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Cuba's Educational System Declines Amid Complaints from Government and Citizenry

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Cuba's national education system, for decades one of the bastions of the communist project, is showing signs of a severe crisis, as indicated by the continuous complaints by the populace, including President Raúl Castro's administration, about the lack of teachers, low salaries, deteriorating schools, fraud scandals, and, in general, the decline of the country's moral values and social discipline.

The origins of the crisis are found in the collapse two decades ago of the former Soviet Union, which subsidized the island's economy. Since that time, in addition to power cuts, lack of urban transport, shortages of food and other staples, teachers began their exodus. Their income now pales in comparison with that of taxi drivers, supermarket cashiers, or simple vendors of homemade pizza (NotiCen, Sept. 12, 2002).

The island's state media started to publically air the issue after Castro voiced his own concerns, pointing out the loss of values, vulgarities heard in the streets, and criminal behavior ignored by the public. "We have gone backward in culture and civic-mindedness as citizens. I have the bitter feeling that we are a society increasingly instructed, but not necessarily more educated," confessed Castro on July 7 in a national parliament session.

The president's discomfort with social conduct and the loss of moral values in the Cuban population after two decades of extreme shortages, together with demands for improvement in the educational system, are interpreted as part of the requirements for order, discipline, and control to "update" the socialist project and revive its economic model.

Gone are the years in which new generations of Cubans were exhorted to establish the hombre nuevo (new person) as a synthesis of the educational system, combined with a strong background in communist political principles and mandatory seasonal agricultural work in the tobacco fields and citrus orchards to clear any "lingering" bourgeois tendencies. The hombre nuevo project of the 1970s and 1980s is no longer mentioned in speeches or in the official press.

**Professional exodus and "instant" teachers**

The island's new school term started on Sept. 2 with an enrollment of 1.8 million students in general education and more than 200,000 in the university, with a 95% teacher coverage in the 10,400 schools, which includes 2,100 teachers returning to the classroom who had retired because of age or as a result of low wages.

Cuba has about 280,000 teachers. The monthly income of a middle school teacher is half that of a police or military officer in the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), to whom the state gives additional perks easing the way for them to buy clothes, toiletries, and food, or even occasionally to visit tourist facilities with their families.
At the end of the 2012 school year last June, it was reported that 3,714 teachers had left the classroom, 676 more than the previous year. The largest exodus was recorded in Havana and the neighboring towns of Matanzas and Artemisa. In these areas the population finds itself better able to change jobs because of the proximity to the nation's capital.

At the same time, a drop in enrollment in teacher training was recorded. In 2012, 80% of the spaces available for teachers in training were vacant. Of the 31,113 jobs available, 6,128 posts were filled. Teaching is perceived as a poorly paid and unrewarding career in today's Cuba.

To meet the teacher shortage, the government created the "emerging teachers" plan in 2000. These new teachers were trained in record time and some were so young that they were just five years older than the high school students they had to teach. Their lack of maturity, cultural breaches, and pedagogical shortcomings led the people to baptize them "instant teachers."

The solution for families with better economic conditions has been to hire private teachers for their children. These services cost about 10 CUC (Cuban convertible pesos) per month or US$12, half the average Cuban monthly salary, but are a way to ensure that adolescents are trained in basic subjects like spelling and are prepared to face the college entrance exams.

Education has not escaped the scandal of fraud, which both the authorities and the state media have exposed after years of rumors, this in addition to Castro's crackdown on corruption in the economic sector, which has already hauled ministry officials, political leaders, and foreign business people into the courts.

Late last June, Granma, the official newspaper of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC), announced the cancellation of the 11th grade final high school exams in several Havana municipalities because of fraud centering on stolen math tests. Test data were sold on a massive scale in an operation that started with two teachers, involved students as vendors, and even parents who paid for the information. The exams were canceled and a new version was administered on July 1.

On July 21, the official press gave details about the increase of fraud in Havana. A poll in the newspaper Juventud Rebelde revealed that fraud is considered a "fairly common type of corruption." Thirty percent of students surveyed in six Havana municipalities confessed that they had participated in some kind of fraud, such as buying or selling examinations.

Among the fraudulent acts reported by the official newspaper of the island's Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas were buying grades from a teacher, purchasing tests, increasing or changing grades, doing favors or bartering, giving gifts, and the various methods for students to know the answers before or while taking the test.

**Aggression and vulgarity**

In Raúl Castro's statements in July, he said a government study showed 191 negative social manifestations grouped under four categories: social misconduct, illegality, infractions, and crimes listed under the criminal code. The government is placing its confidence in the role of the family and the schools to correct these behaviors in the new generations of Cubans.

Among these marginal behaviors, Castro said, is the indiscriminate use of obscene words, accepting bribes and perks, illegal gambling, the "atmosphere of indiscipline that has taken root in our society and causes significant moral and material damage." The president highlighted the "increased
deterioration of moral and civic values such as honesty, decency, shame, integrity, and sensitivity to other people's problems."

Government critics believe that the opposition press warned about these phenomena for years and deemed responsible the authorities who continue organizing "acts of repudiation" in broad daylight where security forces and regime supporters can insult and physically injure dissidents. The opposition has posted online footage and photos of these "chastisements." Ironically, similar offensive and violent incidents are organized by the same authorities who are now calling for a return to civic values and moral reform for society, says the opposition.

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