CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Report Card for Lula: Progress in Education

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Introduction

When President Lula came into office in January 2003, he inherited a government that had made progress in confronting Brazil’s social inequalities. During the 1990s, the Cardoso administration together with state and local governments, focused on improving Brazil’s abysmal record in education. For example, in 1990, adults over age 15 had on average only 4 years of schooling (World Bank 2007). Under Cardoso, the federal government made sweeping changes in the public education system. At the same time, mayors and governors enacted innovative conditional cash transfer programs that paid poor children to attend school. These programs evolved into the federal Bolsa Escola program by 2001. During Cardoso’s tenure, school attendance increased, grade repetition rates fell, and teacher quality was improved. By 2002, almost all Brazilian children aged 7 to 14 were attending school. But Lula faced a difficult challenge because the relatively easy task of increasing children’s school attendance had been achieved. What remained were the more difficult tasks of increasing the years of schooling completed, and raising levels of student learning.

However, Lula did not seize the opportunities to build upon the recent gains in education. During his first administration, the Lula government did not prioritize education. Bolsa Escola, which had focused on increasing enrollment and school attendance of poor children, was converted to a comprehensive social welfare program, the Bolsa Família. Therefore, the policy emphasis of social welfare programs was shifted from improving human capital to providing income transfers. Little effort was expended to develop innovative programs to improve student learning. Spending levels on education remained below standards considered to provide adequate public education.

This chapter focuses on the performance of the educational sector in Brazil during Lula’s first administration in the context of the
accomplishments and shortcomings of the Cardoso administration. Under Lula, access to schooling continued to increase, as enrollment rates of children aged 7 to 14 reached almost 100 percent. The high repetition rates of students continued to decline. However, Brazilian students’ performance on international achievement exams continued to stagnate, and Brazil remained ranked among the lowest performing countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Improving this record is the most important challenge Lula faces in his second term.

**Educational Policy in the 1990s**

Under President Fernando Enrique Cardoso during the 1990s, many new federal educational policies were enacted to address the high degree of educational inequality across regions and across income levels. The 1988 Brazilian Constitution required state and county governments to spend 25 percent of their revenues on public education, and county governments were required to spend 15 percent of their revenues on public education at the primary level (De Mello and Hoppe 2005). These requirements left states and counties with latitude over how to allocate spending across pre–primary, primary, secondary, and university levels of schooling, and how to allocate spending across buildings, infrastructure, and teachers’ pay (Mendes 2001). Great variation existed across states and counties in per capita school spending. The legislative changes made during the Cardoso administration increased federal regulation of public schooling and redistributed educational resources from rich areas to poor areas, while providing incentives that resulted in greater decentralization of school control from the state level to the county level.

New laws were enacted to address regional inequalities in school access and school quality. The legislation focused on grades 1 to 8, defined as fundamental education. A constitutional amendment passed in 1996 mandated that 60 percent of government educational spending be spent on fundamental education (Menezes–Filho and Pazello 2004). The *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional* (*LDB*) (Lei no. 9.394) was passed in 1996. The LDB set minimum federal standards for teacher education and training and also set minimum salaries for teachers. Teachers were required to have at least 300 hours of practice teaching. Starting in 2006, all teachers were required to have training at the university level or to have in-service training. The new law required periodic licensing of teachers and provided incentives for teachers to get more training. States and counties were required to have statutes and plans governing teachers. The plans had to include entrance into teaching based on public examination, salary floors, and promotion based on degrees or increased qualifications and on evaluation of job performance. The legislation set a minimum salary that was determined by the average cost per student per year, working 20 classroom hours and providing 5 hours of activities, with an average of 25 students per teacher (Caiafa Salgado 1999).