spotlight on Educo

Educación con Participación de la Comunidad en El Salvador

By contracting directly with communities, El Salvador dramatically increased the primary school enrollment of children in poor and remote areas—without reducing the quality of learning.

El Salvador was wracked by civil war throughout the 1980s. Some 80,000 people died—in a total population of roughly 5 million—and many more were wounded and disabled. Income per capita fell almost 40 percent between 1978 and 1983. In 1989 the conservative Republican Alliance Party won a majority in the national assembly, with Alfredo Cristiani as president. Despite contentious negotiations, a peace accord was signed in January 1992.

The war had severely damaged the education system. Communication between the central ministry and schools broke down, supervision collapsed, and many teachers, viewed by some as government “agents” and by others as agents of social opposition, abandoned their posts. By 1988 more than a third of the country’s primary schools had closed. And by the end of the war some 1 million children were not in school.

Establishing Educo—Education with the Participation of Communities

The Ministry of Education quickly identified expanding access to basic education and raising its quality as central goals—both to rebuild national unity and to promote long-term economic development. Minister of Education Cecilia Gallardo de Cano, a reform proponent from the “modernizing” wing of the Republican Alliance Party, was intent on lessening the distrust between former combatants.

But skepticism was high. The Ministry of Education was not trusted in many parts of the country and by organized groups such as the National Association of Teachers. Expansion of the traditional education system was viewed suspiciously as a covert means of reasserting national control and building political support in opposition-dominated areas.

During the war many communities had recruited local teachers and established community schools, bearing the cost themselves and paying teachers when they could. The government seized on this model of community-based schooling as the basis for a formal program that would be financially and administratively supported by the ministry: Educación con Participación de la Comunidad, or Educo, with the goal of encouraging the establishment of preschools and primary schools, or classrooms in existing schools.

Begun in 1991, Educo targeted 78 of the country’s poorest rural municipalities (of 221 urban and rural municipalities). By 1993 the program was expanding to all rural areas, including many areas formerly under opposition control. But not all of the “popular schools” established during the war were incorporated into Educo. Some observers claimed there was selective inclusion based on political favoritism; others saw not incorporating popular schools into a government program as a way of sustaining spontaneous community-based education.

Each Educo school (or section within a traditional school) is operated by a Community Education Association (ACE)—an elected committee made up primarily of students’ parents—that enters into a one-year renewable agreement with the ministry. The agreement outlines rights, responsibilities, and financial transfers. The Ministry of Education oversees basic policy and technical design. Using the money directly transferred to them, ACES select, hire, monitor, and retain or dismiss teachers. Teachers at Educo schools are hired on one-year renewable contracts. Parents are taught about school management and how to assist their children at home.

Three-quarters of new enrollments

Educo succeeded in many respects. From a pilot phase of six ACEs in three departments, it scaled up nationally to all of the country’s departments by 1993. Rural primary enrollments increased from 476,000 in 1992 to 555,000 in 1995—with over 75 percent of the new students enrolled in Educo schools (figure 1). By 2001 there were almost 260,000 students enrolled in Educo primary schools, 41 percent of all students enrolled in rural schools—and more than 100,000 children enrolled in Educo preschools, 57 percent of all children in preschool.

Even as enrollments increased rapidly, there is little evidence that learning quality suffered. A survey of 30 Educo primary schools and 101 traditional schools in 1996 found no significant differences in average math and language test scores among third graders in the two types of schools. A follow-up study in 1998 found that grade promotion and repetition were similar across the two types of schools as well. As the innovation matured, the institutional arrangements that it introduced took hold and ensured rapid expansion of school places and enrollments of poor children, seemingly without a substantial cost in quality.

Parent visits to classrooms made much of the difference

That Educo schools served the poorest of El Salvador’s students, in the poorest areas, makes these results all the more astonishing. How did they do it? Using retrospective data that allow controls for child, household, teacher, and school characteristics—

Figure 1 Students enrolled in traditional rural and in Educo primary classes

Note: Figures for 2002 are estimates.

Source: El Salvador Ministry of Education.

(c) The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank
that teachers were less likely to be absent in Educo schools (averaging 1.2 days of absence a month rather than 1.4 days). Students in Educo schools were also absent less (three fewer days a month) than students in traditional schools. In addition, Educo’s more flexible compensation scheme resulted in greater variability in teacher earnings, which suggests that parent associations used compensation to motivate greater effort among teachers. Offering or withholding future employment itself was an incentive, and one that ACEs used. Turnover among Educo teachers was high, which suggests that job loss was not an idle threat.

Converging with traditional schools
Educo’s administration has become embedded in the Ministry of Education, and Educo has developed into a major schooling model in the country. Aspects of traditional and Educo schools have been converging. Traditional schools now have more parent participation in school governance and management, and are more autonomous with supporting block financing. Similarly, the pay packages of teachers are more similar: Educo teachers receive the same salaries and benefits as teachers in traditional schools. Even so, a key distinction remains: Educo teachers are hired (and potentially fired) by parent committees while those in traditional schools are not.

Is the Educo model applicable elsewhere?
Educo’s achievements might appear idiosyncratic. The end of a bloody civil war that had thrown the traditional education system into chaos opened up a unique opportunity to change the way schools were managed. Based in part on coping strategies during the civil war, El Salvador had a history of community involvement in school management. Indeed, the community associations appear to have worked better in places that had prior experience in community organization. In addition, in the aftermath of the war there was an unusually large pool of educated people without jobs (coinciding with the rapid expansion of university places fueled by opening higher education to the private sector).

These factors suggest that the Educo model might not be directly replicable in a different setting. But some lessons are general. First, with political will it is possible to change the relationships between the actors in basic education. Second, schools can be transformed to work in ways that promote enrollment, participation, and learning—even for children from the poorest households. Third, getting parents to participate effectively in managing schools can help overcome some of the potential pitfalls in the provision of education services—especially monitoring schooling in remote areas. Fourth, it is possible to scale up small innovations to have a significant impact on national outcomes.

Figure 2  Educo promoted parent involvement, which boosted test scores

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent visits to classrooms in previous month</th>
<th>Increase in test scores associated with a visit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of visits</td>
<td>Percent increase</td>
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Source: Adapted from Jimenez and Sawada (1999).

Parents are more active in Educo schools. And their involvement affects learning (figure 2). Each classroom visit by parents was associated with significantly higher math and language test scores regardless of the type of school. Parents were more active informally as well: they were more likely to meet with teachers or to assist teachers in monitoring attendance or maintaining school furniture.

How did Educo and parent involvement affect test scores? At least part of the story is

and statistically adjusting for the fact that unobserved abilities of children might systematically differ between the two types of schools—researchers found that community involvement explains much of Educo’s success.