



# Thinking Brazil

## UPCOMING EVENTS

- MARCH 2007  
with the Comparative  
Urban Studies Project  
(CUSP) **Urban Crime and  
Violence**

## Basic Education in Brazil: What's Wrong and How to Fix It

While Brazil has successfully achieved universal access to basic education, the quality of education remains stubbornly low. A recent study by the Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada (IPEA) shows that the average 25 years old Brazilian has completed only nine years of education. Almost eleven percent of the population is illiterate and a much larger proportion is functionally illiterate. On January 29, the Brazil Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center addressed Brazil's education policy, analyzed contemporary comparative research in the field, and suggested reforms to improve overall quality and increase retention rates.



NORMAN GALL AND PATRICIA GUEDES

Director of the Brazil Institute *Paulo Sotero* stressed the importance of education to development and situated Brazil in terms of educational achievements. He praised the country's successful efforts at universalizing basic education and expanding access to secondary education, but noted that the quality of this education is quite poor. However, progress is being made at the local level, he asserted. One such example is the work sponsored and supported by the Instituto Fernand Braudel de Economia Mundial of São Paulo. *Norman Gall*, the executive director of the Institute, offered advice based on his experience researching the New York City public school system and highlighted the challenges to educational reform in Brazil.

Gall looked to New York City for best practices and relevant lessons on how to reform Brazil's educational system. New York City has had (and continues to have) many of the same problems that São Paulo faces, such as low retention rates and poor quality. In some ways, New York has greater challenges to overcome, since students often enter the public education system speaking a language other than English. However, Gall argued that when Mayor Michael Bloomberg took control of the school system from the central bureaucracy, the city's schools improved. An innovative safety program has stopped much of the violence in schools, unruly high schools have been broken up into



more manageable schools, and graduation rates have since improved. For Gall, this turnaround hinges on continued mayoral control of schools, a policy which is up for renewal in 2009.

Many factors contribute to the dismal state of education within the São Paulo public school system, explained Gall. First, not enough resources are invested into education. Whereas New York City spends about US\$ 11,000 per year per pupil on education, São Paulo might spend a mere US\$ 600—and this figure drops even lower in the poor Northeast region of Brazil. Second, the city lacks an effective bureaucracy to provide support, administration, and training. Teachers suffer from violence, supervisors rarely visit the schools (much less enter the classroom), and parents have no say in their children's education. Third, the country lacks an institute of federal education. São Paulo's public schools would benefit from a corps of master teachers who could conduct workshops and professional training to improve the quality of teaching. Fourth, a more rigorous and transparent testing and evaluation system is needed. Such a system is currently in the works in Brazil, with school data compared at the national, state, and municipal level, although unfortunately not on the community level.

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Finally, lack of political leadership over education policy is responsible for hindering reform. Tangible results of a major school reform generally would not appear before the end of an electoral cycle, thus increasing the political capital needed to enact reform but decreasing the political payoff. In the meantime, the status quo will remain, with much-needed funds drained from the limited pool of capital by pensioners. Acknowledging that roughly forty percent of university budgets



RICARDO PAES DE BARROS

often go directly to staff pensions, Gall declared that pensions are a “collective suicide pact” slowly destroying the country.

*Patricia Guedes*, a researcher at the Instituto Fernand Braudel, argued that successful change can also come about at the local level as well. The Institute engages in field research and policy implementation through reading circles. These are supplementary reading groups where children read the classics, discuss their interpretations, and relate their reactions to timeless stories about the human experience. The key to this program's success, claimed Guedes, is student empowerment. The initial investment pays off as students become mentors themselves and end up running reading circles for other kids. This idea guides the thinking of the Institute as a whole. It recommends identifying, supporting, and rewarding high performing individuals, be they students, teachers, or principals. By aligning itself with agents of change, the Institute is able to encourage educational improvements at all levels.

According to *Ricardo Paes de Barros*, a researcher at IPEA, Brazil has substantially improved educational performance over the past two decades, but improvement is leveling off even though much remains to be done. It would be a mistake to think that Brazil has achieved a sufficient level of access to education, he insisted. Yes, the country has laudably achieved near total attendance for children ages seven to 14. The problem is that the

attendance rate for those ages 15 to 19 is only about seventy percent—and this rate seems to be stagnating. The reason why Brazilian teenagers are not remaining in school, he argued, is because of the increasing difficulties in attending college. Universities are not expanding their ranks to accommodate the increasing number of high school students and graduates—only 15 percent of the population enters college. Teenagers thus drop out of high school because they see the pursuit of a college degree (and necessary preparation for it) as futile.

Besides improving secondary education attendance, Brazil also needs to significantly reduce grade repetition, claimed Barros. Students are taking, on average, nine years to complete eight years of primary education. Furthermore, more than one quarter of children will not complete basic education and only one half will complete secondary education. The fact that students are lagging behind is not only a problem for the students themselves, but for the educational system overall. A negative consequence of this is increased inefficiency and wasteful resources expenditures. Too many students spend excess time in primary education (in the form of grade repeaters and students who previously dropped out and are returning to school), overburdening capacity at the lower levels. This imbalance is righting itself with

time; however excess capacity remains in grades one to four while there are insufficient spaces for students in grades five to eight.

Besides problems of access and quality, Brazil's educational system remains grossly unequal. Director of the Inter-American Dialogue's Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas *Jeffrey Puryear* highlighted the inconsistencies in state educational spending in Brazil. According to the World Bank, 25 percent of public education expenditures benefit the country's richest quintile, while only 16 percent benefit the poorest quintile. The government over-invests in higher education at the expense of basic education. Free college tuition, guaranteed in the 1988 Constitution, serves as a subsidy to the rich, as only the children of wealthy families are competitive enough to gain entrance to universities (thanks to private secondary education). Such distortionary measures perpetuate income inequality and help explain the lack of college education among Afro-Brazilians, who are often too poor to purchase private education for their children.

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JEFFREY PURYEAR

Puryear argued that education reform does not come about because there is very little effective demand for better education in Brazil. Those with the money and power to influence policy have no incentive to reform an education system that they do not use. Without a powerful social group demanding change, the system is captured by supply-side interest groups, such as teachers unions, bureaucracies, and universities themselves. Because of this, Puryear believes that the quality of the demand for education needs to improve before the quality of the education supply ever improves.



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# Brazil Institute

Thinking Brazil is an electronic publication of the Brazil Institute. This project was created out of the conviction that Brazil and the U.S.-Brazilian relationship deserve greater attention within the Washington policy community. Brazil's population, size, and economy, as well as its unique position as a regional leader and global player, justify this attention. In keeping with the Center's mission to bridge the worlds of scholarship and policymaking, the Brazil Institute sponsors activities on a broad range of key policy issues designed to create a Brazil "presence" in Washington.

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