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“Learning Loss in Latin America and the Caribbean: Building Better Education Systems in the Wake of the Pandemic,”

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Education in Latin America was already in crisis, the pandemic made it worse. The region suffers the greatest inequality in the world, beginning with inequality of opportunities to access a good education. Fifty percent of students do not finish high school in a timely manner, and the region ranks last when measured against international tests, such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

The pandemic aggravated this, resulting in 3 million students dropping out of school and, according to the World Bank, never returning to the classroom. Poor educational assessment results were surely due to the length of time schools were closed and the lack of connectivity particularly in the most vulnerable communities. In addition, it has become clear that, online learning is not a sound replacement for in-person education. This dynamic appears to be widespread, as the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results show that U.S. students’ educational performance results have also suffered for the same aforementioned reasons.

This tragedy seems to be getting worse, but it should also bring about opportunities to overcome ongoing challenges in education:

First, we have an opportunity to give visibility to the educational crisis. And to understand, from a foreign policy perspective, that education in the region is key for the U.S, not only because education increases the odds of socioeconomic success and a more stable citizenry, but also because a prosperous Latin America means more trade, less forced immigration, and the economic consolidation of the continent vis-à-vis the growing presence of China.

There are so many issues that we include in foreign policy discussions, such as geopolitics, trade, transparency, and institutions. But we must also include human capital. We must give it the necessary relevance and include it in all multilateral and bilateral conversations. We must focus on the skills and abilities necessary for a thriving democracy and boost economic development. The accreditation of university and postgraduate degrees between and among countries, and the mobility of talent in the hemisphere need to be key foreign policy issues moving forward, keeping in mind that remote work and the possibility of exporting education has generated enormous changes and opportunities in the education sector.

Secondly, we have an opportunity to dare to advance with more audacity and a sense of urgency around necessary reforms in the region, including improving teaching careers and measuring performance more effectively, evaluating schools and teachers in modern ways, generating precise information systems, and building a better transition from high school to the working world.

Third, we have an opportunity to build on lessons learned regarding online education. While technology cannot replace face-to-face schooling, it is true that the pandemic has familiarized the entire educational system with this powerful tool to strengthen learning, especially for the most vulnerable students who generally do not have access to the best educational content and teaching methods in person. But to harness online learning to help students make genuine improvements, governments and the private sector must work together to invest in the connectivity of schools and families. A stronger and more deliberate online learning ecosystem gives students at all levels more options to find methods that help them learn and attain key educational performance goals.

The experience of the pandemic has shown even more clearly that we all learn in different ways, at different rates, and with different interests. Along these lines, it would be helpful if the governments in the region institutionalized changes that give more freedom to educational offerings, from homeschooling to secondary schools with elective subjects and credits. Educational offerings continue to be very rigid in Latin American and the Caribbean, ill-suited to individual learning needs, and disconnected from the profound changes that the pandemic has exacerbated in the labor markets.

Simultaneously the prolongation of the closure of schools has led to greater participation of families and more active social demands from them when it comes to their children's education. This is a positive phenomenon for the region, where governments and trade union organizations typically dominate conversations around education. We must continue promoting the participation of parents, making quality of learning a priority among the demands of citizens who want politicians to invest in education more seriously. We should also encourage citizens to demand that governments provide more information on how schools are progressing and how students are performing, while making it easier for parents to understand schools' curricular content.

Another positive effect worth highlighting is that schools and teachers have been more valued during the pandemic. Today families recognize the effort and dedication of these educators. And there is a direct correlation between more valued teachers and better learning results. Even during isolation, many teachers have received recognition from society the way doctors and health personnel have. Schools will continue to be seen as that social engine that generates equality, promotes values, and creates a sense of community.

Finally, we have seen another positive trend towards greater autonomy and empowerment of schools, which, due to either government action or lack thereof, have been able to make more and different kinds of decisions around student learning, and have been encouraged to innovate and experiment with new ways of reaching their students. This positive trend could be replicated and cemented as the norm if governments better define institutional frameworks with more freedom for schools and teachers, who can do what they know best, which is to teach, with less rigidity and fewer regulations from the central ministries of education.

In conclusion, while the pandemic has revealed and sometimes worsened educational challenges in Latin America that have existed for years, it has also widened the possibilities for changes that will benefit students, families, teachers, communities, and societies at large. The region has an opportunity to learn from what the pandemic has brought on the education sector and embark on key reforms that would not only reverse the downward trends we have seen but also make Latin America a model of progress for developing nations looking to catch up to developed countries' educational performance.