

Low marks

Education is still letting the country down

From the inside the Unidade de Educação Básica Cidade Olímpica feels more like a dungeon than a school. Slits wide enough to admit trays of food pierce the walls between the classrooms and a cavernous hallway. The pre-class clamour of children does not stop with the bell because some teachers have not turned up yet. Paula Souza, the school's director, says that 40% of the teachers are absent at least one day a week. Some resent being assigned to this primary school on the poor periphery of São Luís. Its performance shows it: in a national exam administered in 2005 Cidade Olímpica's scores in Portuguese and maths were below average for city, state and country.

Alamy



Don't repeat after me

The real problem is those averages for the country as a whole. Brazil came dead last in maths and fourth from the bottom in reading in tests administered in 40 countries by the OECD. Half of ten-year-olds are functionally illiterate and there is little sign of improvement. Working-age Brazilians have an average of 4.1 years of schooling, compared with six in China. This is the biggest obstacle to Brazil's ambitions. If educational standards were as good as those in the United States, the difference in income per head would fall by 30-40%, calculates Samuel Pessôa, an economist at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas. To diminish that gap, all three levels of government, which share responsibility for education, must raise their game.

To be fair, Herculean progress has already been made. Little more than a decade ago some 17% of children aged 7-14 did not go to school. That changed in the 1990s when the federal government started distributing money to states and municipalities on the basis of enrolment in primary school. The extra pupils then thronged the high schools, which tripled their output of graduates during the 1990s, according to Claudio de Moura Castro of Pitágoras, a chain of private schools. Quality deteriorated in part because quantity expanded so fast.

Upgrading is harder than expanding. Brazil spends 4.3% of GDP on public education, less than it should, given the relative youth of its population. Much of that money is wasted. Brazil is among the world champions in grade repetition, with 30% more children in primary school than the total in the 7-14 age group. Undertrained, overstretched teachers know no other way of controlling their classrooms. The practice costs 13 billion reais a year, nearly a fifth of basic-education spending. "It's a vicious circle. You can't invest in quality because of repetition," says Alberto Rodríguez of the World Bank.

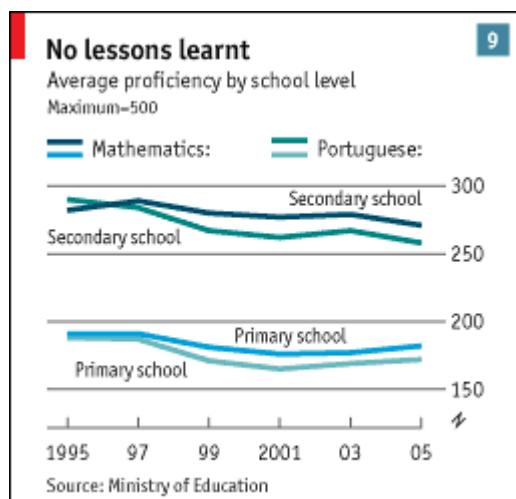
Starting salaries for teachers are low, which deters good candidates, but then increase steeply, encouraging incumbents to stay until they retire, five years earlier than other workers. In that brief career, encouragement and incentives are both in short supply. Training is long on theory and short on practical experience. Many teachers work at two or even three schools, one of them private. In Maranhão experienced teachers refuse to teach in remote districts, which are served by students who take classes during the week and pursue their studies at the weekend. The São Luís school system is plagued by absences for medical reasons, which can last up to

15 days without a doctor's certificate. Mayors reward political supporters with school directorships and sometimes teaching jobs. "Many states have tried to limit political intervention but these efforts have been short-lived," says Mr Rodríguez. And students spend an average of only three hours a day in class.

Worry about Brazil's lagging education system is becoming more widespread. A gaggle of enterprises and NGOs banded together last year to form "Everyone for Education", a movement to push for better results. Global competition is obliging enterprises to adopt international quality standards such as ISO 9000, which in turn demand a workforce educated to high-school level. Fernando Haddad, the education minister, says Brazil aims to match the OECD's average performance by 2022, the bicentenary of independence.

Paying attention

Having ignored basic education for much of his first term, Lula now acknowledges that Brazil's educational plight is "the worst of all worlds". Fundef, the federal fund that financed the expansion of primary education in poorer states, has been turned into Fundeb, which covers pre-school and high school as well. Children who go to pre-school are more likely to finish high school and, the government hopes, less likely to have to repeat grades. A new "education development package" is to set performance targets for each state and municipality and to reward those that achieve them, with around 8 billion reais earmarked as education aid over the next four years. This "new culture" of offering carrots for results will require restructuring in the states, the cities and the ministry itself, says Mr Haddad.



State and local initiatives also seem to be making a difference. Seven of the ten highest-scoring school districts in the state of São Paulo had a private education company, COC, to manage their classrooms. In COC-run schools teachers attend monthly training sessions, are constantly evaluated and learn how to deal with problem children. São Luís has hugely increased its share of teachers with a college degree, from less than 20% to more than 90%, and now does much better in national tests.

As so often in Brazil, the question is whether the bright ideas and promising experiments can work their way into its institutions. Teachers want better education as well, but they are more interested in spending, training and working conditions than in the nitty-gritty of managing schools and classrooms. Juçara Vieira, president of the National Confederation of Education Workers, thinks that schools should be evaluated but individual teachers should not, because that "would lead to competition".

Nor is there much pressure from struggling, often single parents, who are inclined to treat school as a form of day care. Ms Souza of Cidade Olímpica confirms that "they [just] want us to take care of their kids." Real change may not come until parents start demanding more from their schools. The same might be said of voters and politicians.

Fonte: The Economist, v. 383, n. 8524, A special report on Brazil, p. 13-14, 14 April 2007.