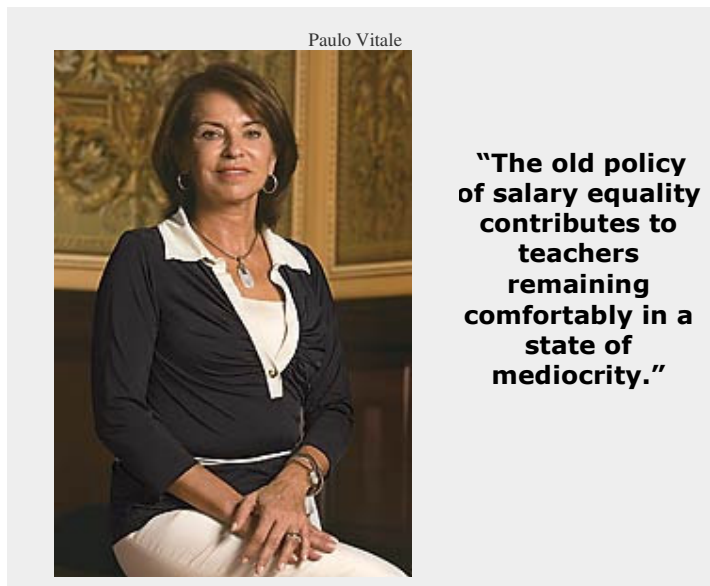


Reward for merit

The Secretary of Education for the state of São Paulo says Brazil has to rid itself of corporatism once and for all, and give incentives to those who deserve them

by **Mônica Weinberg**

As São Paulo State Secretary of Education, Professor Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro, 61, leads a network which has 5,500 schools, 250,000 teachers and 5 million students. No other education secretariat in the country comes close to these figures. The bonus will be distributed among the employees. After announcing the new system, the secretary received dozens of e-mails from teachers, some of them very angry. "Yes, they do want salary raises but not linked to performance. They are swimming against the current," says the secretary. A social scientist by training, since 1993, when she took office as Secretary of Education in Campinas, Maria Helena has held several public offices, including executive secretary at the Ministry of Education (MEC), during the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration, when she gained fame for having led the development of a valuable evaluation system for Brazil's schools. Married, mother of three and grandmother of four, she gave the following interview to VEJA.



"The old policy of salary equality contributes to teachers remaining comfortably in a state of mediocrity."

Veja – In the coming weeks, the state schools in São Paulo will become the first in the nation to set academic goals – and to be rewarded with more money if they achieve them. What is the expected outcome of these measures?

Maria Helena – The purpose is to create real incentives for school progress, following the example of successful experiences in other developed countries, such as England and the United States. They didn't make up any elaborate formula, but, yes, they managed to put into practice systems that were able to identify and reward schools with good academic performance, based on objective criteria. Research shows that everywhere that merit award policies have been implemented, education has advanced. In Brazil, this is a new debate and, unfortunately, there are educators who are critical.

Veja – Exactly what are the criticisms of the new system?

Maria Helena – Even in the 21st century, there are still people who persist in their outdated, corporatist and unionist vision, by which all teachers deserve to earn the same salary at the end of the month. This old policy of equal pay disregards the different outcomes in the classroom, and there in lies the mistake. Ignoring merit and demerit causes us to fail to spotlight those who are more talented and work harder, thus contributing to the mass of teachers conveniently remaining in a state of mediocrity. That's why we took measures to counter this.

Veja – Teachers complain about their low salaries. Do you think they're right?

Maria Helena – Studies have shown that compared to other professionals in Brazil, as well as private school teachers, faculty salaries in the public system are even higher. This is a fact based on numbers. Nevertheless, I do think that it is government's duty to create financial incentives to assign value to the teaching career, and for public schools be more appealing to good professionals. One thing you can't do is to support indiscriminate salary raises for bad, indifferent teachers or for those who barely show up at school. Those who deserve more money at the end of the month are the good teachers, as well as the public schools that offer a unique quality education, despite clear difficulties.

Veja – How will this new reward system for teachers work in São Paulo?

Maria Helena – We have developed an indicator to measure the current situation of each school, and it will set the basis for establishing concrete goals. Student performance on tests administered by the Secretariat of Education will be given greater weight. This is no doubt an excellent indicator of a school's academic success. Another is the time a student takes to finish school cycles. The index will stem from the combination of these two factors, plus others. It will be recalculated after a year. Only those schools that manage to improve statistics will receive more money.

Veja – How much will the prize be?

Maria Helena – The bonus could be as high as the equivalent of over three monthly salaries in a year. And this would go to all school employees, from janitorial staff to the principal. By using a similar system, New York City has achieved remarkable progress. Here we made some necessary adjustments for the Brazilian reality: Teachers who are more frequently absent will be automatically excluded from the award list. That's only fair. Brazil is not accustomed to viewing educational policy from the students' perspective. After all, they deserve a good class – that's why we're not rewarding those teachers who are champions of absences.

Veja – According to the latest data from the OECD (an organization made up by European countries and the United States), Brazilian students are in last place in reading, science, and mathematics. How can you change this scenario?

Maria Helena – A critical step is to make schools feel responsible for the students' results, something that is still very far off in time, but that could happen through setting goals and requiring that they be met. I've conducted research on the subject, where the teachers interviewed in different Brazilian states repeated the same litany: "The students' grades are low because of the lack of resources for public schools and because the teachers are underpaid." In my opinion it is not reasonable to blame everything on outside factors. According to this outdated and convenient mentality, the overall poor performance is always the fault of the Brazilian government and never the fault of the teachers themselves, many of whom are incapable of teaching a good class. The lack of teachers who are prepared to perform their function is, after all, a chronic illness of the Brazilian education system. If we do not unravel this knot, we can't even think about good education.

Veja – What would be the best way to raise the teachers' level?

Maria Helena – In an ideal world, I would shut down all the colleges of education in the country, even the most prestigious ones, such as those at the USP and Unicamp, and I would start from scratch. This is because in Brazil a type of pedagogical program focused exclusively on theoretical matters, with no connection to public schools and their needs, has been sanctioned. This is an erroneous model. In their everyday work, students of education get lost in long discussions on major issues about the universe and the most important thinkers of humankind, but they ignore the basics of teaching skills. Colleges of education are very concerned about the ideological discourse on the multiple transformational functions of education. They leave behind scientific evidences on pedagogical practices that really work in Brazil and throughout the world. Thus, they also do a great disservice through the dissemination and perpetuation of old myths. By moving the focus off core issues, these myths only get in the way.

Veja – Can you give some examples of such myths?

Maria Helena – One of the most popular is that raising teacher salaries always leads to educational improvement. Research shows that, when money comes dissociated from a merit recognition policy, it does little or no good. A second widespread myth has to do with the classroom size. Educators argue that it is impossible to give a good class in a crowded room, but studies on the subject show that, except for the first grades, this factor is of little importance. Schools in different countries have even decided to increase the number of students in the classroom as a solution to another problem – this indeed of a great positive effect. They are expanding the time students stay in school and, to pay for the costs of such measure, they have had to put more students in the same classroom. Finally there's the myth of the textbook. College of education students learn to see textbooks as a kind of straitjacket, rather than a basis to expand the horizons in a classroom.

Veja – School curriculum is also viewed with reservations by Brazilian teachers, according to research data....

Maria Helena – Again, teachers feel themselves deprived of their freedom to teach – a bit of ideological nonsense that disregards a core issue. Without a curriculum, the public school teacher in Brazil, in general, continues to face the classrooms without a minimum point of reference to look at. There are few Brazilian states (among the exceptions are São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Tocantins) which offer their schools a curriculum with details on the subjects to be covered in each discipline. It's a shame. Experience shows that teachers with pedagogical support of this nature goes farther in the classroom. Investing in building a curriculum, as some European countries did two centuries ago, is certainly a more proper destiny for public resources than to scatter building sites throughout the country – a very common fate for education funds in Brazil.

Veja – What are the best applications for the money devoted to education?

Maria Helena – Three forms of using the money are more effective in the classroom, according to research: In addition to investing in teaching materials, programs to improve the education of teachers and initiatives to reward good teachers have also resulted in real education improvements. Yet it is impossible to escape extra spending on schools without a minimum infrastructure. As head of the 5,500 state schools in São Paulo, I've seen all sorts of things. In some schools, the principal has to remove daily the light bulbs and electric wiring at the end of the day to prevent students from stealing them. They used to trade these items for drugs. Other schools have become a mass of “*puxadinhos*”, meandering extensions of the original building constructed by the community itself. These are just some pictures of the disorder we have to face. Given so much precariousness, the old Brazilian tradition of setting off fireworks with public education funds doesn't seem to make any sense.

Veja – What kind of “firework” are you referring to?

Maria Helena – The building of monumental schools furnished with multi sports courts, olympic-size pools and hundreds of computers, for example. These are generally an invitation to the free-spending of public funds with no evidence of return to the classroom in the long run. And that's because, experience shows, in a short time these schools decay, once they require a maintenance program that is too expensive for public resources. I insist on the same point: What works in education is the disciplined application of a set of basic measures – rather than those with festive, more visible impact that some people still prefer.

Veja – How do some public schools excel despite their budget shortages?

Maria Helena – There is one factor common to every A school, and it deserves attention from all the others: That is the presence of a competent principal, with leadership attributes similar to those of any leader of a big company. Under his or her baton, the teachers are encouraged to work, the students enjoy a positive climate for learning and the school environment becomes appealing to the parents. If most principals were like that, public education in Brazil wouldn't be in such a bad shape.

Veja – In your opinion, the Ministry of Education (MEC) has taken the right measures?

Maria Helena – In general, yes. The concentrated efforts to improve fundamental education and the emphasis on school assessment are two positive aspects. Seeing education back on track is a relief to me. During Lula's first term in office I had my sad moments.

Veja – Why?

Maria Helena – It was a period of paralysis in education, with some setbacks: The dismantling of the old “*Provão*”, a test developed during the Fernando Henrique administration to evaluate the quality of the universities. It worked well, but it ended up as victim of an old habit of Brazilian politics: The failure to provide continuity for policies adopted by one's predecessors. In an area such as education, which depends on long term results, the traditional break down at each change of administration is something to be combated, as countries such as Ireland and South Korea have done and they are now role models for education. It was only possible for them to climb out of the morass of low grades after making a kind of national agreement, capable of surviving successive changes of administration over the decades. Currently Brazil has a goal, set fifteen years in the future, and there's a good consensus on the strategies to achieve it. From now on, we need to show political maturity in order to move out of the lowest ranks of global education – and, who knows, even appear among the best one day.

Translation: Unitrad - Profissionais em Tradução