

**Differences and Similarities Between School Principals in  
Costa Rica and the United States**

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## **Differences and Similarities Between School Principals in Costa Rica and the United States**

The importance of effective school leadership is critical for the operation of a good school around the world. We have often been asked the question “Is the position of school principal in Costa Rica different from being a principal in the United States?” At Morehead State University, we explain to our students about the similarities and differences for principals in both countries. These similarities and differences come from the nature of the principal position, its importance, role, responsibilities, as well as the funding for schools in both countries.

Principal positions in the United States and Costa Rica are demanding due to the overwhelming workload and problems that go with the job. The position of principal in Costa Rica differs from the one in the United States. The principal in Costa Rica serves as a part-time counselor, school’s accountant, attendance director, nurse, and sometimes the cheerleader of the soccer team. In a school of 2,000 students, Dr. Ballestero had one counselor, one secretary, no nurse, no department heads, no curriculum coordinator, no assistant principals, no school council, and no permanent school budget. In the United States, a school may have an assistant principal, a dean of students, two or three counselors, department heads, a school advisory council, and a budget.

What are some of the major challenges for a principal in Costa Rica? A Costa Rican principal can spend 17 to 18 hours a day on the job, assist the faculty, work with federal government personnel, local businesses, wealthy alumni, and parents. Student instruction is delivered for 200 days a year in Costa Rica. Costa Rica has a national curriculum that must be implemented in its schools. Schools are divided into 17 educational regions. Each educational region has a superintendent of public instruction, director of personnel, and an associate superintendent in charge of managerial issues. Each subject area has supervisors of instruction that deal with instruction and the curriculum. However, because of budget constraints, these professionals are not able to visit all the schools in a given school year. Their roles are more reactive than proactive as school administrators. Principals in Costa Rica do a lot of MBWA (Management by Walking Around) to compensate for help with the curriculum. Principals are required to

identify areas of need. Teachers often advise the principal in the absence of regional help. Teacher/principal relations are paramount with the lack of regional support for schools.

Students must pass exams at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level, to move from elementary education (First and Second Cycles) to secondary education (Third and Fourth Cycles). For secondary education, there are exit exams at the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade levels. The last exit exam is called “*bachillerato*”. *It is* the key to college entrance in Costa Rica. Grading in Costa Rican schools follow the numerical system. Grades go from 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest. A passing grade at the elementary level is a 6. A passing grade is a 7 at the secondary level.

Schools in the United States have assigned the control of schools in the hands of State legislatures. In addition, local control of schools has historically been the rule in American schools. Local Boards of Education have been selected to make decisions about the local curriculum and what is of the most worth to American students. This has changed, with significant controversy, during the George Bush presidency. No Child Left Behind legislation has mandated that millions of American students be tested each year to determine if they are proficient in Reading and Math. In addition, 19 states have made it mandatory for students to pass an exit exam for graduation. There are 7 other states that are phasing in exit exams by 2012. <sup>1</sup>

What incentives do Costa Rican principals receive if their students are successful? Monetary rewards are out of the question due to the permanent economic crisis for the government in Costa Rica. Principals receive intrinsic rewards in the form of personal satisfaction and pride that the majority of their students were able to move to the next grade level. It is common to find a math teacher of a “*colegio*” (high school), reviewing the students on a Saturday morning, getting them prepared for the dreaded 11<sup>th</sup> grade exit exam.

Collaboration with parents is crucial to school success. Communications between the school and home takes place in the form of a notebook for each student. The teacher and/or principal make use of the notebook to write notes to the parents. Whenever a note to the parents is required, the notebook is returned the following day with a parent

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.educ.state.ak.us/tls/Assessment/HSGQE/Fall05/AllStateExitExamFINAL8.12.05.pdf>

signature acknowledging that the school note was read and discussed with the child. A positive result of this constant communication with parents is few discipline problems at Costa Rican schools. A discipline violation carries an automatic suspension and a conduct grade of 5 for that trimester. A 5 is a failing grade and this really makes the difference in student behavior. Fighting among students is very rare. Dr. Ballestero only witnessed three fights in 23 years as an administrator in Costa Rica.

By contrast, the high school Dr. Ballestero used to teach at in Kentucky, had six fights one afternoon, four of the fights were between girls. Students do not smoke in the bathrooms in Costa Rica, so Costa Rican teachers are not assigned to bathroom duty. Discipline is a long-standing problem in American schools. The 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Poll by Phi Delta Kappan identified Lack of discipline, more control; Fighting/violence/gangs; and Use of drugs/dope as the biggest school problems for each of years between 2004 – 2007. These are problem areas that the public expects American principals to deal with and control.<sup>2</sup>

The Health System in Costa Rica, where 95 % of the population is covered by either the employer or the government, compensates the need for a school nurse. Personnel from the local Health Department, called “EBAIS”, are prepared to come to school to deal with any health problem. Dr. Ballestero remembered an incident that happened when he was the principal of a high school in the north zone of Costa Rica. After successfully petitioning businesses for painting materials to paint the school’s gym it was agreed that the PE teachers and their students were going to provide the labor, outside of the school day. One evening one of the students fell from the ladder and broke his arm. When they called Dr. Ballestero to the gym, he took the student to the local hospital where x-rays were taken and a cast placed on the boys arm. Dr. Ballestero took the student home and talked to the parent. Dr. Ballestero explained to the parent how the accident had taken place. The parent took the place of the student the next day painting the gym. In the United States, the parent would have likely sued the school district.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pdkmembers.org/e-GALLUP/kpoll\\_pdfs/pdkpoll39\\_2007.pdf](http://www.pdkmembers.org/e-GALLUP/kpoll_pdfs/pdkpoll39_2007.pdf)

There are an estimated 20.5 million American children who do not have health insurance. This number has been increasing due to the loss of employer-provided health insurance and reduced enrollment in public insurance such as Medicaid and SCHIP.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of school nurses and other school health related services has grown in the United States.



*Kindergarten students in class*

There are no school buses in Costa Rica. Students take the local public transportation system to school, ride a bike, or walk to school. There is no bus duty for principals. The result of not providing school transportation by the “canton” (or district) does not affect school attendance. Parents view education as the only way out for their kids, so parents make sure students always attend school. At the elementary school level, students come to school one week in the morning and the following week in the afternoon. Classes go from 7 a.m. in the morning to 11:30 a.m. At this time teachers have a quick lunch and then receive the second group at 12:00 and finish school at 4:30 p.m. At the secondary school level students also start school at 7 a.m., go home for lunch at 11:30, and come back to school for the afternoon session from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m. If they do not want to go home they may grab something to eat at the school soda, or nearby

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.childrenshealthfund.org/calendar/WhitePaper-May2007-FINAL.pdf>

businesses, of course paying for their meals because there are no government funded meals. In recent years, the Costa Rican government has provided funding for cafeteria personnel for the schools. Parents also contribute funds to offer lunch service once a day for the students, particularly at the elementary school level. In the United States, many of our high school students would not come back to school if we scheduled a lunch break in the middle of the day.

There are more than 450,000 yellow school buses that transport children to American schools. This is a \$15 billion dollar annual business in America. There are around 23,500,000 American children that ride school buses. This comprises around 55 percent of the K-12 students in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

American school cafeterias prepare 30 million school lunches and 9.6 million breakfasts for schoolchildren each day during the school year.<sup>5</sup> Many of these children would go hungry if not for these two programs sponsored by United States Department of Agriculture.



*Elementary School Students take a drink at the water fountain before going home.*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.stnonline.com/stn/faq/aboutpupiltrans.htm#children>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.gotbreakfast.org/press/gb\\_Press\\_Release\\_3.5.07.pdf](http://www.gotbreakfast.org/press/gb_Press_Release_3.5.07.pdf)

## **How different are Principal's Preparation Programs in Costa Rica?**

The principal preparation programs in Costa Rica are run exclusively by the universities, in the Department of *Administración Educativa* (School Administration). As in the United States, principals come from the ranks of experienced teachers. Teachers with five years of successful classroom experience may take a national entrance test and, if successful, they may apply for admission to the university to complete the *Bachillerato en Administración Educativa, Bachelor's Degree in School Administration*. Upon completion of the bachelor's degree, students who are lucky enough to be located near a university campus, may elect to work toward a *Maestría en Administración Educativa, a Master's Degree in School Administration*. In Costa Rica, as in the majority of the Latin American countries, the only alternative to principal certification comes through the *Ministerio De Educación Pública* or *Ministry of Public Education*, which is an arm of the federal government. The Ministry of Education, a centralized entity that operates from the capital of the country, resembles a giant octopus controlling every single aspect of the instructional process. In Costa Rica, alternative certification options for administrators do not exist.

### **Principals' salaries:**

As in the United States, salaries in Costa Rica are based upon years of experience and level of education. Salaries for teachers in Costa Rica are structured in six levels ranging from MT-1 through MT-6. Salary grade MT-1 would be appropriate for an individual with a high school education who is just beginning to take college coursework. MT-6 would be assigned to an individual holding a Master's degree. Because of the requirement for a principal to hold at least a bachelor's degree, the minimum salary grade for a principal would be MT-4. A principal holding two bachelor's degrees would be classified as an MT-5.

School size is another variable, which influences the salary of a Costa Rican principal. Schools with up to 750 students would be classified as a Principalship 1. Schools with an enrollment between 751 to 1,500 students are classified as Principalship 2. Schools with enrollment between 1501 to 2500 students are classified as a

Principalship 3. It is quite common to see schools that have between 1,500 and 2,300 students, especially in the capital cities of the provinces.

The school principals who hold a *Licenciatura*, a hybrid degree midway between the bachelor's and master's degree, are entitled to what is called, *Dedicación Exclusiva*. A very literal translation of this term is "Only job allowed". These principals are bonded to the school position and are not permitted to perform any other type of duty for pay at any other institution. This "bonding" of the principal to the position will increase his or her salary by 55%.

As the result of a critical lack of space and very high enrollment levels, many Costa Rican schools operate on what is called *Doble Jornada*. This term refers to a double session schedule in which teachers instruct two groups during the day; one in a morning session and one in an afternoon **session** (session). Principals working under these conditions typically receive a 35% increase of their base salary. Seventy percent of the principals of Costa Rica will have both of these two supplements added to their salary.

At the present time, a principal of a school with category 3 enrollment, who enjoys all of the available salary supplements and has 10 years of teaching/principal experience, would earn a salary of 300000 **Colones** per month. This would equate to approximately \$600 a month in the United States. By U.S. standards this figure may be viewed as extremely small, but in a country like Costa Rica, where the cost of living is very low, this salary would place an individual well into the upper-middle class. Salaries for all educational employees are adjusted annually for each year of completed service. In addition to the annual increase, all public employees, as well as retirees, receive an annual increase equal to the index of inflation in the country for the preceding 12-month period. Another stipend that every worker in Costa Rica receives is what is called "*aguinaldo*", this is the equivalent of a month's salary, with no taxes withheld, that the worker receives in the month of December.



Salaries for principals in the United States have been going up in recent years due primarily to a shortage of qualified principals. Average salaries for American principals for the 2006-07 school year were as follows:

Elementary Principal	\$82, 414
Middle School Principal	\$87,866
High School Principal	\$92,965 <sup>6</sup>



*Recess feels better with a friend.*

### **Selection of principals in Costa Rica**

Once the teacher receives his/her degree in School Administration, the prospective principal candidate can go to the *Servicio Civil, Sección Docente* (Civil Service, Teachers' Branch office), conveniently located at the main office of the Ministry of Education *Raventós* Building, in San Jose and ask to be classified as a prospective principal. Candidates for becoming school principals are certified at one of two levels, elementary or secondary, based upon their initial teaching certification level. There is no provision for P-12 principal certification, thus principals are effectively restricted to working in schools at the level of their initial teaching assignment.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=2238>

Principals and teachers in Costa Rica are Federal employees and are assigned to schools throughout the country by the Director of Human Resources of the Ministry of Education. Certified principal candidates must submit full academic records, present evidence of experience, and be interviewed by a panel. These reviews result in a civil service ranking. Once the ranking has been assigned, the candidate is free to submit applications to vacant positions.

From among those who applied for a principal's position, (assistant principal positions are almost non-existent), the Director of the Civil Service will create a short list with the three top candidates called *Terna*, from which the Director of Human Resources of the Ministry of Education will select the principal. Unlike the common practice here in the United States, there are no interviews through a Site Based Decision Making Council. No references are called on the candidates. The "Equal Opportunity Employer" is not posted in any Costa Rican school. As long as a candidate is on the *Terna*, regardless of the ranking of candidate, he or she may be selected as a principal.

In Costa Rica, as in many American school districts, politics plays a significant role in the selection of a local school principal. The local Senator of the governing political party, called "*diputado*", often gets involved in the selection process by making a recommendation to the Director of Human Resources. Sometimes a representative from the senator's office will sit on the committee when a principal is being selected. This may be a Federal system but unlike the United States, it is a comparatively small Federal system and so it is not uncommon to have a member of the Costa Rican Senate actively involved in the selection of a principal for a school within the senator's district. What might be an unwarranted intrusion into local school affairs by the Federal government in the United States is regarded very differently in Costa Rica where the Federal government is responsible for all aspects of public education. The intervention by a Senator in Costa Rica is regarded not as politics but as his/her civic responsibility.

Principals in Costa Rica, when selected from the *Terna*, receive automatic tenure. Unlike the practice in the United States, there is no internship. Also, principals do not have to wait until the third year to get tenure as do principals in Kentucky.



*Six graders wear a tie.*

### **The Principal's Induction Process**

The principalship in Costa Rica may be best described as a “baptism under fire”. Upon selection for the position as principal, an individual is typically given the keys to the school and asked to start leading the school forward. There is no internship process or a “honeymoon” period. A principal must hit the road running. Basic needs of the school, faculty, and the students must be attended to immediately. The school calendar, typically 200 days long, is inflexible and instruction has to take place every day that school is in session. With no snow days, or other type of calamity events disrupting the calendar, the school year most likely will start on the first Monday in February. The school year ends second Friday in December, with a so-called “end of summer week” off, normally during Easter. There is a two weeks mid-year vacation during the first two weeks of July.

Due to a very bureaucratic system, school quite often starts with unfilled vacancies. When this happens, an interim teacher, that may not have completed the whole teacher preparation program, will cover the position until it is filled.

Every school gets a yearly budget of no more than the equivalent of a few hundred dollars. As an example of how much the schools get, the North Zone educational Region of Costa Rica that has 350 primary schools, and 31 secondary

schools, with a total of 1650 teachers, and 40,000 students receives in “*colones*”, name of the Costa Rica currency, the equivalent of \$800,000 annually. The exchange rate at the end of December 2006 was 510 *colones* per dollar.

The Federal government makes a small sum of money available to individual schools. This amount is never enough to cover basic services. For example, a school of 200 students will receive around \$9,000 for their annual budget from the Federal government. With a working budget of \$20,000, the principal must scramble to find funds to cover the deficit. The principal of the school, with the help of the faculty and the PTO organization, must organize bingos, town fairs, and school festivals, in an attempt to meet the financial needs of the school. Utilities, water, electricity and telephone service, must be paid through funds generated locally by a constant series of fund raising activities. With the rising costs of mail delivery, the Postal Service no longer considers mail from schools “*correo oficial*” (official mail), as was the past practice. School principals now have to scramble for extra money to buy stamps for school letters.

School and community relations in Costa Rica are generally a second priority on the principal’s list. School festivals (called *Feria Escolar*) are designed to raise funds for the basic operation of the school. The *Feria Escolar* generally has the full support of parents. It is not uncommon, for example, to have a parent who is a veterinarian, donate his or her time at a school fair providing routine examinations for student pets, normally dogs, cats and parrots, charging a minimal contribution, that will go into the school’s general fund. On the days of the school fund raising fairs one can stop by the school, and for a contribution, get a haircut or have ones nails done by a parent who is supporting the local school.

Principals in both countries, Costa Rica and the United States, are faced with challenges that require strong leadership. The basic rule for principals in both countries is to make decisions that are in the best interests of children. Children must be priority number one in Costa Rica and the United States.

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