panama. In addition, there is a high degree of collaboration planned between the IDB and Panama’s Ministry of Education. With the recognition that a failure to communicate and collaborate had contributed to the earlier education project’s unsatisfactory performance, this project stresses the importance of the IDB and the Ministry of Education working together.

The objective of the reformulated IDB project is to improve both educational opportunities and learning conditions for all, but especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. (“Short Procedure,” p. iv) This is to be achieved through the creation of new educational opportunities for these groups, through increased quality and inclusiveness of education and through the establishment of adequate learning facilities, as well as through a secondary education reform. At the time of this writing, the IDB is still reviewing bids for the infrastructural plans and is conducting curriculum studies in order to finalize plans for the secondary education reform. According to Mr. Jeremy Gold from the IDB, a first report will most likely be submitted in late 2007, and a more comprehensive evaluation will take place when the halfway point of execution is reached in 2008. (Gold) While plans for developing this secondary education reform are still in progress, the other three components of the reformulated project are analyzed more in detail below.

### **Improved Access to Education**

First, the IDB seeks to expand educational opportunities especially for the poor and indigenous school-aged population. Focus will be directed largely towards improving literacy. This is to be achieved by providing more access

to preschool and primary education in rural and indigenous areas as well as through efforts to combat illiteracy among both youths and adults. New classrooms will be built to accommodate more children. Additional resources will be utilized to train outreach workers and teachers and to provide educational materials and furniture for schools. (“Short Procedure,” p. 8) These educational materials will be adapted to bilingual and intercultural settings for the indigenous population. However, even when preschool and primary education reaches all of Panama’s school-aged children, gaps will remain. For example, there are still no middle or high schools in rural and indigenous areas to provide further education for those who complete elementary school. (“Short Procedure,” p. 5)

### **Quality Improvement**

A second component of the IDB education project targets the problems of quality and inclusion in learning in Panama. As the IDB explains in the project description, “Improvement in the quality of education requires the application of inclusive and effective teaching practices, as well as periodic assessments of student learning, in order to obtain feedback on those practices.” (“Short Procedure,” p. 9) To this end, resources will be set aside for school improvements in some 200 poor urban schools that show deficiencies in the quality of learning. Officials also recognize that certain groups of students (in particular, those with disabilities) remain excluded from the educational system. As a result, they plan to include children with disabilities in regular classroom settings and to train teachers accordingly. In addition, Panama will participate in assessment tests and become part of the LLECE (The Latin-American Laboratory for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education, which is part of UNESCO). The IDB will also support the training of 300 teachers through SENACYT and its Conéctate al Conocimiento project, described earlier.

### **Improvement of Infrastructure**

The third component of the IDB’s strategy seeks to establish a better learning infrastruc-



ture. ("Short Procedure," p. 11) Put simply, more classrooms need to be built while most schools in the indigenous areas also require major renovations and repairs. More specifically, the IDB will contribute to the construction of about 340 preschool and middle school classrooms and to the renovation of at least 1,700 classrooms in 450 different schools. ("Short Procedure," p. 11)

## Conclusions

This article has highlighted how Panama's Ministry of Education has become increasingly proactive in reforming the country's educational system. With the financial help of both the World Bank and the IDB, the lack of coverage and the poor quality of Panama's educational system are now being addressed. Both agencies have realized that full commitment by the national government is key to a successful implementation of these projects. Both the government and loan providers have complementary goals, but face significant challenges in implementation due to institutional constraints and the difficulty of reaching the more remote areas of the country.

Although Panama's past education projects never achieved all of their original goals, progress has been made over time. Whereas plans and projects that specify strategies for reform are essential for success, a cer-

tain level of flexibility is also necessary, as is the willingness to adjust goals to the situation found in Panama's rural areas. As a result, alternative solutions such as distance learning need to be considered more fully to complement more traditional reform approaches in order to accommodate the living conditions of various populations.

Those who design and implement development projects must place increasing importance on collaboration with the local population. If reforms are to be accepted by the Panamanian population, the creators of these reforms must ensure they have the support of those whose lives they are affecting. This requires not just collaboration with Panama's elites. From the growing consensus that emphasis needs to be placed on the most disadvantaged groups, namely the rural and indigenous populations of Panama, it follows that these groups also need to be included in both the planning and execution of any reforms. The current reforms will most likely not be the last ones implemented in the country. Great shifts in the educational system cannot be expected to happen quickly, but the increased focus on disadvantaged rural and indigenous populations by all parties offers hope for continued positive change.

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