

Strategic Partnership Project



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IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN PANAMA'S SCHOOLS

In collaboration with the Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PREAL), the Private Sector Council for Educational Assistance (CoSPAe) initiated the “Competencies for Strengthening Leadership and Management in Panamanian Schools” project to improve the quality of basic education by establishing a policy for the professionalization of school principals and regional school supervisors. The initiative included the definition of competency profiles of these positions and a preliminary training phase of 99 principals and 23 supervisors (regional directors) from three distinct regions.

BETTER LEADERSHIP FOR BETTER EDUCATION

As enrollments become nearly universal and Panama decentralizes its school system to better serve a diverse population, emphasis has shifted from having the right to education – ensuring that every child has access to school – to having the right to an education of quality.

In order for a school system to be “of quality,” it must meet equity, relevance, and efficiency criteria:

- A system is equitable if it enables students to achieve similar results even if they come from different backgrounds.
- A system is relevant if it responds to the learning needs of its society.
- A system is efficient if it produces results.

Inequity is widespread. Enrollment rates are lower among rural and indigenous populations, while drop-out, repetition and failure rates are higher (especially among females).

With regard to efficiency, some 80% of students scored below the minimum proficiency level of 60 points on Panama's national achievement test (SINECA) in 2005. According to UNESCO's 2008 Second Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (SERCE), some 50% of Panama's students reach third grade without having acquired the ability to read and comprehend basic text, while 30-70% of third and sixth graders do not attain minimum levels of performance in science, math or Spanish language.

Numerous studies have agreed that management which strengthens teacher performance in the classroom is the most important factor in raising education quality, particularly in decentralized education systems. From this perspective, the “Competencies for Strengthening Leadership and Management in Panamanian Schools” project, carried out over 18 months by CoSPAe with support from PREAL, represents a timely response to the demand for higher quality education, by helping local educational leadership and management focus on teacher performance. Box 1 outlines the project's goals.

DEVELOPING STANDARDS FOR MANAGERIAL COMPETENCE

Establishing competencies has proven to be a useful instrument for informing personnel policy. Competencies can be helpful in keying hiring, evaluation, and training decisions to a common goal. The approach was originally developed by economic sectors, but today is increasingly embraced by social sectors, including education.

The first component of the project consisted of establishing competency standards based on a review of practices in other countries.



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The project team visited Santiago, Chile to analyze two school management models:

- The total quality school management model based on the “Quality Leadership Framework” that the Chilean ministry of education has implemented over the past decade. This model establishes measurable criteria in four areas: leadership, curriculum stewardship, resource allocation, and management of the school and organizational environment.
- The Quality School Management Program of the Chile Foundation, which outlines management competency standards based on student and user-focused management practices, staff leadership, management of teacher competencies, planning, process management, and outcomes management.

The project team also visited Bogotá, Colombia to examine the quality management system designed by the national planning department of the ministry of education, which was formed as part of the National Development Plan 2006 – 2010. This system follows a model similar to that of the Chile Foundation.

The team also took into consideration the Salvadoran School Supervision Training Program, which was particularly helpful in

profiling the competencies of regional supervisors (those ministry-assigned personnel that oversee a cluster of schools in a given zone). In this program, the supervisor supports decision-making at the school level while helping keep on-the-ground realities and central policies in mind.

The project team analyzed the relevant competencies in these cases, adapted them to Panama’s context, and categorized them into two general areas: administrative and pedagogical. They also added a third “attitudinal” area, which specified cross-cutting actions or propensities which the team felt were essential (see Box 2).

“Competency” comprises the knowledge, skills and attitudes that mobilize groups to resolve common problems in ways that are in accordance with cultural norms. It implies action and a set of performance criteria that serve to judge whether the action has been executed competently. In accordance with these definitions, the project elaborated standards for a given set of particular competencies and a brief description that helps to concretize the performance expectations (see Box 3). A preliminary version of these standards was vetted with principals and supervisors in three pilot districts of the country (East Panama, West Panama, and Coclé). At the request of the principals’ and supervisors’ unions, as well as the ministry of education, representatives from each region in the country endorsed the standards at a conference in Santiago (Veraguas), led by the vice minister of education.

Box 1

Competencies for Strengthening Leadership and Management in Panamanian Schools Program

GOAL:

Help improve the quality of basic education through the professional development of regional school managers and supervisors, and the strengthening of pedagogical leadership, effective teaching and administrative practices, so as to address the challenges of decentralization and school autonomy in Panama.

INTERMEDIATE OBJECTIVES:

- Analyze the work of school principals in selected regions and of regional supervisors at the national level, as a crucial input for systems that seek to promote quality education through democratic values.
- Describe the characteristics of school management in their organizational dimensions, considering the allocation of roles and responsibilities to each member of the educational community, and their formal interactions.
- Strengthen the pedagogical leadership of principals and supervisors by promoting attitudes and conducts consistent with education goals.
- Design, implement and evaluate a program of professional development based on managerial competencies for effective school and educational leadership in Panama.
- Convince the ministry of education to establish and implement the program as part of a continuous professionalization policy for supervisors and principals.

FROM PROPOSAL TO IMPLEMENTATION

The second component of the project consisted of training exercises, in which the government’s Panamanian Education Center Project (PEC) played a major role. Each school uses the PEC as a guideline for handling personnel and management issues outlined in Panama’s Education Law, which regulates the general participation of the educational community (teacher representatives, students and parents, the professional staff of schools). Through the PEC, schools can coordinate school management decisions, combining administrative and technical/pedagogical elements, all oriented towards improved outcomes. The PEC also helps orient the procurement of project-based funding via the ministry of education’s Quality and Equity Fund (FECE).

A total of 99 principals and 23 supervisors from the 3 pilot regions participated in the training seminars. Some secondary school principals were also included by request of the ministry of education.

The project team immediately identified a set of key institutional weaknesses:

- The relative absence of pedagogical quality issues in the PEC, and a tendency to focus almost entirely on infrastructural improvements.
- The tendency of the PEC to plan without involving the wide school and educational community.
- A mechanical approach to planning that pays little attention to action or to detecting and solving problems.
- Minimal attention to attitudinal competencies.

Profiles of Principal and Supervisor Competencies

| PRINCIPALS | SUPERVISORS |
|--|---|
| ADMINISTRATIVE COMPETENCIES | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote harmonious relationships within the educational community. - Represent the school as its chief professional. - Lead PEC-based strategic planning. - Disseminate PEC strategy. - Assure access to and the availability of useful information for planning purposes. - Periodically inform school community on functions and processes. - Make decisions on school investments in collaboration with school community. - Effectively administer material and financial resources of the school. - Make available public accounting of leadership decisions and investments. - Continuously evaluate and adjust the school's goals and objectives. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote the organizational relationships between the schools and communities in the given school zone. - Follow-up and evaluate the goals and objectives of schools. - Administer resources in a given school zone based upon the School Zone Project (PEZ). - Coordinate operational and administrative aspects of schools under a given zone's purvey. - Coordinate and orient the administrative functions of schools' personnel. - Coordinate and orient normative processes related to administrative staff and teachers of General Basic Education. |
| PEDAGOGICAL COMPETENCIES | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordinate and promote the personal and professional development of teachers. - Coordinate and supervise the academic work of teachers in the classroom. - Assure availability of teaching resources for teachers. - Supervise and assess the implementation of the curricular program within the classroom. - Promote, orient, and assure the quality of new teaching strategies in the classroom. - Manage the organizational environment of the school and the dynamics of its staff to facilitate inclusion and optimal learning. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordinate and supervise academic and administrative work of principals. - Coordinate and promote the professional development of teachers and professional staff. - Manage availability of teaching resources for all personnel. - Orient and follow up on the implementation of the curricular program within the classroom. - Promote, orient, and assure the quality of new teaching strategies in the classroom. - Assure the implementation of priorities and programs according to plans. - Foster a positive organizational environment in schools and of personnel to facilitate inclusion and optimal learning. |
| ATTITUDINAL COMPETENCIES | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Commitment to social ethics - Commitment to quality - Self-directed learning - Proactive leadership - Inter-personal relations - Negotiation and conflict management - Adaptability and flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-development - Teamwork - Self-motivation - Communication - Creative problem solving - Entrepreneurial spirit |

At the same time, several strengths were identified as having aided the training process. These included a concern for the welfare of students, a frustration with the limited evidence of teacher impact, and a top-to-bottom desire to find ways to improve personnel performance.

The training exercises employed an "action-reflection-action" methodology, in which participants analyzed their personal experiences and reviewed the comprehensive methods, techniques, and tools so as to design and implement the PEC. This helped principals work on their leadership roles, focusing on pedagogical aspects and designing plans to bring about needed changes. At the same time, the exercises helped show

Box 3

Example of indicator descriptions for a specific principal competency

| COMPETENCY | INDICATORS |
|---|---|
| <p>CP 12: Coordinate and supervise the academic work of teachers in the classroom.</p> <p>Description: Capacity to assess academic work of teachers based upon didactic planning presented to the school leadership.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Plan, coordinate and direct periodic technical meetings with teachers.2. Analyze teacher planning based upon programs and plans to which the school has previously committed and agreed.3. Review plans and strategies in collaboration with teacher coordinators or relevant staff.4. Supervise the completion of programs in different academic and administrative areas.5. Plan, in collaboration with teachers, activities that advance priorities established by the school or zone.6. Provide technical support, supervising the implementation of methodological orientations.7. Plan, coordinate and direct meetings of teachers to analyze the evaluation process, and offer pertinent adjustments and feedback.8. Assess the teaching and learning process, seeking coherence among goals, objectives, content and curricular activities of each subject and grade. |

supervisors how to develop strategic plans for a given zone and region, emphasizing teacher support. The cross-cutting dimensions of emotional intelligence, improving inter-personal relations, teamwork and conflict management served as a background. This called for:

- An initial, 7-day workshop with the objective of training on the identified competencies.
- The development of a workplace practicum with the assistance of the project team leaders.
- A second workshop to share and evaluate the related experiences.

Significant outcomes of the training exercises include:

- Principals and supervisors recognized having refocused their work around essential practices (those which affect student learning), and understanding that administrative functions should be organized around student learning.
- Improved teamwork, including replication of the training exercises for those who were unable to participate in the project.
- Principals and supervisors had the opportunity to review their leadership styles and a majority noted an improvement in relations and communication with their collaborators.
- Principals recognized the utility of the PEC as a medium for

setting and achieving school-based objectives. Therein, they also recognized the value of inclusive planning.

- Pedagogical components were included in the PEC, in addition to plans to generate solutions for recurring problems.
- School values and missions were constructed with more objective and realistic criteria.
- Schools organized to create a work environment that allows putting the PEC into practice more feasibly.

RESULTS AND PROSPECTS

In the recent past, educational reforms have invested a good deal of energy and resources into curricular transformation. While this was necessary for adjusting curriculums to the demands of the “knowledge society”, most of these efforts failed because they could not be implemented in the schools and classrooms.

This project sets in place performance-orienting standards for school principals and supervisors, two key actors in the administration of the Panamanian school system. It also produced a training model and methodology which has proven to be efficient in shifting the focus of management towards quality and learning.

For now, the competency standards have proven useful for the professionals who participated in the training exercises. Moving forward, they will be useful in the process of selecting and training future directors and supervisors, and will become a tool in developing rigorous policies that prioritize professionalization of school leaders. In order for the standards to become a policy tool, new procedures and some legislative modifications must be put in place, along with thoughtful and inclusive guidelines for discussing the implications of making national policy based on these priorities.

It is important to highlight the impact of working in teams with the principals and supervisors, who share a language and a process towards a common goal: improving student learning. For the spirit of this process to be maintained over time, it will be important to reinforce this “alliance” and to avoid becoming part of the mechanical processes that this project sought to modify in the first place. On the other hand, the educational community in Panama has to date shown an impressive willingness to participate in such a process, which addresses common goals of reform.

Surveyed participants indicated that the project’s training exercises were directly relevant to their work, differentiating them from other training programs in which teachers are only exposed to theoretical or conceptual frameworks. Most likely, the positive results of this project are due to a work dynamic that provoked sincere self-reflection and experiential learning. In this sense, it would be productive to evaluate and compare the leadership style changes produced with other courses (elsewhere) with similar objectives. Lastly, it is worth noting that the methodology of holding an initial workshop and then a follow-up seminar after new practices had been put in place made it possible to reinforce in practice the innovative approaches that the project sought to establish. ©