El Salvador

Rural Schools Triple Enrollment and Deliver Higher Quality

Education requires sustained and well-sequenced efforts to bring about tangible results. The recently completed Secondary Education Project in El Salvador builds upon earlier programs designed to improve both the coverage and quality of primary education and has been successful in achieving similar improvements at the secondary level. It produced these results despite a series of natural disasters that occurred during project implementation (Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and earthquakes in 2001).

With the support of this project, gross enrollment rates in secondary education in El Salvador increased from 34.5% in 1998 to 46.1% in 2005, exceeding the target rate of 40% envisaged at the start. Rural areas saw the greatest growth in coverage: the number of students attending rural secondary schools tripled from 7,160 in 1999 to 21,593 in 2005. Enrollment was increased through offering means-tested scholarships, new classroom construction, and development of distance learning. Between 1999 and 2005, 6,156 scholarships were awarded to students from poor families, allowing 5,328 of the recipients (87%) to finish secondary education. Construction of 106 new classrooms provided space to enroll 4,686 new students, and another 354 classrooms were added through the distance education component, benefiting over 19,000 students around the country. However, this increase of enrollment at the secondary level would have been impossible without the previous success of the EDUCO program that expanded access to a complete cycle of primary education in rural areas and improved primary completion rates to around 90%.

Quality of education outcomes was also enhanced in a measurable way. Test results show improvements in learning achievements in mathematics and language for both public and private schools. In public schools, the percentage of students achieving intermediate or superior levels in mathematics
increased from 38% in 2002 to 46% in 2005. In language, performance increased from 58% to 68% in the same period. A similar trend was found in private schools. This improvement in learning outcomes was obtained through teacher training, curriculum development linked to labor market skills, establishing standards for private schools and improving the M&E methodology and infrastructure. The new curriculum gives secondary level students a choice between a two year general academic program and a three year technical/vocational program with a strong focus on labor market skills. 4,500 teachers were trained through a decentralized in-service teacher training system, which in turn relied on a self-diagnostic instrument in each secondary school (PEI – Proyecto Educativo Institucional). The project also financed rehabilitation of 117 schools and setting up 149 learning resource centers, 365 libraries and 162 science laboratories in secondary schools, all of which improved the quality of educational resources available to students and teachers.

An important part of improving the quality of education in El Salvador was the development of a national student assessment test (PAES), which has been taken by all graduating secondary students since 1998. Test score data are used to analyze the factors that influence student achievement and to compare learning outcomes over time and across schools, thus providing an important feedback mechanism to schools and to the Ministry of Education.

Looking back, the following factors have contributed to the success of the Secondary Education Project in El Salvador:

1. **Strong country ownership and long term vision.** The Ministry of Education had clear, long term goals for reforming the education system in the country and was able to maintain this vision over time through political change and external shocks. The project therefore was part of a well articulated sequence of measures, building on earlier successes and preparing ground for future work. The Ministry managed the project directly, without a PIU, which meant that no institutional memory was lost with project closure.

2. **Involving stakeholders.** The continuity of the program was based on the broad based support from schools and families, who were involved in decision-making through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., Proyecto Educativo Institucional that allowed schools to self-diagnose their needs and work out proposals for improvements; school-based projects that allowed students to make an input into curriculum reform; etc.).

3. **Focus on Results.** The project was one of the first in the Region to focus on outcomes rather than outputs, and that also helped to maintain the strategic vision over time and through many tactical adjustments. Availability of reliable data was key in this process, and the Government was willing to collect and use such data from the very beginning of the project.

**About this Series**

The “Results in Action” series showcases LCR operations and AAA that have produced good results and highlights how they have achieved these. The series appears monthly. For more information contact Alan Carroll at acarroll@worldbank.org or Tatiana Proskurykova at tproskurykova@worldbank.org