



# en breve



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## IMPROVING SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLING IN BRAZIL: THE FUNDESCOLA APPROACH

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The Fundescola approach to improving schooling outcomes, especially for millions of poor children in Brazil, is showing considerable success.

### Context and Defining the Problem

Public primary schooling in Brazil is the responsibility of state and municipal governments and not under the direct jurisdiction of the federal Ministry of Education. As a consequence, when the federal government wants to improve the quality of schooling, it has neither the mandate nor the capacity to work directly with the country's 184,800 public schools, serving 44 million children. Instead, the Ministry has to mobilize the 27 state-level governments and 5,561 municipal governments to undertake the desired reforms and improvements.

The School Improvement Program, designed to address these concerns, consists of three projects. The first, Fundescola I (US\$125 million), approved in April 1998, was designed to develop an initial set of school-based instruments and support structures to improve school equity and effectiveness and to increase public awareness around the issue of school quality. The second project, Fundescola II (US\$400 million), approved in June 1999, focused on improving and expanding the set of tools developed in the

first phase, extending these to additional schools, and more aggressively engaging the education establishment and the public sector in the process of school-based development. The third project, Fundescola III, aims at completing the work involved in the development of the tools and processes and scaling these up within Brazil. Fundescola III will be implemented in two phases: Fundescola IIIA (US\$320 million), approved on June 13, 2002, and Fundescola IIIB (planned for July 2006, estimated amount US\$450 million).

During the preparation of the Fundescola Program, pre-investment studies by the government and the Bank, including the 1997 sector study "Call to Action", examined the determinants of low educational performance of poor children in Brazil<sup>1</sup>. Leading policymakers and key stakeholders in the education community participated actively and helped interpret the findings (see Box on back page).

Although they noted many causes of student failure, policymakers and stakeholders focused on the factors most amenable to government policy and intervention:

- **inequitable school quality**—school quality is not guaranteed for all children, with the poorest children being particularly underserved
- **ineffective schooling**—many school staff are not using effective methods of teaching and learning.

### FUNDESCOLA : Steps for School Improvement

- *Promote public engagement and parents' sense of ownership of schools by giving school councils financial resources to manage.*
- *Raise the equity of school quality by helping schools attain Minimum Operational Standards.*
- *Help schools to prepare and implement their own strategic "School Development Plan" to improve student achievement.*
- *Provide financing to schools to execute their School Development Plans.*
- *Improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning and raise student achievement by providing integrated instructional models along with technical assistance and training to local secretariats of education.*

Two underlying reasons for these factors are:

- **insufficient engagement of parents and the broader public**—raising the quality of schools and schooling requires that parents and the public hold the schools and the responsible government agency accountable.
- **inadequate policy alignment on school quality and effectiveness**—all policies, activities, and resources in the school system need to be aligned with the objective of raising the quality of schooling for all children and improving student learning.

The study found that to achieve fundamental reform, broad-based changes were required in education strategies, supporting organizational structures and attitudes among stakeholders. It was also clear that widespread and sustained school reform in Brazil can neither bubble up from below nor be imposed from above. Local governments must play a key role. On the basis of this analysis, the Ministry of Education and the Bank designed a school improvement strategy built on federal Ministry assistance and incentives to local governments to support and implement school reforms.

### Project Objectives and Strategy

The Fundescola Program was developed to help local governments reduce disparities in educational quality across their primary schools and increase the effectiveness of their schools, within their own financial limits. The Ministry of Education defined indicators to measure the effects of the program on educational equity and school effectiveness, and the capacity of participating education secretariats to bring about, expand, and sustain improvements in their school systems.

The Program starts from the premise that children’s educational performance is largely determined by the quality of their schooling. The Program uses three levels of intervention to help local governments improve children’s learning performance in primary schools: the school, the education secretariat and the broader public (Figure 1).

#### School-Based Development – the First Level of Intervention

Schooling improvement depends on a **school-based development strategy**. The ultimate objective of this strategy is to transform thousands of poorly performing

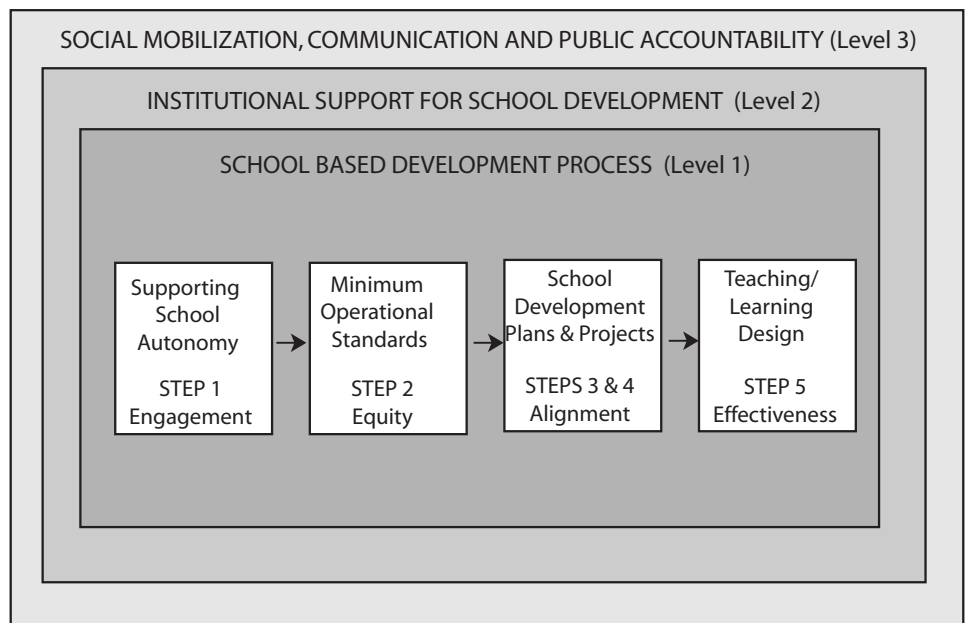
schools, which enroll the majority of children in the regions targeted by the project, into effective, high quality institutions where student learning is prioritized and success for all students is increasingly within reach. The starting proposition is that school reform takes place when the school principal and staff are (i) given greater responsibility for school improvement, (ii) offered well-structured guidance in the process of self-diagnosis and strategic planning, and (iii) supported by regular technical assistance and follow-up. In addition, the institutional and local political environment must be restructured to support these changes.

Fundescola’s school-based development strategy was designed to be phased in over time for two reasons. First, this type of transformation requires fundamental changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of school principals, teachers and parents, and the staff and management of the education secretariat. It takes time for these stakeholders to recognize their responsibility and capacity to make school reform happen. Second, experience and research demonstrate that it is not possible to motivate and support school reform simultaneously in a large number of schools. Consequently, whereas all schools in the region benefited immediately from a direct transfer of resources, fewer schools undertook a development plan or continued with the strategic planning process.

#### The Second Level of Intervention: Institutional Support for School Development:

While the major emphasis of Fundescola’s design is on schools, the approach recognizes that schools do not exist within an institutional vacuum, but depend on state or municipal secretariats of education for guidance and resources. For the school-based development strategy to be effective and self-sustaining, local education managers and their institutions need to understand and accept the

**Figure 1 - The Fundescola Strategy**



rationale behind the strategy and know how to support and promote it. Consequently, the project includes a program of institutional strengthening for secretariats which aims to develop their capacity to support and sustain the school improvement strategy. This involves the development of strategic plans by state and municipal authorities which align their programs and organizational structures to focus on school improvement—promoting equity, effectiveness, and efficiency within their systems.

These plans help the secretariats to support schools' efforts to prepare and implement *school development plans* (PDEs) and *school improvement projects* (PMEs). Secretariats are able to access information on revenues and expenditures, allowing them to budget effectively. They acquire the legal instruments needed to transfer their own resources to schools and develop a Management and Business Plan to design and institutionalize career plans for education professionals, emphasizing continuous improvement and incentives for better classroom teacher performance.

### The Third Level of Intervention : Social Mobilization and Public Accountability:

Reorienting education development in Brazil by putting the school rather than the government in the driver's seat requires a substantial shift in perceptions, attitudes, and behavior on the part of politicians, administrators, teachers, principals and parents. Influencing attitudes, encouraging participation, and disseminating the results of the changes are crucial to Fundescola's success and the institutional sustainability and expansion of these new approaches across the region.

Fundescola supports a major social marketing campaign to ensure that stakeholders have sufficient information to set educational goals and be held accountable for their part in achieving them. National assessment results are disseminated to schools and school systems; school performance indicators are reported to each school system in the same year; standardized criteria—referenced test packages—are developed and made available to school systems, and the results of Fundescola implementation and impact studies are disseminated.

## Results and Lessons Learned

Many initial project targets have been exceeded by over 100 percent, particularly with respect to Minimum Operating Standards and school development plans. Fundescola I and II achieved the following results:

- 4,164 schools (100%) were surveyed
- 10,975 primary school classrooms in the priority

attention zones were equipped according to Minimum Operating Standards and 12,616 classrooms received furniture

- school development plans (PDEs) were implemented at 1,724 schools
- 1,513 school improvement projects (PME) were implemented
- 12,685 key decision makers were trained, including mayors, secretaries of finance and secretaries of education.

Research carried out by the National Institute for Education Research (INEP) on the impact of key interventions of Fundescola I and II influenced the design of Fundescola III, which was recently approved<sup>2</sup>. In 1999, a research sample was selected, comprising 158 schools in 6 states distributed across all three of Fundescola's regions (North, Northeast, and Center West), including 55 schools with PDEs and the

remainder without PDEs. INEP contracted consultants to survey the schools and collect detailed background information on the students and their families, teachers and principals, and on the characteristics of the schools themselves. Achievement tests in Portuguese and Mathematics were also developed by INEP and administered by consultants to all fourth grade students in the sample schools.

Among the numerous variables included in the research study are: teacher education attainment level and performance on achievement tests, the percent of students who had previously repeated, teacher self-reports on curriculum coverage, mother's education level, student socioeconomic status, and a binary indicator of school participation

in the PDE intervention. Most of the findings showed a positive and significant difference for students in schools implementing a PDE: students in these schools had better report card scores and promotion rates, and reflected improved performance for boys in mathematics and girls in Portuguese. It is important to point out that this research focused on only one of Fundescola's interventions.

A Stanford University study of the Fundescola program (the PDE study), using the INEP data base and additional data, shows substantial improvements in school management, and positive and significant improvement in student achievement, controlling for family background, school characteristics, type of municipality, self selection, and other factors.

Other Fundescola interventions, such as the Minimum Operating Standards, Escola Ativa, Proformação, and Gestar are being examined separately. Since the PDE is the core intervention of Fundescola, the results from the studies cited above give strong support to the Fundescola School Improvement Strategy.



The design of Fundescola III benefits from the implementation experience of its sister projects, Fundescola I and II. Lessons include the need to give higher priority to social mobilization and communication efforts in promoting the school-based development approach; the benefits of funding a second and third round of school improvement projects, providing an incentive for schools to stay focused on quality improvement and to practice the planning skills they have learned; and providing incentives for municipalities to expand the school-based development approach to additional schools.

## Moving Forward

Bringing the Fundescola school improvement strategy to schools attended by the poorest children in Brazil, and

providing a framework through which the reforms can be sustained by local governments, and scaled up in Brazil, requires that large numbers of education secretariats commit themselves to the school improvement effort. For Fundescola to take root and expand, be successful and sustained over the long term, the principles—equity and quality—and strategies—public engagement and alignment—of Fundescola’s school improvement program will need to be integrated into the mindsets and daily practices of education secretariat staff, and into the operating procedures of the institutions themselves. The Program’s success will be measured not by the number of schools implementing Fundescola interventions, but by the number of local governments operating effective and equitable school systems.

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### A Call to Action, Combating School Failure in the Northeast of Brazil

A 1995 study<sup>1</sup>, developed with the support of the Federal Ministry of Education, the World Bank, and UNICEF, examined classroom practices and behavior of first-grade teachers in the public schools in two states in the north-east of Brazil - Bahia and Ceará. The study covered 140 first-grade classes totaling 1,650 children in 94 municipal and state schools. The objectives of the study were to observe how teachers and students interact in the classroom and to identify the teaching methods that contribute most to students’ academic achievement.

The study confirmed many of the criticisms that had been made of schooling in the Region for some years. The researchers found that the amount of time spent on teaching was less than expected, classroom activities focused on the teacher rather than on the students, teachers did not use classroom materials and teaching aids, and relied on outdated techniques based on dictation and students copying lessons in notebooks, and there was almost no interactive learning. On the other hand, the study noted that the teachers had little support from parents or the local community and had no incentives to change their pedagogical practices. In addition, the teachers had no adequate guidelines about how to do their jobs and had few materials or textbooks.

On the positive side, the researchers concluded that children learned better in classrooms that had their artwork and written work hung on the walls. Students also learned significantly more when teachers executed sequenced programs of discrete instructional activities each day, which proves that well-organized teachers are an essential ingredient for effective instruction. The children also learned more when they were actively engaged in classroom activities, attentive to the learning task, and informed about homework assignments.

Teachers were more effective when a wide variety of instructional materials was available for use in the classroom. Finally, the verbal ability of teachers is critical. Teachers who are effective communicators are more successful in enabling students to learn.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> - *Brazil: A Call to Action, Combating School Failure in the Northeast of Brazil*. Brasília: Projecto Nordeste/World Bank/UNICEF, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> - see *Avaliação de Desempenho: Fatores Associados*, mimeo., July 2001, 59 pps

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