

# CHANGING HOW STUDENTS LEARN, TEACHERS TEACH, AND SCHOOLS ARE ORGANIZED

Latin American and Caribbean Education Profiles 1999–2004

## PROFILES OF USAID EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS: INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

This publication is one in a series profiling the recent work of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in the education sector in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). It is intended for all who are interested in learning more about USAID, international development, and education activities in the LAC region. While USAID currently has offices or development activities in 17 countries throughout the region, its education development efforts are concentrated in eight: the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Peru.

The purpose of the series is to provide information on how the U.S. government is responding to diverse education needs in these countries through a variety of initiatives—ranging from innovative projects that increase educational access for underserved populations to efforts to foster policy dialogue and better decision-making in the sector. Bringing these initiatives to life typically requires coordination with and participation from a variety of international, national, and local partners.

The publications highlight USAID efforts in these countries during a five year period, 1999–2004. Each profile treats one country and includes a succinct analysis of key problems that limit access to quality education there, defining those challenges within historical, political, and social contexts. The publication outlines USAID's strategies for targeting its education investments, describes specific projects for addressing key issues, and shares lessons learned/best practices to improve future programming.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Students learning through cooperative activities in BASE II-supported school.

**COVER:** Students and teacher interact together in BASE II-supported school.

All images courtesy of U.S. Agency for International Development.



## NICARAGUA AT A GLANCE

**NICARAGUA HAS ESTABLISHED A NETWORK OF 170 “MODEL SCHOOLS” NATIONWIDE TO TRAIN TEACHERS BETTER, DEVELOP BETTER EDUCATION MATERIALS, STRENGTHEN INTERCULTURAL BILINGUAL EDUCATION, AND PROMOTE ACTIVE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION.**

The educational system in Nicaragua has changed over the past 15 years. Despite numerous beneficial outcomes, such as increased enrollment rates and improvements in school infrastructure, the country still suffers some of the worst education statistics in the region.

From 1995 through 2002, USAID’s education program in Nicaragua sought to foster better education and, in turn, healthier and smaller families, to develop the skills and attitudes needed for development within the country. Education activities emphasized strengthening teacher performance, involving parents and community members in education, implementing a more effective curriculum, and decentralizing the education system. Given the success of model schools, the concept has now caught on throughout the country. Some 2,000 other public primary schools have started to adopt the approach in hopes of attaining more effective teachers, strong bilingual education, increased community participation, and school autonomy.

**USAID/Nicaragua’s 2003–2008 Country Strategy emphasizes:**

- 1) Increased and improved social sectors and transparency.
- 2) Increased and improved basic education opportunities.
- 3) Efforts to improve the efficiency of expenditures and resource allocation.
- 4) Support for the expansion of decentralized services.

**USAID/NICARAGUA AIMS TO STRENGTHEN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM NATIONWIDE THROUGH BROAD-REACHING, PARTICIPATORY, AND EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING MODELS.**

“The quality and relevance of primary and secondary schooling in LAC countries continue to cause concern, as the majority of students attend weak and underfunded schools and fail to acquire basic skills in mathematics, language, and science. Fewer than 30 percent of students in the region complete secondary school, and many of those who do finish lack the skills to compete in the workplace, let alone in an increasingly competitive global economy. USAID programs are improving educational systems by developing innovative pilots and more effective service delivery models, many of which are being expanded by host governments and multilateral development banks.”

—Senate Testimony of Adolfo Franco,  
USAID Assistant Administrator for  
the LAC Bureau, March 2004

#### MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF HUMAN INVESTMENTS, USAID/NICARAGUA

“A better educated population is critical to Nicaragua becoming competitive in the global market, which increases possibilities for healthier households. Quality education is fundamental to achieving these changes. We have built a model with the government of Nicaragua over the past 10 years that has helped establish a foundation for modernizing the Nicaraguan educational system. Our future programs will support a transformation of public schools nationwide to take advantage of the many lessons learned on providing quality primary education with full participation of students, families, and communities. This will help Nicaragua reach the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals and Nicaragua’s Education for All/Fast Track Initiative goals. There is also tremendous opportunity for cross-cutting support and coordination with the trade capacity and economic growth program. Nicaragua’s enabling environment for economic growth, particularly in existing human capital, is so problematic that further human investment may be an important precondition for viable and sustainable economic growth and competitiveness in the Central American and global markets. Nicaragua needs to see more youth moving into secondary education after a progressively better primary education experience—thus becoming better educated and able to take advantage of the economic opportunities the Nicaraguan government and we hope to foment.”

—Alonzo Wind







6.6 years, an extremely poor person had completed only 2.2 years. Compared with a nonpoor urban literacy rate of 91.3 percent, the level in extremely poor rural areas was only 53.9 percent. These equity gaps are especially pronounced on the Caribbean coast, home to most of the nation's indigenous groups and where 80 percent of the population lives in poverty.

Despite being one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, Nicaragua designates a relatively high share of its national budget (18 percent) for education investment. Given the small size of the overall gross domestic product, however, the resources available are still woefully insufficient. This is reflected in the lowest teachers' salaries in the LAC region—an average of \$61.50 per month for a primary school teacher in 2003. Moreover, public spending per student in the year 2002 was only \$5.10 at the preschool level, \$83.00 for primary, and \$38.40 for secondary.

The financial strain is exacerbated by high repetition and desertion (often tied to family poverty), evidenced by the fact that it takes a typical student more than 10 years to complete primary school. This systemic inefficiency is a drain on scarce resources, with an estimated \$9.7 million of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports' (MECD's) primary education budget

spent on repetition in 2003. Finally, because of a law allocating 6 percent of the national budget to higher education, the ratio of university to primary school per student spending is nearly 8:1, among the most inequitable in the region.

Since the early 1990s, Nicaragua has experimented with reforms to improve education access and quality under the concepts of humanistic constructivism<sup>3</sup> and curricular transformation to promote active learning. This has entailed a host of ongoing adjustments to school curriculum, classroom pedagogy, and teacher training. A National Education Plan for 2001–2015 outlines the government of Nicaragua's long-term vision for the Nicaraguan education system. It is based on principles such as the right to equity of and access to quality education; the integration of civil society as a key participant in the educational process; and education as an economic and social investment in human capital.

## **USAID REGIONAL STRATEGY**

In response to dramatically reduced region-wide funding levels—from \$190 million in 1990 to \$52.7 million in 2004—USAID education programming in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has shifted from large national programs to smaller, targeted geographic areas and an emphasis on

<sup>3</sup> According to *constructivismo humanista*, learners acquire knowledge and understanding mainly by “constructing” these through interactions with others. In constructivist classrooms, each child follows an individual path with the teacher's help and guidance, using the resources available in a classroom environment arranged for that purpose.















Students enjoying small-group work assignment.

# BASE II PROJECT

## IMPROVING EDUCATION QUALITY IN MODEL SCHOOLS

Implemented by the Academy for Educational Development with Juárez and Associates

Dates: March 1999 to September 2005

Funding: \$15,113,528<sup>6</sup>

### WHAT EDUCATION PROBLEMS MUST BE ADDRESSED?

Nicaragua faces numerous challenges related to educational access, equity, and quality. One indication that the current system is not preparing qualified students is the fact that so few possess core competencies. In applying standardized tests to more than 16,000 students in 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports (MECD) found that only 8 percent of third graders and 5 percent of sixth graders demonstrated proficiency in Spanish. In mathematics, 14 percent of third graders and only 1 percent of sixth graders were deemed proficient.<sup>7</sup>

### WHAT IS USAID DOING TO RESPOND?

Since 1994, USAID's flagship education program has consisted of the BASE and BASE II Program. The activities have supported the shared objectives of USAID and the Nicaraguan government of increased access to quality education and greater student achievement. BASE II continues the long-term effort to improve primary education quality by promoting modern teaching and active learning methodologies and parent and community support for schools.

The program in Nicaragua is the latest iteration of the *Escuela Nueva* (New School) movement—a world-renowned approach to working with multigrade schools in isolated rural areas that has transformed primary education in Colombia and Guatemala. Its components have been applied in many other Latin American countries.

### WHAT IS THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PROGRAM?

The goals of BASE II are to 1) increase Nicaraguan children's access to quality primary education, 2) improve student achievement, and 3) increase the number of students completing primary school. This has been done through a network of 170 “model schools”—the centerpiece of the project—located in two thirds of the municipalities nationwide. Given the proven success of BASE model schools, roughly 2,000 other public primary schools around the country have started to adopt the approach to date, or roughly one third of all Nicaraguan schools.

By the end of the program, it is expected that model school students will have completed more years of schooling and demonstrated greater achievement as a result of active learning. Teachers will also have been equipped to provide quality education

<sup>6</sup> BASE II was originally awarded from March 1999 to September 2003 with a \$12.6 million budget. Two option years (included in the original contract) were authorized to provide the program a bridge between the old USAID strategy and the new 2003–2008 strategy and program.

<sup>7</sup> *Plan Común de Trabajo del MECD en el Marco del SWAP* (MECO Sector-Wide Framework) 2004–2008, first version, February 2004.



































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