

Education Reform in El Salvador: Progress and Challenges

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When Salvador Sánchez Cerén became president of El Salvador in June 2014, he named “security, education, and employment” as the priorities of his government.¹ A former school teacher, Sánchez promised to raise investment in education to 6 percent of gross domestic product by the end of his five-year term.² Increased investment, however, has yet to be realized; current expenditure on education is just 3.47 percent of the country’s GDP.

Background

Access to education has expanded slowly since the end of El Salvador’s 12-year civil war in 1992. Over 70,000 people died in the conflict, and hundreds of thousands more were displaced.³ Many Salvadorians fled the country, including 334,000 who reported that they entered the United States between 1985 and 1990.⁴ In some parts of El Salvador students and teachers did not go to school out of fear for their personal security. Especially in the countryside, schools were damaged during fighting between rebels and the military.⁵

After the civil war three consecutive conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) administrations governed El Salvador, followed by the first president coming from the left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), Mauricio Funes. Taking office in 2009, Funes introduced efforts to bolster the national education system, among other social programs. President Sánchez, an FMLN member who was Funes’ vice-president, has continued Funes administration programs by launching a series of new initiatives.⁶ Today, El Salvador has a population of about 6.1 million.⁷ Some 1,470,000 students were enrolled in primary and secondary school in 2014. That El Salvador has a large student population and a significant number of young people not attending school puts considerable pressure on the government to dedicate resources to improve school infrastructure, enrollment rates and security for students.⁸

Infrastructure

Improving school infrastructure remains a challenge. Students need a comfortable environment conducive to learning, but schools are chronically overcrowded. In rural areas, some children do not attend because the nearest school is far from their homes. Another thing keeping some children away from school is that gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18 often recruit children in primary school.⁹ Additionally, some of the schools damaged by earthquakes and hurricanes have not been repaired or replaced.

The Education Ministry's national education plan for 2014 to 2019 aims to address the infrastructure challenge. A strategic goal is the construction of pleasant school environments, which includes rebuilding and strengthening infrastructure, but the plan does not include a timeline. The Education Ministry should make a nationwide assessment of school infrastructure to determine where infrastructure repair and expansionist projects are most needed.¹⁰

School Supplies, Nutrition, and Technology

Children anywhere are less likely to attend school if they do not have adequate school supplies, clothing, and nutrition.¹¹ According to a survey by the Economy Ministry, the national poverty rate in 2013 was 28.9 percent.¹² The Student Food and Health Program provides free meals to students across the country. The Education Ministry says that in 2014 the program benefited close to 1.35 million children in 5,106 schools, 220 Salvadorian Institute for the Integral Development of Children and Adolescents (ISNA) centers, and 30 rural centers of the Ministry of Health.¹³ A program launched by then-President Funes in 2010 called *Programa Paquete Escolar* (School Package Program) donates school supplies, uniforms, and shoes to pre-school and primary school students across El Salvador.¹⁴ Another presidential program, called *Una Niña, Un Niño, Una Computadora* (One Boy, One Girl, One Computer), is expected to deliver at least 50,000 computers to 2,600 schools across El Salvador by the end of 2015. President Sánchez launched the program this year. This initiative aims to provide access to a computer to each student in every school in El Salvador. Erlinda Handál, vice minister for Science and Technology, says it will benefit a million students at all levels of education this year.¹⁵ Education Ministry statistics from 2014 indicate that many public schools did not have Internet service.¹⁶ Although many students should benefit from access to a computer in school, many will still lack access to one at home. Continuing these programs can help ensure that all school children receive the basic supplies, technology, and nutrition that they need.

Enrollment and Dropout Rates

Low enrollment in public and private schools at all levels is a matter of uttermost importance. In El Salvador only primary school is mandatory. Between 2009 to 2014, students enrolled at all levels of education in the country decreased by about 2.7 percent (from 1,915,420 to 1,619,386), with the enrollment decline in primary schools at nearly 12.6 percent (from 1,322,305 to 1,155,950). Gang recruitment and violence contributed to lower enrollment rates. Enrollment in pre-primary school, secondary school, and higher education actually increased. Still, the number of students at these three levels is disproportionate compared to the number of students in primary school, who make up the majority of the student population. Enrollment rates for females are lower than those for males.¹⁷ Between 2009 and 2013 the number of students at all levels of education who dropped out increased by 5.3 percent (from 115,549 to 121,706).¹⁸ Addressing low enrollment and high dropout rates will require not only strengthening the national education system, but making progress in bolstering economic development and increasing personal security.

The Security Challenge

El Salvador is grappling with the highest levels of violence and insecurity since the end of the civil war in 1992. Homicide spiked after a gang truce fell apart in 2012. Although President Sánchez has



prioritized security, government efforts to increase public safety have been largely unsuccessful. The Civil National Police crackdown on organized crime prompted gangs to respond with even greater violence. El Salvador's government will need to adjust its strategy to address the issue. The gangs themselves are impeding many Salvadorians' educational opportunities. Children who rebuff gangs that are recruiting at schools risk losing their lives. A new security strategy should involve better protection in schools (as well as for children on their way to and from them) and restoring a truce so that gangs do not forcibly recruit school children.¹⁹

El Salvador is making progress in improving its national education system. Recent presidential and Ministry of Education programs have helped expand access to education, but enrollment rates remain discouragingly low. The current rate of investment in education, 3.5 percent of GDP, is too low.²⁰ Lack of security has affected enrollment in schools, especially at the primary level where gang recruitment is most intense. In order to achieve viable progress, the government needs to make steady and consequential increases in education investment beginning in 2016.

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³ RIBANDO SEELKE Clare, "El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations", in Congressional Research Service on May 19, 2015. Consulted on <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43616.pdf> on December 18, 2015.

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The World Bank. Consulted on <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=SLV&series=&period=> on December 18, 2015.

⁸ Education Policy Data Center (EPDC) Consulted on http://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/EPDC%20NEP_El%20Salvador.pdf on December 18, 2015.

⁹ *The Economist*, "Rivers of Blood", on October 10, 2015. Consulted on <http://www.economist.com/news/americas/21672337-crackdown-gangs-has-so-far-made-things-worse-rivers-blood> on December 18, 2015.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Education of El Salvador. Consulted on https://www.mined.gob.sv/jdownloads/Institucional/ejes_estrategicos_del_plan_nacional_de_educacin_en_funcin_de_la_nacin.pdf on December 18, 2015.

¹¹ MILLS Frederick, "Education Reform Gets High Marks in El Salvador", in Council on Hemispheric Affairs on March 5, 2012. Consulted on <http://www.coha.org/education-reform-gets-high-marks-in-el-salvador/> on December 18, 2015.

¹² The World Bank. Consulted on <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/elsalvador/overview> on December 18, 2015.



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¹⁴ Government of El Salvador. Consulted on <http://www.proteccionsocial.gob.sv/index/index.php/programas/uniformes-zapatos-y-utiles/93-programa-de-dotacion-de-uniformes-zapatos-y-utiles-escolares-para-estudiantes-de-educacion-parvularia-y-educacion-basica-del-sector-publico> on December 19, 2015.

¹⁵ Government of El Salvador. Consulted on <http://www.presidencia.gob.sv/el-programa-presidencial-un-nino-una-nina-una-computadora-beneficiara-a-mas-de-un-millon-de-alumnos-en-2015/> on December 19, 2015.

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¹⁷ The Ministry of Education of El Salvador (MINED). Consulted on http://www.mined.gob.sv/EstadisticaWeb/publicacion/EDUCACION%20EN%20EL%20SALVADOR%20EN%20CIFRAS%202009%20A%202014_11.pdf on December 19, 2015.

¹⁸ The Ministry of Education of El Salvador (MINED). Consulted on <http://www.mined.gob.sv/index.php/temas/estadisticas/item/7249-datos-de-matr%C3%ADcula-final.html> on December 19, 2015.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ SOSA Byron, “*Inversión Aún Es Insuficiente Dice UNICEF*”, in *La Prensa Grafica*, on October 1, 2015. Consulted on <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2015/10/01/inversion-aun-es-insuficiente-dice-unicef> on December 19, 2015.

