

The struggle for better schools in São Paulo and New York

What is to be done?

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TV Globo, in its soap opera “The Seven Sins,” presents a familiar view of a failing public school in São Paulo’s periphery. The school is covered with graffiti, teaches little and functions under permanent threat of disorder. A young, idealistic principal comes the school, vowing to improve teaching and learning, but is driven away by a food fight in the cafeteria. She decides to resign, but is persuaded to stay by a poor student who pleads with her: “You must stay. You’re the only one who cares. Otherwise I never will learn anything at this school.”

The annals of public education contain many examples of individual heroism –of principals, teachers and students struggling against the waste and sterility of a failed system. But the system as a whole –or systems in Brazil’s decentralized federation of states and municipalities—is performing so badly that it is widely seen as undermining Brazil’s future stability and development. Calls for reform are being heard with increasing intensity.

Reforms of public education usually begin under adverse conditions. Their success depends on political leadership at the top of public institutions and mobilization of those at the bottom of the economic pyramid who would benefit from better schools. The government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has set a goal for Brazil’s schools to reach average performance levels of more advanced countries by 2022. What new policies and investments are needed to move Brazil forward toward this goal?

A team from the Fernand Braudel Institute of World Economics conducted five weeks of field research on school reform in New York earlier this year, interviewing students, teachers and principals at schools in poor neighborhoods to learn what strategies and methods may be useful in improving public education in São Paulo and Brazil. The main lesson learned from this work is that Brazil needs to invest in developing institutional capacity.

We discovered that the New York reforms followed a pattern developed in England over the past two decades, begun under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and reinforced over the past decade by the Labor government of Tony Blair. According to Michael Barber, who headed the British school reform from 1997 to 2005, the “very radical reforms” of the Thatcher-Blair era had three main thrusts: (1) creating standards and accountability; (2) building capacity and collaboration, “securing the supply of teachers, improving teachers’ pay, creating opportunities for schools to collaborate, investing in professional development,” and (3) creating “a quasi-market in public services, exploiting the power of choice, competition, transparency and incentives, and that’s really where the education debate is going now.”

The adverse conditions that have been prevailing in São Paulo and New York are poor academic performance, high dropout rates, absence of standards, chronic disorder in the schools, lack of effective supervision, discouragement and apathy among teachers and low expectations of future improvement. Adding to these difficulties in São Paulo are legal protection for promiscuous absenteeism of many teachers, which aggravates disorder in the schools and demoralizes pupils, as well as laxity and anarchy in teaching methods and curriculum that contribute to high rates of academic failure. Moreover, Brazil’s political class has shown little interest in promoting long-term efforts to improve teaching and learning. In New York, leadership of school reform came from outside the traditional political class under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire businessman, and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, a lawyer. Similarly, Brazilian business leaders have begun to press for improvements in public education. These efforts must be reinforced and expanded to gain momentum.

Brazil enjoys some advantages for efforts to improve its schools. (1) Its decentralized federation embraces a wide range of states and municipalities of different sizes and social and economic profiles. This diversity offers opportunities for experiments with different local approaches and strategies. (2) Reflecting a widely felt concern about the quality of public education, the federal government recently launched a Education Development Plan (PDE) with a major funding commitment for the next few years. (3) The young Education Minister, Fernando Haddad, enjoys the confidence both of President Lula and the education establishment. (4) Efforts to improve public schools are receiving political and financial support from the private sector. The education ministry has adopted the achievement targets proposed by Todos pela Educação [Everyone for Education], a private sector coalition. (5) São Paulo State, with a population (40 million) larger than either Argentina or California and with one of the world’s largest school systems (5.5 million pupils), is in excellent fiscal shape to finance education improvements and will receive a large additional flow of taxes and royalties from economic activity generated by recent oil and gas discoveries offshore in the Santos Basin.

Despite widespread criticism of the failure of Brazil’s schools, some important initiatives are emerging.

The Federal District [Brasília], with a school system embracing 500,000 pupils, is adopting a unified curriculum as well as performance incentives for schools and teachers that were incorporated into salary negotiations, and is implementing one of Brazil's first school security programs. In Minas Gerais, which has sporadically implemented education reform since 1991, a system of community election of school principals who pass qualifying examinations has been consolidated. A way has been found to fire failing teachers. Most importantly, pupils are being tested for literacy after their first two years in primary school in an effort to consolidate reading ability very early. In Pernambuco, a privately sponsored movement, Procentro, is providing full-time secondary education of high quality in public schools in 20 cities of the interior.

It is easier to denounce and diagnose the failings of Brazilian education than to propose viable solutions. Because Brazil is a vast archipelago of diverse communities, with different levels of development, its decentralized federal system discourages nation-wide initiatives in education. Investments must be selective, based on initiatives by states and municipalities that are trying to improve local schools and are seeking technical and financial support. Dispersed and localized efforts may be important, although any significant effort to improve Brazil's schools will take several years and demand a coherent long-term strategy to overcome some basic difficulties:

1. What to teach? More and better content is needed. One reason why Brazilian children learn so little in school, and do so badly on national and international tests, is that there is no curriculum adopted by federal, state and municipal authorities. The vague "curriculum parameters" adopted by the Ministry of Education offer little guidance to teachers in providing classroom content. A dedicated effort is needed to adopt learning standards and enriched curriculum. These innovations must be supported by new efforts at classroom supervision and coaching, in which Brazilian schools historically have been deficient.

2. Implementing change. New institutes must be created, along the lines of New York's Leadership Academy, to train supervisors, mentors and master teachers to intervene in classrooms to support improvements in teaching practice. At present, Brazilian school systems lack institutional capacity to promote improvements in teaching and learning. There is no support and supervision for classroom teachers in dealing with their own deficiencies and with pupils' failure to learn. There is no middle management intermediating between central bureaucracies and individual schools and teachers to apply standards and practices. The new goals announced by the federal government and proposed by private groups cannot be achieved without improvements in the middle management of school systems and the quality of supervision. Investments are needed to create this capacity. Supervision is especially important because teachers are poorly prepared for classroom work by universities and pedagogy institutes.

3. Creating new incentives. Efforts to improve public education must involve a restructuring of incentives. Teachers, principals and entire schools and districts must be rewarded for improved performance of students. Frequent absences by teachers and principals should not be tolerated.

4. Measuring progress. Data produced by national and state examinations are not used to diagnose and improve student performance. In most cases, test results do not reach the schools. Scandalously, the data from São Paulo's SARESP state exam are not even published. Thus parents are deprived of vital information on how much or little academic progress is being achieved by their children and their schools. The Education Ministry promises to correct this by grading all schools in Brazil, as is being done in New York. But more evaluation is needed, with consequences for excellence as well as for poor performance. Schools should evaluate themselves publicly each year and, together with their communities, plan for action to improve their performance on standard tests. Independent quality reviews by visiting professionals should take place at each school every few years. Brazilian authorities should consider creating an independent Superintendency for evaluating school performance, as established recently in Chile.

5. A strategy for metropolitan regions. Among the 14 Brazilian cities with populations of more than one million, São Paulo's giant school system exhibits most of the difficulties of metropolitan areas. They are endemic disorder in many schools, frequent absences and rapid turnover of teachers and principals, deficient supervision, lack of a core curriculum and anarchy of teaching methods by poorly trained teachers. In the statewide SARESP exam, students often are questioned on subject matter never taught in their classes. SEADE, the state statistical agency, is preparing profiles of all the state's 5,800 schools, incorporating enrollments, teacher turnover, test results, promotions, dropout rates and socio-economic conditions. With this data, which has accumulated unused over the years in the state Education Secretariat, authorities would be able to make focused interventions according to each school's needs.

Previous state government has shown little interest in addressing the systemic problems of public education. Until recently, there has been little popular pressure for improving the quality of education and general indifference among the political class. The system has not collapsed entirely because of public demand for some kind of schooling and because schools provide an abundant source of formal employment and pensions for teachers and administrators who in turn provide a useful bloc of votes for political elites. To a large degree, the system is governed by perverse incentives. Perverse incentives are the devices of law and custom rewarding behavior that undermines the stated purpose of institutions. The system is indifferent to results and seems to function for the benefit of its employees rather than the people they are supposed to serve. In New York, the motto of school reform is "Children First." This priority is not visible in São Paulo.

What is needed is investing more resources in the learning process. This means establishing a core curriculum that sets clear goals for teaching and learning. It means changing laws and regulations to reduce teachers' absences, which has been a major problem in Brazilian education since the 19th century. It means training supervisors and other specialists to work inside classrooms with teachers and pupils to improve results. It means decentralizing decision-making powers, within a general framework, to regional directors and school principals in exchange for responsibility for results. The system should invest in regional leadership. Pilot programs should be developed in some regions, just as new strategies and methods were tried in the Bronx before they were applied citywide in New York. Curriculum and teaching methods should be enriched for the 700,000 secondary students in São Paulo forced to study at night under boring and sterile classroom routines. Special programs should be created for talented pupils whose needs are ignored as teachers and principals struggle to deal with chronic disorder in the schools. Institutional capacity should be developed to deal with this disorder, such as training school safety specialists and creating alternative learning environments for disruptive students.

6. Unions. In Latin America as well as in many other societies, teachers' unions often oppose school reforms, saying that they are the work of elite technocrats, with hidden agendas of privatizing public schools, reducing costs and breaking unions. Latin American unions have stressed their opposition to reform with strikes, marches, demonstrations, media campaigns and votes in elections. However, in Brazil's federal system, its teachers' unions are decentralized, along with states and municipalities. Some are weaker than they are reputed to be, run by career union bureaucrats with little contact with classroom teachers, creating opportunities for dialogue and negotiation with both union leaders and the rank-and-file for creation of new incentives if they are not threatened with loss of their jobs. The quality of union leadership varies among localities, as does political leadership among states and municipalities. In some places, notably Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Minas Gerais in the 1990s, as well as in New York in 2003-07, successful negotiations have occurred between education reformers and teachers' unions.² Deteriorating schools mean deteriorating working conditions for teachers. So teachers' unions outside Brazil gradually have become engaged in school reform. Some are training and retraining teachers. Some have agreed to performance incentives. In New York, Newark, Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, Miami and Minneapolis, teachers' unions have accepted responsibility for running public schools.

In her excellent book, *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform*, Professor Merilee Grindle of the Institute of Latin American Studies at Harvard University warned that the future of school

reform is in doubt “where the support of teachers has been ignored, where hostile unions continue to oppose change, and where incentives for politicians, administrators, teachers and parents work against new initiatives.” Grindle added: “education changes had to be adopted at the classroom level if they were to improve the extent to which children learned critical skills and abilities; this meant that multiple layers of implementers needed to be on board for new initiatives to succeed. At any point in a long chain of decision-making responsibilities, reform activities could fall victim to sloth, political contention, mistaken judgment, organizational jealousies and logistical tangles.”

It takes courage to embark on school reform. At the beginning of this series of four articles we asked: What is the relationship between ignorance and social disorder? How can we operate a complex society without a literate population? What will our societies be like in 10 or 20 years if our children fail to learn?

To their credit, the New York authorities courageously decided to confront the threatening reality of disorder and failure in their schools, responding with creative solutions that addressed deformations in their system’s structure and incentives. They have made mistakes and exposed themselves to intense political controversy, but their work has begun to show results. Both reading scores and graduation rates have improved, while violence in the schools has been reduced. Chancellor Joel Klein went to my old school in the Bronx, Evander Childs, to announce that three small schools operating in that troubled building were graduating 80% of their seniors, against only 31% in 2002. “Kids must practice reading, reading, reading,” said Steven Chernigoff, principal of the Bronx High School for Writing and Communication Arts, an overcrowded school for 348 students occupying a corridor in the Evander building. “Much of the improvement came with intensive work with individual students and with small groups. We are very well-trained in using data to track student progress from the moment they enter our school. We explain the importance of their graduating on time. If they fall behind, we offer them summer school, Saturday classes and individual study after school closes in the afternoon.”

The decision to embark on school reform in New York was made by one man, Mayor Bloomberg, reflecting widespread anxiety in the United States about the failures of public education. In São Paulo, the decision also depends on one man, Governor José Serra, a graduate of São Paulo public schools and the Polytechnic Institute with a doctorate in economics at Cornell University who, while in exile, worked at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) in Santiago, Chile, and later at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, before becoming Planning Secretary of São Paulo State and federal Minister of Planning and Health. Serra’s impressive credentials give reason to hope for new initiatives to do more in public education than past São Paulo governments. In his first six months as governor, Serra has concentrated his efforts on projects like getting federal financing for the Ring Road around Greater São Paulo, improving suburban railways, providing sanitary infrastructure for the illegal settlements around the Guarapiranga reservoir and repairing deteriorated rural roads. In other words, Serra has focused on the hardware of the system rather than the software. However, it is the software that makes the society productive. In education, he has focused on narrow initiatives like hiring 4,000 assistants [estagiários] to help in the teaching of literacy in the first two primary grades. Although these narrow initiatives may be important, what is needed is integrated action to address the systemic problems of public education, which has suffered badly for lack of ambition. How did Serra feel when Folha de S. Paulo reported last month of the deterioration of the state school in Mooca where he studied as a child, E.E. Antonio Fermino de Proença, with pupils missing four classes on some days for lack of teachers? “On our days of science classes,” one pupil said, “we pass the time playing tic-tac-toe.”