

9-12-2002

## Cuba Renovates Schools

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Cuba Renovates Schools." (2002). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9004>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Cuba Renovates Schools

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Cuba

Published: 2002-09-12

Cuba has recently completed a massive project to rehabilitate substandard schools, especially in Havana, and to strengthen a teaching staff, which, according to some accounts, had become as rundown as many of the schools. Despite the deterioration in the schools, Cuba maintains a superior public education system. The goal nationwide was to refurbish all the schools, reduce class size to 20 students or fewer, put a television set and computer lab in every classroom, and induct thousands of newly trained teachers into the profession by the start of the school year this month.

In Havana, where the school problem was most severe, 746 primary and secondary schools have been renovated and 33 new ones built in 22 months in what President Fidel Castro called "an educational revolution that will be a model for the world." Although spending on education has risen somewhat in recent years, the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimates that budget allocations for schools dropped by 48% between 1989 and 1995 the period of the decline and disappearance of Soviet aid. The government says it now spends 8.1% of GDP on education compared to the average of 4.6% of GDP in Latin America as a whole.

Officials lay some of the blame for the decline in the quality of schools on the US embargo and the blow to the economy resulting from the disappearance of Soviet aid. A factor in the decline of the teaching corps has, ironically, been the success of the limited private-sector opening of the mid-1990s. With the legalization of the US dollar and increased access to the currency, especially through employment in the tourism sector, many teachers left the classroom for jobs where they can earn dollars.

In a July 1 speech celebrating the completion of the 402nd school renovation in Havana, Castro catalogued some of the problems: students in Santiago de Cuba were learning twice as much as those in Havana; barely 48 new graduate teachers were entering the profession in Havana each year as many more exited the classroom. "Nobody wanted to be a primary school teacher," Castro said. He said there were schools with no windows and broken plumbing; schools with only one working toilet for hundreds of children; schools without water fountains; 450 schools with no refrigerators in the kitchens; other schools with no kitchens; and classes as large as 50 students.

### *Education in Cuba ahead of other Latin American countries*

The condition of public education in Cuba is one of those "compared-to what" issues. Despite the deterioration in schools, a 1998 study by the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that Cuban third and fourth graders were better educated in basic language and mathematics skills than children in all other Latin American countries that took part in a study.

UNESCO tested students in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. Only 11 sets of tests were

counted, however, because the Costa Rican government sent in the scores too late, and, in Peru, then President Alberto Fujimori took the unprecedented step of refusing to release the scores. The Cuban students scored 350 out of a possible 500 points on the tests. Students in the other countries scored between 180 and 280 points.

Richard Wolf, co-director of the study, said in a National Public Radio interview, "There was a you know, just an astounding difference. I'd never seen a difference of this size in an international survey. It's not just that they [the Cubans] came in first in this study, but that they came in overwhelmingly in first place." The Cuban test scores were so high that UNESCO retested the Cuban students but got the same results.

Cuban students performed better on the tests than even the private-school students in Argentina and Chile. "These [Cuban] students are doing very well. They must be doing something like the level of North American students or maybe even beyond," Wolf said. The report noted that, at the time of the study, Cuba's GDP ranked ninth among the 11 countries counted in the results. Chile had the highest GDP but ranked second to Cuba in the language scores and fourth behind Cuba in the mathematics scores.

In April 2001, World Bank President James Wolfensohn praised Cuba for its education and other social programs. The bank's World Development Indicators in 1999 showed that Cuba led most other poor countries and ranked with the industrial nations in education and some other categories. "Cuba has done a great job on education and health," Wolfensohn said, "...and it does not embarrass me to admit it." The embarrassment would have come from Cuba's ability to maintain and improve its development indicators without the benefit of World Bank advice or loans and its rejection of the neoliberal economic model.

The executive summary of the World Bank's findings for 1999 said that if Cuba were to open up to the global economy the educational system could suffer setbacks resulting from greater personal income and consumer choices. "It is unclear whether Cuba will be able to maintain the consistency of educational investments and policy strategy in a more open environment," said the summary. The system's commitment to equity will surely be tested as economic opportunities provide greater opportunities for families to purchase high quality education for their members, directly or indirectly." Thus, prosperity could threaten the high quality of Cuba's education system.

## *Reforms part of Battle of Ideas*

Educational reform is part of the Battle of Ideas initiated in 2000, which takes as its point of departure the detention in the US of Elian Gonzalez (see NotiCen, 2000-07- 13). It is part of Cuba's response to external pressures to end socialism and adopt reforms advocated by the US. Castro has given a series of speeches marking progress in the school renovation and reform programs. The theme of these speeches is part inspirational urging construction workers and teachers to efforts comparable to the 1961 battle at the Bay of Pigs or the eradication earlier this year of dengue fever.

Another theme is his thesis that Cuba's future lies with its intellectual capital. "No one should be surprised that there are millions of professionals because, in the not-too-distant future, this country

will live on its intellectual production," said Castro. Practical examples of this strategy are: the heavy investment in the pharmaceutical industry; the recent policy decision to restrict dependence on sugar exports, while subjecting the industry to high-tech diversification (see NotiCen, 2002-06-27); and the opening this month of a university-level school to train computer specialists on the site of the former Russian electronic surveillance center at Lourdes near Havana. Castro has called Cuba the most cultivated country in the world.

He and education leaders do not talk of the push in education as a crisis of the moment but as part of a long-term project to show off gains under socialism as compared with, in Castro's words, "the profound and unstoppable capitalist crisis." Increasingly, with the collapse of the Argentine economy and the general failure of neoliberal economic policies to reduce poverty and unemployment in Latin America, Cuba has restated its view that consumer capitalism cannot survive. This assertion leads inevitably to comparisons.

In a recent broadcast of the Cuban daily televised Round Table program, panelists said privatization of education in Latin American had victimized students, and they drew comparisons between Cuba and the rest of Latin America. In one example, a panelist said that, in Honduras, 500,000 school children dropped out of school each year because of poverty. School enrollment is close to 100% in Cuba.

-- End --