

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United
Nations Human Rights Council 4th Cycle – 44th Session

Right to Education Country Review: Cuba

Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK

April 2023

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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Broken Chalk drafted this report to contribute to the fourth Universal Periodic Review of Cuba. The information will first explore the current educational system that exists within the country, how other countries can look at Cuba as a case study to better improve and understand the education system that exists within their land and then look into further recommendations to be made to Cuba to improve human rights education further. It is to be noted that this report only focuses on human rights within the field of education in the country of Cuba.
2. According to the sub-section “Right to Education” within the report from the third cycle, when it comes to education rights within the country, Cuba is one of the only Latin American countries that has achieved its education objectives, allowing the country to be ranked 28th on the Education for all Development index.¹¹

CURRENT EDUCATIONAL TRENDS

3. As noted earlier, this report reviews the country of Cuba or officially the Republic of Cuba—An island nation located in the cross-section of the Northern Caribbean Sea, Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. As of 2022, the country is estimated to have a population of about 11 million. Cuban adheres to socialist principles, with a GDP of 107.4 billion USD. The government has a literacy rate of 99.8%, and this is due to one major factor, which is the provision of free education at every level. ¹
4. Since the revolution and the rise of Castro’s government to power, education has always been the key pillar for the country, receiving high priority regarding the country’s expenditures.
5. Public education has always been free in Cuba. However, under the new government, the country restructured its education system to make it more accessible, allowing teachers to travel far into remote and rural areas. This reform in the education system allowed the literacy rate problem to be solved, which was at an all-time low around 1958, with approx. Seven hundred people were literate in the country at the time.
6. The reform was the first step in restructuring the education system. To reach the goal of educating every citizen and improving the literacy rates within the country. The government launched the “Literacy campaign”. [4][5]
7. The First stage of the literacy plan was to educate and train a brigade of already literate individuals with the help of professional educators. They would be familiarised with the curriculum and material needed to be taught, so they would use it to teach their students.

[4][5]

8. The second stage was to close schools early for summer to allow students to supplement their missed classes by teaching illiterate adults. This saw 105,700 students participate. These students formed Conrado Benitez Brigadistas. [4][5]
9. The plan's third and final stage was the most crucial. In this stage, factory workers were recruited as "educators", forming the Patria o Muerte workers brigade. The main goal of this brigade was to identify the remaining individuals who were still illiterate. [4][5]
10. These enchantments and restructuring within the education system are considered so fundamental that it has been engraved into the Cuban constitution, with several articles being passed on the "fundamental principles and objectives of education", with the constitution even stating "that no child be left without schooling, food and clothing; that no young person be left without the opportunity to study; that no one is left without access to the studies, culture and sports...", while "guiding, fostering and promoting education, culture and science in all their manifestations." [7]

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATION IN CUBA

11. With the above words being engraved into the Cuban Constitution. The government noted that five key points must be achieved to make these words a reality.
12. Coverage of education – if education was to be considered a fundamental right to every Cuban, the government had to guarantee universal access to education to all its citizens, without regard to age, sex, ethnic or religious background [2]
13. Study and work combination – One of the main driving principles of the Cuban government was the importance of students developing a good student and work-life balance. This balance was considered fundamental in engraving the values of responsibility and industriousness within the students. The Cuban government focused on providing students with vocational training to allow students to understand the work culture and develop their skills to become productive and responsible participants within Cuban Society. [2]
14. Zero Cost – With free education, the government had to ensure that teachers had the facilities needed to develop and hone their skills. [2]
15. Community Influence – The final principle was the importance of community involvement in facilitating education within Cuba. Different stakeholders (family members and community leaders) must play active roles in improving the education system. Their involvement would allow for a better and more effective education system in Cuba. [2]

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING EDUCATION

16. As successful as the education and literacy campaign was in Cuba, some serious flaws and issues must be addressed.

Resource Shortages

17. One of Cuba's most significant educational problems is the need for more resources. This is mainly due to the USA's embargo on Cuba. The boycott was first established in the year 1958 against Cuba. Although during the 2022 UN General Assembly, 185 countries voted in favour of ending the ban, with UN backing, as the UN considers the embargo an impediment to the development of Cuba. However, the United States voted against it in every single voting process, including the 2022 meeting, and wished to maintain the embargo as is. This sanction has been causing economic and financial trouble to the country for several decades, leading to a shortage of resources, poorly equipped schools, inadequate supplies, and a lack of modern technologies that allow for more effective teaching and learning. According to the United Nations Development Programme or UNDP, "Cuba has a large number of schools, but many of them are in a state of disrepair, and many lack basic facilities such as running water, electricity, and sanitary facilities" (UNDP, 2020). This lack of infrastructure significantly impacts the quality of education that students receive.

Low Teacher Salaries

18. Another significant issue is the low wages for teachers and professors. Although the government does provide salaries to teachers and professors, they still need to provide teachers with a good payday. According to UNESCO, the average salary of a teacher in Cuba is \$24 per month (UNESCO, 2020). This has led to an influx of unqualified educators, as many leave to pursue higher-paying jobs. This has led to a burden on a few good educators taking on larger classes and negatively impacting the education being provided at the institution. [10]

Outdated Curriculum

19. The next issue is the outdated curriculum in schools. The outdated curriculum often needs to address current issues that would prepare students to face challenges in the 21st century, which requires critical thinking and problem-solving skills. According to a report by the World Bank, the Cuban curriculum is heavily dependent on the fact that "rote memorisation and recall of information, rather than developing higher-order thinking skills" (World Bank, 2019). This has led to the need for experimentation or innovative ideas to be brought about by students and teachers alike.

Limited Access to Education in Rural Areas

20. Although teachers travel into rural areas to provide equal educational opportunities for students who live in rural areas. There still needs to be a significant gap that is visible between urban and rural areas in terms of educational opportunities. Many rural towns lack immediate access to quality education, showing signs of inequality and social exclusion. According to UNESCO, "access to education remains a major challenge for students living in rural areas, particularly those from low-income families" (UNESCO, 2020). With the government facing economic instability, they cannot construct schools in rural areas. Those schools constructed in rural areas often need more basic resources for students to be appropriately educated. Hence, making it difficult for students to access quality education. [1]

Centralised Control of Education

21. The Cuban education system is highly centralised, with the government controlling all curriculum and educational policies. This has limited the autonomy of schools and teachers, hindering innovation and experimentation in education. There is also limited flexibility in the curriculum, which does not allow for incorporating local knowledge and culture, making the educational experience less relevant and engaging for students.

High Rate of School Dropouts

22. Another significant problem in Cuban education is the high rate of school dropouts. Many students drop out of school due to economic hardship, family obligations, or a lack of interest in their studies. According to UNESCO, "the school dropout rate remains high in Cuba, particularly in rural areas" (UNESCO, 2020). This has perpetuated a cycle of poverty and inequality in the country, as education is often seen as a pathway to social mobility and economic opportunity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

23. One of the most important recommendations is to increase education investment, particularly in rural areas, to provide students with quality education. The government can allocate more funds to education, including constructing new schools, renovating existing ones, and providing modern equipment and supplies. This would help to reduce the resource shortages that have hampered education in Cuba. According to UNESCO, increasing investment in education is crucial for ensuring equitable access to education for all Cuban students (UNESCO, 2020). Of course, financial investment can take much work to come by as government currently faces an embargo. Keeping this in mind, it is essential to

reorganise different school networks to utilise human and material resources better and more effectively and efficiently.

- 24.** Another solution is to increase teacher salaries to make the profession more attractive and retain qualified educators. The government can also provide incentives for teachers to work in rural areas, where the shortage of teachers is most acute. Higher salaries would encourage more people to pursue a career in teaching, which would help to improve the quality of education. According to a report by the World Bank, increasing teacher salaries is an effective way to attract and retain qualified teachers (World Bank, 2016).
- 25.** Another recommendation is to introduce a pedagogical training system to train better and equip primary and preschool teachers. This would also allow teachers to prepare ahead of classes better, hence safeguarding the quality of teaching and scientific activity. Better equipping teachers and providing them with autonomy within their careers to have a dual speciality would increase research output and enhance the education system.
- 26.** The government can also update the curriculum to make it more relevant to the country's current needs and emphasise critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This would better prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century and improve their ability to contribute to the country's development. The government can also incorporate local knowledge and culture into the curriculum to make it more engaging and relevant for students. According to the Cuban Ministry of Education, updating the curriculum is a priority for improving the quality of education in Cuba (Ministry of Education, 2020). This would also allow teachers to enhance and develop their teaching skills as the students enter the 21st century.
- 27.** Another recommendation is decentralising the education system to give schools and teachers more autonomy and flexibility. This would enable innovation and experimentation in education and allow schools to adapt to the changing needs of students and society. Decentralisation also provides for incorporating local knowledge and culture into the curriculum, making the educational experience more relevant and engaging for students. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, decentralising the education system is an effective way to improve the quality of education (Inter-American Development Bank, 2020).
- 28.** To reduce the high rate of school dropouts, the government can implement programs that provide financial assistance to low-income families to enable their children to continue their education. These programs can also support families to help them overcome other barriers to education, such as family obligations or a lack of interest in studies. The government can also collaborate with NGOs and other organisations to implement programs that promote the value of education and encourage students to stay in school. According to a report by UNICEF, providing financial and social support to families effectively reduces school dropouts (UNICEF, 2018).

29. Finally, increasing political and intellectual diversity in the education system can help to promote critical thinking and independent thought among students. According to a report by the Inter-American Development Bank, fostering diversity in the education system is crucial for developing students' critical thinking and citizenship skills (Inter-American Development Bank, 2020). The government can encourage the participation of diverse voices in the development of educational policies and curricula, including opposition groups and civil society organisations. This would help to promote a more pluralistic and inclusive educational environment.

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