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PUBLIC EDUCATION:

Challenges, Opportunities and Innovative Approaches

Dear Fellows,

I hope 2009 has been a fun and productive year for all of you so far! In December, the Americas Project hosted a successful colloquium on "Urban Migration: Planning for the Future," a topic that is very timely and relevant to every single one of our countries. You can download a copy of the conference report from our meeting at: www.bakerinstitute.org/publications/ap08-urbanmigration. As you'll read, we discussed public education during the AP symposium but the topic is so vast and important that we decided to devote this newsletter to the subject.

By now, most of you know we have a full time project administrator of the Latin American Initiative, Lisa Guáqueta. She is from Colombia and fully bilingual. Lisa's responsibilities include most of the AP follow up with fellows, including the newsletter. We want to thank those of you who contributed to this very interesting issue on public education. Given the amount of time it is taking us to collect information from the different participants, we've decided to have two newsletters per year; a spring and a fall issue. The topics for the fall 2009 newsletter will be philanthropy and volunteerism. Please contact Lisa at lguaqueta@rice.edu as soon as possible if you would like to write for the next issue. The deadline for articles is May 15, 2009.

Keep in touch and enjoy the newsletter and the AP report!

Best wishes,

Erika

Program Director,
Latin American Initiative

The Americas Project

The fellows believe education is essential to break the cycle of poverty. Schools open doors to new opportunities and provide entry to social networks that might otherwise be closed to disadvantaged and marginalized youth. But the challenge of educating this demographic, which includes many immigrant children, is significant. High dropout rates, lack of parental involvement, and poor nutrition and health are all barriers to learning.

In this edition of The Americas Project newsletter, the fellows present some innovative responses to these dilemmas that have found success. Programs such as Avancemos in Costa Rica, Bolsa-Familia in Brazil and Oportunidades in Mexico show that financial incentives for staying in school can improve the prospects of these children. In the United States, one of the fellows describes outreach programs at a Texas school that encourage immigrant students to earn a diploma and apply for college.

"Relationships are key," another fellow writes. Indeed, the programs presented here emphasize the idea by offering ways to strengthen the bond between governments, families, educators and children. All the fellows agree that while there is still work to be done, these programs are a firm and important step toward providing our children with the opportunities they deserve and must have to become engaged, productive citizens on the global playing field.

Bolsa-Família: Brazil's Conditional Cash Transfer Program

By Brazilian fellows Marcelo Driusso ('08) and Tania Callado Borges ('02)

Conditional cash transfer programs (CCTs) have been gaining popularity in developing countries around the globe. These government programs offer cash to poor families in exchange for commitments such as enrolling children in school or taking infants to health clinics.

CCT programs have real and significant impacts in the lives of the low-income families receiving the aid. Rigorous evaluation has led to a growing body of literature showing that CCTs improve the educational opportunities and health of the poor, as well as reduce poverty, mortality and the incidence of child labor.

Bolsa-Família

The Bolsa-Família program, created in October 2003, is a combination of four CCT programs previously in place in Brazil: Program for Eradication of Child Labor (created in 1996); Bolsa-Escola[1] (created in 2001); Bolsa-Alimentação[2] (created in 2001); and the Nutrition Card program (created at the beginning of 2003).

Each program was overseen by a different governmental agency, and coordination between them was almost nonexistent. The database for each program did not communicate with the others. As a result, a family could receive all four types of aid, while another family, living in equal conditions, received nothing.

In the Bolsa-Família program, poor families are divided into two groups: the extremely poor, with a monthly per capita income up to R$50.00; and the poor, with a monthly per capita income between R$50.01 and R$120.00 as of November 2006. The extremely poor families that benefit from this program receive a fixed amount of R$50.00 a month.

The program also has a variable benefit that is disbursed according to family composition: For each child up to 15 years of age and for each pregnant woman, the family receives an additional R$15.00 a month. However, the variable benefit applies to a maximum of three children or pregnant women per family.[3] Therefore, the maximum fixed and variable benefit is R$95.00 a month for extremely poor families, and R$45.00 a month for poor families receiving the variable benefit.

In order to receive the benefit, a family has to comply with the following requirements: Children between the ages of 6 and 15 must be enrolled in and attend school at least 85 percent of the term; children up to 6 years of age must have vaccination cards and make regular visits to the doctor; and pregnant women must receive prenatal consultations and nutrition education. No commitments are defined for extremely poor families that receive the fixed benefit; however, it is suggested that adults receive job training.

Impact of Bolsa-Família on Inequality

Brazil is a country characterized by a very unequal distribution of income. Fortunately, this is not a static situation, and CCTs have helped reduce poverty and improve opportunities for the most disadvantaged people in the country.

There are various ways to measure the impact of CCTs on inequality. In one study, Sergei Soares,[4] a researcher at the Brazilian Institute of Applied Economic Research, used the decomposition of the Gini coefficient[5] to study per capita income distribution in Brazil. Soares found that between 1996 — the first year the program was implemented — and 2004, CCTs had reduced the country's inequality rate by about 5 percent.

This study does not reach conclusions that can lead to detailed recommendations for redistributive policies, but general strategies to reduce inequality in Brazil can be derived. For example, Bolsa-Família obtained excellent results by targeting the poorest populations in Brazil. This positive outcome was possible due to the partnership between the federal government and the municipalities, which were able to identify the beneficiaries.

A well-run program such as Bolsa-Família can operate at a reduced cost. In fact, CCTs in general are a very cost-effective method for reducing income quality, as some Brazilian case studies demonstrate. With an annual budget of approximately 2 percent of the country's GDP, Bolsa-Família benefits 10.45 million families in Brazil. In addition, as the study by Soares confirmed, 40 percent of the poorest Brazilians received 80 percent of the total amount distributed by Bolsa-Família, which helped to reduce income inequality.

Impact of Bolsa-Família on Education

A study conducted by the Brazilian Social Development Ministry[6] verified that the Bolsa-Família program has had a clear, positive impact on school attendance. The probability of absence is 3.6 percentage points lower for children in the program than for those who are not; in addition, the probability of dropping out is 1.6 percentage points lower for children in the program.

However, children benefiting from Bolsa-Família are almost 4 percentage points more likely than other students to fail to advance in school. This adverse impact could be attributed to a higher number of underachieving students who enroll in school as a result of the program. Since such students have been out of school for awhile, or have never attended, they are likely to have greater difficulty in catching up with those who have always been in school.

Conclusion

The cost of Brazil's CCT programs represents a modest 0.5 percent of the total annual income of the population — a very small percentage compared to income from labor (including salary, hourly wages, professional fees, etc.) and social security. Yet studies have shown that Bolsa-Família was responsible for a significant reduction in the Gini coefficient for a number of people, and has significantly impacted poverty and income inequality in Brazil.

In order to reduce poverty in the long term without dependence on these transfers, it will be necessary to improve the distribution of wealth and to provide better-paying jobs for the population. Improving the distribution of wealth means modifying the distribution of individual productive capacities (such as access to education), as well as improving access to property and opportunities. However, these changes will take time. There are structural aspects that simply cannot be changed in a few years. Education, for instance, is a long-term investment. It is important to have more clarity on the adoption and limitations of such programs since they are one of the tools for the economic and social transformation Latin America's social structure.

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[1]The Bolsa Escola program, administered by the Ministry of Education, required school attendance for children in families whose monthly per capita income was below R$90.00. The transfer was R$15.00 per child per month, up to a maximum of R$45.00 per month.
[2]The Bolsa Alimentação program, administered by the Ministry of Health, required regular check-ups for pregnant women, breastfeeding for mothers and immunization for young children. The transfer was R$15.00 per month per child up to age six, and a maximum of R$45.00 per month.
[3]The variable benefit, therefore, applies to any combination of these two designations, i.e., three children, two children and one pregnant woman, two pregnant women and one child, etc.
[4]Sergei Soares, et al. "Conditional Cash Transfer in Brazil, Chile and Mexico: Impacts upon Inequality" (working paper, International Poverty Centre, 2007).
[5]The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality of income distribution. It is defined as a ratio with values between 0 and 1, where a low number indicates more equal income or wealth distribution (0 would correspond to perfect equality).
[6]Social Development Ministry, First Results of Bolsa Família Program Impact Analysis, SAGI/MDS, Brasília, 2007.

The Avancemos Program: Deterring School Dropouts in Costa Rica

By Costa Rican fellow Mishelle Mitchell Bernard ('05)

For decades, Costa Rica has been recognized in Latin America for high levels of human development, measured by access to educational and health services, and by the standard of living of its citizens. The constitutional precept that determines the free and compulsory nature of education has helped improve the quality and reach of the country's schools. Six percent of Costa Rica's national budget is allocated to education, resulting in literacy rates of 95.8 percent, according to the National Institute for Statistics and Census (INEC). In 2008, this Central American country reaffirmed this trend, remaining in seventh place among Latin American countries.

Costa Rica's educational system has produced a strong, highly-skilled service sector that has given the country a competitive advantage. As an illustration, Intel, a world leader in microprocessor manufacturing, set up operations in the country in 1995, highlighting the upward trend of the service sector in the Costa Rican economy and securing its place in the global economy.

Despite the shift in the Costa Rican economy from agriculture to service exports, the country's poverty rate stagnated at 20 percent for 20 years. The situation has meant that generations of Costa Ricans have had limited access to education — a dilemma at a time when education is the principal mechanism driving social mobility, as noted in the 2008 State of the Nation address. A lack of financial resources is the main reason thousands of young Costa Ricans give for dropping out of school, according to research conducted by the Ministry of Education.

In response, the administration of President Oscar Arias launched the Avancemos[1] program in 2006. This initiative, adapted from the Brazilian model, awards conditional monetary transfers to families to promote the continued involvement and re-enrollment of young people in secondary schools. The subsidy ranges from $29 to $96 U.S. dollars per month, and is granted to students between 12 and 21 years of age who are enrolled in academic or technical secondary school programs. In order to keep the grant, beneficiaries must agree not to drop out, and to obtain passing grades. According to the National Development Plan,[2] the program should provide direct financial assistance to 130,000 students over four years. As of May 2008, the program's technical department had reported 102,366 beneficiaries.

Official data from social sector authorities show that as a result of the Avancemos program, student dropout rates went from 6.4 percent in 2007 to 5.3 percent in 2008. During the same period, poverty declined an average 3.5 percent; among teenagers between 13 and 17 years of age, poverty was reduced by 3.9 percent — from 26.5 to 22.6 percent, according to INEC.

Despite these improvements, the Avancemos program has been criticized for weaknesses in a system meant to monitor transferred funds and verify they are, in fact, used to support the education process. Furthermore, some sectors point to the institutional weakness of the executive entity, the Joint Institute for Social Aid, in detecting young people who are in situations of risk.

On the other hand, the Ministry of Public Education has acknowledged that lack of interest among students is another powerful reason behind educational casualties. In Costa Rica, the school year runs for 200 days — quite a bit shorter than the school year in developed countries. However, students mention a lack of interest in the lessons taught. The disinterest becomes more visible after the midterm vacation and during the last weeks of school in December, when absenteeism increases.

As a countermeasure, in 2007 the Ministry of Education implemented new programs in music education, civic education, art and physical education for high school students. During the final weeks of the school year, courses such as Financial Education for Life, Culinary Arts, Cinema Forums, Art and Handcrafts are offered to keep the students' interest.

Both the financial assistance and the curriculum variations, which aim to bring young people closer to their areas of interest, have managed, in the words of Public Education Minister Leonardo Garnier, to "break the trend" in school dropout rates.

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[1]Spanish for "Let's Move Forward."

[2]The National Development Plan establishes the objectives, activities and goals that the public institutions of Costa Rica must develop during one administrative period. The current plan presents the objectives and goals for the period from 2006 to 2010.

Mexico's Oportunidades Program

By Mexican fellow Jose Roberto Grajales ('08)

The Oportunidades program[1] is notable for its direct impact on the standard of living of Mexico's most underprivileged families. The program is defined as "an instrument for human development"[2] because it promotes improvements in the education, nutrition and health of targeted citizens, and draws them into mainstream society. A distinctive feature is its ability to help break "the intergenerational cycle of extreme poverty and favor the development of abilities in education, health, and nutrition in the beneficiary families within the program."[3] Program assistance is precisely aimed at families living in areas of extreme poverty, both rural and urban. The concept of achieving "equal opportunity" gives the program its name.

According to the National Council for Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), more than 42 million Mexicans — close to 40 percent of the country's population — lived in poverty in 2006. In addition to insufficient family income, poverty involves malnutrition, illiteracy, disease and significant school dropout rates. The Oportunidades program aims to combat the vicious cycle that generates poverty and passes it on to successive generations; therefore, in selecting the beneficiary families, a social underdevelopment index[4] established by CONEVAL is used as a reference, as is an index of underprivileged status[5] established by the National Population Council. Additional data provided by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography and the Department of Social Development are also considered. Assistance is thus directed to locations where it is most needed.

The Oportunidades program has three basic components: education, health and nutrition. Within each component, assistance or benefits are granted to qualifying families in cash or in kind. The education component includes scholarships for children under age 18 who are enrolled in grades three through nine. Scholarships are also available to students 14 to 21 who are enrolled in school. This scholarship is in the form of bimonthly financial aid which increases as the student moves to the next grade level. In addition, assistance is provided for acquiring school materials, either in cash or in kind. Lastly, there is the "Youth with Opportunities" fund, which grants monetary aid to young people who are under 22 when they graduate from college.

The health care component of the program seeks to promote nutrition and improve the beneficiaries' health. To that end, family members schedule appointments at the nearest hospital, where information about their health and nutritional needs is collected and statistically processed. Families are given a list of medicines that are included in the "Basic Guaranteed Health Package"[6]; beneficiaries have access to the medication free of charge. In addition, disease-prevention training is conducted in community workshops. Lastly, the health component includes monthly financial aid for persons over age 70 who live in communities with a population over 10,000.

The nutrition component of the program includes a monthly and fixed "Better Living" stipend, which is designed to compensate "beneficiary families for the effect of the international increase in food prices."[7] The food component also includes a monthly "Energy Assistance" allowance, which helps cover the cost of electricity, gas, coal, fuel, firewood and other energy sources.

These forms of assistance directly benefit families, as they are managed under a holistic vision, and are not simply dispensed as subsidies that go into a bottomless pit. The Oportunidades program seeks to address the disadvantages and hardships faced by low-income families in Mexico through policies that produce measurable results. However, there is much more to be done. While it is true that there is no perfect approach, this program, effectively implemented (as it is in most cases), brings the poorest families much closer to having the "equal opportunities" that many of us desire and persistently work to achieve in Mexico.

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[1]Spanish for "Opportunities."
[2]Department of Social Development. "Agreement under which the Rules of Operation for the Oportunidades Human Development Program are Issued," Official Federation Daily, 6th Edition, Monday, December 29, 2008, México, pg. 2.
[3]Ibid., 3.
[4]The social underdevelopment index helps identify the lack of access to basic needs and services at the federal, state and local levels.
[5]The index of underprivileged status helps identify the unmet needs of the country's poor at the federal, state and local level.
[6]This package consists mainly of preventative actions and timely detection of health problems.
[7]Ibid., 6.

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Helping Immigrant Students Access Higher Education: A Multi-Tiered Approach in Houston, Texas

By American fellow Monica Piquet-Rodriguez ('08)

A college education is becoming more of a necessity in the American and global economies. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of American jobs that require a college education will increase to 43 million by 2016 — a faster growth rate than that for jobs at other educational levels.[1] Others frame the issue in less quantitative terms by explaining that what is required are far more workers who can read and understand complex, technical material and apply that knowledge to perform new tasks and solve problems.[2]

This mandate for an educated workforce in the 21st century has serious implications for the immigrant community and the public (K-12) and higher (post-secondary) education systems. In the United States today, approximately one in every five children under the age of 18 is an immigrant. Many do not speak English well, have parents with little or no formal education, and are living in low-income neighborhoods.[3] Given this data, there is no arguing that a peek into America's economy 10 or 20 years from now begs an important question: Where will immigrant youth end up after high school?

Ensuring a college education for more immigrant youth in the United States is indeed a mountain to climb, but it is not insurmountable. With the right support and instruction, every child is capable of learning and succeeding in college. For educators, the challenge is determining what constitutes "the right support and instruction." There are numerous questions educators must grapple with in this regard:

- How to simultaneously ensure successful language acquisition and content mastery so that students remain on track through high school graduation and college matriculation.
- How to help immigrant families adapt to the American educational system, and understand and value the principles underlying educational success and the attainment of pivotal milestones (grade level promotion, acquisition of a diploma, etc.).
- How to minimize the myriad variables that pervade the homes of all too many immigrant families: poverty, lack of resources to create a nurturing learning environment, and parents without the formal education or financial resources to support college-level study for their children.

The variables range too widely for any one teacher, school, research-based curriculum or educational reform policy to be the answer. To ensure that more immigrant youths obtain a college education in the United States, the approach must be as complex and multifaceted as the challenges presented in the task. This is certainly the approach that we are taking at Lee High School in Houston, Texas — a large student population (~1,950), inner-city school that serves a significant number of immigrant youth. Collectively, Lee High School's students come from 72 countries as first-generation immigrants. Three out of every four students do not speak English as their first language. Slightly more than 40 percent of Lee's students are classified as English language learners, or ELL. Approximately 90 percent of students are economically disadvantaged,[4] 85 percent are at-risk,[5] and close to 40 percent transfer into or out of school during a nine-month school year. While it's tempting to get caught up in the almost unbelievable challenge these demographics represent, it is much more important to consider the approaches that schools like Lee are taking, continue those that are working, and reallocate the time and resources spent on efforts that show little or no promise of success.

Relationships are key. A system that builds a strong relationship between the family and the school is central to Lee High School's approach of ensuring more immigrant students graduate and attend college. Immigrants — regardless of age, race or nation of origin — contend with a multitude of daunting challenges in a new country of residence. These challenges are magnified for immigrants with limited schooling and scant financial resources (which is the case for most of our students and their families). While a bureaucracy meant to help immigrants assimilate can often be overwhelming, our hope is that Lee High School will provide a different experience — one in which faculty members know the students and their individual situations. This is a huge task, and takes time, persistence and a genuine belief in the value of trust. Lee High School does this in formal ways (through a "family advocacy" system[6] and a "small learning community"[7] school structure), as well as informal ways (through a culture that fosters strong relationships to improve a student's chances of short- and long-term success). Applying to college is one of the biggest personal risks low-income immigrant students will take in their educational careers. If the people trying to assist them in that process are strangers, it is much less likely to happen.

Equity of college counseling services. While most traditional public high schools assign guidance counselors to students alphabetically or by grade level, Lee High School offers a comprehensive and fully-staffed college center to all students in grades 9 to 12. This ensures a consistent message and level of service for all of Lee's students, especially its immigrant youth. Lee High School's college center provides opportunities for immigrant students to get involved in college-preparatory and career-aligned learning programs outside of school. These programs — otherwise known at Lee as "Fantastic Learning Opportunities," or FLOs — help build the students' confidence and increase their familiarity with business environments and the demands of college-level courses. The college center also provides a full-time college access coordinator who is well-versed in higher education opportunities for immigrant youth, including immigrants with "undocumented" status. The presence of these counselors is critical because they provide accurate legal and financial information about the programs and services available to immigrant students; they also offer one-on-one counseling to address the common interpersonal needs of immigrant students and their families.

Minimize the variables, maximize the constant. At Lee, we know it would be naïve to assume that for an immigrant student, the only obstacles to a college education are the required number of high school credits, a solid SAT score and college essays. As suggested earlier, the economic and domestic realities of many immigrant youth imply delicate social issues that can, and do, consistently interrupt the process of education. All too often, students lack manageable ways to address these variables in their personal lives. Thus, Lee High School works with community-based organizations and local social support providers to create a megacenter of services staffed by highly qualified personnel. Students requiring health care can visit the Baylor College of Medicine Teen Clinic. Students looking for an extra source of inspiration can take advantage of the Mentors of Hope program.[8] Students in need of emotional support can visit one of two part-time psychologists on campus, or several full-time social workers in the "Communities in Schools" office. There is an anti-gang specialist, dropout prevention task force and more. Lee strives to minimize the multiple variables that can get in the way of a student's success, and "maximize the constant" — the consistent availability of resources.

These are only some of the initiatives that have increased college matriculation rates for immigrant students at Lee High School. In the five to eight years since many of these initiatives were piloted, Lee's college matriculation rate has almost doubled, from approximately 25 percent in 2001 to 40 to 50 percent in 2007. In recent years, notably successful immigrant students from Lee High School have gone on to study at institutions such as Harvard University, Princeton University, Stanford University, Vanderbilt University, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Southern California and The University of Texas.

Like Lee, hundreds of schools across the United States are grappling with this very real challenge and opportunity for the nation. Different models that promote higher education for immigrant youth are being met with varying levels of success. Yet one thing is certain: Educating immigrant youth is critical for the future of our economy, and for a productive society whose leaders contribute for years to come.

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[1]Drew Liming and Michael Wolf, Job outlook by education, 2006–16, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006.
[2]Alan Eck, Job-related education and training: their impact on earnings, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1993.
[3]Migration Policy Institute, 2000.
[4]An "economically disadvantaged" student is defined as one who is eligible for the free- or reduced-lunch program, or any other form of public assistance, provided that gross family income meets the government standard for poverty.
[5]"At risk" is defined as a student who has one or more academic, behavioral or domestic indicators that make it more likely the student will drop out of high school before completion. The indicators include multiple course failures, assessment failure, pregnancy, enrollment in an alternative education center and homelessness.
[6]The family advocacy system ensures each student and family has at least one adult faculty member who serves as their "advocate." Instead of having to wade through myriad offices, procedures and processes to get questions answered or concerns addressed at the high school, the student and family can always use their family advocate as a first-stop resource and confidante.
[7]Small learning communities consist of approximately 250 students who are taught by the same 10 to 15 teachers for all core curriculum classes, as well as the "signature" electives tailored to the learning community's "theme." Themes of small learning communities are aligned to career industries, such as Media and Visual Arts or Health and Human Services. The small learning community is essentially an organizational structure that provides the benefits of a small school, yet exists within a large, traditional school setting.
[8]The Mentors of Hope program matches students to business professionals who visit frequently to have lunch and discuss life goals and the paths for reaching them.

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