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## Honduran Bilingual School

by LADB Staff

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[The following article by Larry Luxner is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the April 9, 2003, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

Forty percent of Honduran children receive no formal education, and 69% of all kindergarten students in this impoverished country drop out before the school year ends. But on the outskirts of the northern city of San Pedro Sula, 590 children from low-income families are enjoying a first-rate education in English and Spanish at what may be the only school of its kind in Central America.

The Mhotivo Foundation (the name stands for Mas Hondurenos Teniendo Identidad, Valores y Orgullo or More Hondurans with Identity, Values, and Pride) is funded by businesses in San Pedro Sula, a city of 800,000 people and the country's industrial center. The school was inaugurated Oct. 5, 1998, less than a month before Hurricane Mitch struck, killing more than 7,000 people and crippling the country's fragile economy (see NotiCen, 1998-11-12). At least 10% of the school's pupils are from families that were directly affected by the hurricane.

"I don't think there's another school like this in Central America, where all the kids are on scholarships and their parents don't pay a cent," said Elsa Marina de Hoffman, the institution's rector. "Seventy percent of our children are really poor, 20% are lower-middle class and 10% are middle class." The Mhotivo Foundation's philosophy, she said, is based on "recovering traditional values and pride in being Honduran." Located off a busy highway leading to the airport, the school has 12 classrooms for preschoolers and eight for first and second graders. The first first-grade class began in August 2001, and second grade was added last August.

By 2006, the school plans to offer kindergarten through sixth grade. The Mhotivo Foundation has invested about US\$2 million, and the school has a soccer field, four basketball courts, and two volleyball courts. Ecumenical student body and beautiful "We are ecumenical. The school is Catholic, but we have students who are Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other religions. The idea is to reach very poor people with very few resources who can't study in a private school, let alone a bilingual school where costs are high. They come here on scholarships offered by private companies or personal benefactors," Hoffman said.

A bronze plaque at the school's entrance lists the benefactors. Many are members of the local Palestinian community: Emilio Hawit Lara, Jacobo Faraj, Juan Canahuati, Nasry and Alicia Canahuati, Jorge and Emilia Charur. "The companies can choose [scholarship] candidates from among their own workers' children, or they can give us the scholarships and we look for the kids," Hoffman said, adding that more than 140 local companies have contributed to the foundation. It costs about US\$59 a month to sponsor a student, which covers tuition and all school supplies. The donation of scholarships is also a public relations tool for the companies.

"We have a responsibility to provide jobs and, through jobs, opportunities," said Mario Canahuati, the Mhotivo Foundation's founder, who is now Honduras' ambassador to the US. The foundation is headed by Rafael Flores, president of the Cortes Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

"Only through education can we provide the tools people need to search for new opportunities," Canahuati said. The school has 12 teachers whose salaries start at slightly more than US\$300 a month. All are bilingual. Some have lived in the US, while others studied in bilingual schools. Twelve bilingual teaching assistants earn about US\$125 a month. She added, "It's very motivating to build up the children's moral and religious values. These children can be a part of the future development of our country."

First-grade teacher Casta Duran said, "The attention here is much more personalized. We not only teach them a second language, we also try to teach the children how to survive in society. Most kids in this school belong to the lower class. We want them to become professionals." "That's just the beginning," Canahuati said. "We want to transfer our experience and knowledge to other communities and to public schools. The concept is to make sure people realize the importance of education. People don't know what education can do for them."

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