

A QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE GUATEMALAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Since it has taken me several years to even begin to understand the Guatemalan educational system, it occurred to me that some of you might be interested in learning a bit more about the educational backgrounds of our scholarship students. Please remember that I am no expert and my understanding may not be 100% correct.

First, the basic public education is divided into primary and secondary schools. The “primaria” grades are from one to six. In recent years more and more schools have also added a year of pre-primaria or parvulos. In the private schools this is sometimes called kinder. Secondary school is divided in two parts, first, three years of “basico” which is roughly comparable to our junior high school and then three years of “diversificado” in which students study a specialization (most commonly either “magisterio” (teaching) or “perito contidor” (bookkeeping). Other majors do exist, especially in the private schools, such as tourism, auto mechanics, computers, agronomy, and bi-lingual secretary but the majority of the public secondary schools offer only one or two specializations in each school. Students must often choose a major that is available rather than what they really want.

Next, you should know that the general level of education is exceedingly low. As I mentioned earlier primary school teachers have only a high school education themselves. Further, the school day is only four hours long, usually from 8 am to 12 noon. Teachers are poorly paid and generally earn between \$100 and \$300 dollars per month. Absenteeism is common both among the students and the teachers since there are many strikes and holidays and there is no such thing as a substitute teacher or make-up days at the end of the school year.

According to a rather optimistic article in today’s newspaper (Prensa Libre, January 2, 2007), 2,636,272* children or 98% of the appropriate age group are expected to attend school in the coming year at 17,000 public primary schools, 3,000 public secondary schools and 6,500 private schools. According to this article “only” 300,000 school age children have never attended school. These figures are considerable more positive than those that were reported in a study done by the World Bank. This is probably because they don’t address the drop out rate which is extremely high. Quite a few students never even manage to pass first grade.

*addendum: The next day a different paper reported that parents tried to register 3,000,000 students and that most of the schools closed registration after the first day because they were full. The children who don’t get accepted generally have to wait until the next year unless their families can afford private schools.

One reason for the high drop out rate is the generally poor quality of classroom teaching. The teachers are not only poorly trained and poorly paid they receive little or no support for their efforts in the classroom. The central government rarely provides much more than the teacher’s salary, the curriculum and the school building. The budget does not provide for any kind of support staff or even for cleaning or painting. There are few books and virtually no supplemental teaching aids. Most teachers simply replicate the teaching system which was in effect when they were students, that is to say lots of

repetition and rote learning. Another reason for the high drop out rate is the cost. The students and their families must provide virtually all of the needed supplies which can cost as much as a subsistence farmer or farm laborer makes in a week. For many large families these costs add up to considerably more than a month's income.

Even the optimistic article in the Prensa Libre which claims that 98% of children attend school divides this number into 46% in primaria, 33% in "basico" and 19% in diversificado. These figures are based on educational levels of the entire country and hide the fact that there is a wide discrepancy between educational achievement in rural as compared to the urban areas and an even greater discrepancy in the educational levels of the rich and the poor. To give you a more accurate measure school attendance and the educational disparity is between rich and poor I refer you to a graph prepared by the World Bank at the following website:

<http://www.worldbank.org/research/projects/edattain/edattain.htm>

The first graph on this page shows the proportion of children age 6 to age 24 that are in school. Blue indicates they are in primary school, red indicates secondary school and grey or silver represents post-secondary or university education. The second graph divides this information for the richest 20% of the population and the poorest 20%. The majority of our students would be listed under the poorest 20% and you can see how few in this category make it to high school. As for our college students, they are walking miracles!

I'm sure there is much more that could be said but I hope this gives you at least a quick overview. Before closing I want to tell you just a little about university study. First, you should know that all students enter into their careers during the very first year. Thus medical students start their freshman year in the department of Medicine. They take courses for 5 years and then have one more year of internship. Lawyers study for 5 years and then need 2 or 3 more years to complete a variety of internships, take a series of exams and complete a thesis or thesis project. Those that are studying social work and most of the other liberal arts type degrees need three years of course work to achieve



One of our graduate's classroom



The house of one of our students

the level of "tecnico" and one or 2 more for internships and thesis in order to become "licenciados" This is considered an important level of professional education and lawyers, administrators (even the president of the country) use this title.