Enrollment Is Up, but Quality Problems Persist in Nicaragua’s Public Schools

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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

Recommended Citation

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.
Enrollment Is Up, but Quality Problems Persist in Nicaragua’s Public Schools

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Nicaragua
Published: 2013-01-31

When Nicaragua’s public schools open their doors next month for the new academic year, 2,500 students and an equal number of teachers will show up for their first day of class on shiny new mountain bikes.

The "lucky" recipients can thank the administration of President Daniel Ortega, which is distributing the bikes free of charge as a way to keep impoverished rural students—who would otherwise have to walk at least 3 km to their respective schools—from dropping out. The administration, in turn, can thank the telecommunications giant Claro, which ponied up a reported US$400,000 to pay for the two-wheelers. The company is controlled by Mexican business magnate Carlos Slim, the richest person on the planet, according to Forbes Magazine’s annual ranking. Through its Claro-sponsored Ayúdame a Llegar (help me get there) program, the government claims to have distributed some 15,000 bikes during the past several years.

Critics dismiss the project as a "band-aid" measure that has little real value beyond the public-relations buzz it generates for the Ortega administration and its corporate partner. By the government’s own estimates, roughly 144,000 of the country’s approximately 1.6 million students, or 9%, dropped out of school in 2012. Are a couple thousand free bikes really going to make much of a difference?

Government backers, nevertheless, insist the program is a worthy contribution, especially in conjunction with the Ortega administration’s many other efforts on behalf of Nicaraguan school children. Just this month, first lady Rosario Murillo—who doubles as the government’s official spokesperson—announced plans to distribute free school supplies to 400,000 needy students. The state will also give away 300,000 pairs of shoes, as well as provide more frequent training sessions for teachers, she promised.

"Poverty pains us," said Murillo. "Families shouldn’t feel the need to stop sending their children to school because they don’t have notebooks, pencils, and other supplies."

Murillo and her husband have been making announcements of this kind since 2007, when Ortega—a one-time Marxist revolutionary who led the country for a number of years following the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) revolution of 1979—regained the presidency after three failed bids. Ortega marked his return to power by famously reaffirming the right of all Nicaraguans to free public education. "Recess is over," he said. "Everyone get to class, and without paying even a cent on matriculation or monthly fees."

Overall student enrollment, as a result of the president’s pledge, has increased. And, the dropout rate has dropped—by six percentage points since 2006—according to government statistics. In addition, the Ortega administration claims to have taught thousands of Nicaraguans to read, cutting the national illiteracy rate form 22% in 2006 to 3.33% in 2010, thanks to programs such as Yo Sí
Puedo (yes I can) and Yo Sí Puedo Seguir (yes I can keep going), efforts reminiscent of the FSLN’s widely heralded post-revolutionary Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización (national literary crusade).

"If we look at the results from year to year, it’s clear that what we’ve accomplished, the advances we’ve made in things like academic performance and student retention, have been really significant. And, if we compare that to the period [before Ortega’s return to office], there’s an enormous difference," Vice Minister of Education José Treminio said during a Jan. 11 event marking the sixth anniversary of President Ortega’s "recess is over" declaration.

Questions about quality

Not everyone shares Terminio's enthusiasm for the state of Nicaragua’s public-education system. While enrollment and student retention may have improved under Ortega, the same, argue many observers, cannot necessarily be said for the quality of education those students receive. "It’s important that [the students] are being fed," Dr. Ernesto Medina, president of the organization Foro Eduquemos, explained in a recent interview with El Nuevo Diario. "But the question remains: What are those children who are sticking around [for their free afternoon snack] learning? Are they learning at a competitive level or at a very basic level?"

The kind of studies needed to properly answer that question, according to education experts, have been few and far between in Nicaragua. What data does exist, however, is less than encouraging. A case in point are the recently published results of this year’s basic entrance exam for the Universidad Nacional de Ingeniería (UNI) in Managua. Of the nearly 2,800 high school students who took the test, only 136—less than 6%—passed. Why? Because "they can’t analyze, they’re weak at solving [math] problems," Diego Muñoz, the UNI’s general secretary, told reporters.

Diedrich García, a student from Río Blanco who was one of just two people to pass the test with a score of 100, had a different take. In his school, at least, students simply weren’t exposed to much of the material covered on the exam. "We never saw that stuff in school," he told La Prensa. "There wasn’t time to go over [those subjects] in class."

Math is not the only subject posing problems for Nicaraguan students. Last August, Carolina Castro, director of the development project Alianzas II, used the standard international exam Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) to test primary school students in both Granada, a medium-sized city by Nicaraguan standards, and Chinandega, a rural community. The results in Granada were discouraging: some third graders could barely read at a first-grade level. What Castro found in Chinandega was more troubling still. "At one point, the teacher warned us not to expect much from the exam since he himself didn’t have a full grasp of all the concepts," she told the online news site El Confidencial.

More students, less money

Suggestions about how to improve education quality vary, though most analysts agree that, as a starting point, Nicaragua would do well to increase education spending. Instead, the Ortega administration has actually trimmed the education budget in recent years. As a percentage of GDP, education spending is set to be 2.8% this year, down from 3.4% in 2012. A study published last year by the Instituto de Estudios Estratégicos y Políticas Públicas (IEEPP) found that Nicaragua spends less on its primary schools than does any other country in Central America. In 2009, the Ortega government spent just under US$196 per student. Guatemala and Costa Rica spent US$297 and US $788, respectively.
More money would not only mean better facilities and materials; it could also give teachers a much-needed salary boost, argues Dr. Medina of Foro Eduquemos. "If you look at things in terms of what would really be needed to provide [teachers] with decent salaries and to guarantee the basic conditions for a modern education, the budget just looks ridiculous," he said.


Nicaragua also needs better mechanisms in place to ensure that students are actually present for the requisite number of classroom hours, according to Medina. That means clamping down not just on truancy but on activities undertaken by the government’s unofficial youth branch—the Juventud Sandinista—which on several occasions in recent years has bussed students to political rallies or to watch televised Spanish league soccer matches. "What can we expect from students who don’t go to school because they’re watching a soccer game?" the Foro Eduquemos president said.

Edmundo Jarquín, one of the country’s leading opposition voices, agrees with Medina on the urgent need for education reform. Continuing to ignore the problem, he wrote in a recent opinion piece, means "giving up on the future and condemning millions to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and frustration." To really turn the system around, however, Nicaraguans should first make an effort to "depoliticize" the issue, Jarquín explained.

"Politicizing the analysis of the problem—either by heaping all the blame on the current administration or, on the other extreme, saying it’s all the fault of the 'evil neoliberal governments'—doesn’t help one bit," he wrote.

-- End --