

EDUCATION IN BOGOTA: MODERN, EFICIENT AND TRANSPARENT

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In Colombia there are virtually no studies that deal exclusively with the problem of corruption in the field of education and it can be said that the topic has not been of central concern in the country. Nevertheless, the result of a recent study carried out by the Corporación Transparencia por Colombia shows an alarming index of integrity of hardly 26% in the Ministry of National Education, which calls attention to the urgent need of studying this phenomenon thoroughly.

The result of the study carried out by the Corporación Transparencia por Colombia is, nevertheless, surprising, because the educational sector has never been an actor in the great corruption scandals, even though it manages directly the considerable resources destined to this sector. As a result of the process of decentralization begun in the middle of the decade of the 90's, the Ministry of National Education ceased to manage these resources and the direct execution become the responsibility of the territorial entities, thus exempting the Ministry of any responsibility in the administration of a great quantity of these resources, other than distributing them among the different territorial entities.

The explanation can be found in the factors considered by the Corporación Transparencia por Colombia in the evaluation of the performance of the entities of the state, and which relate to a broader conception of the phenomenon of corruption: transparency, in terms not only of the publicity of official acts but also in terms of the access of the general public and other interested parties to information of these entities; control and sanction which is the degree to which wrongful acts are investigated and punished; and finally, efficiency and institutionalism, that is the compliance with the proceedings that have been established and are well known by all. In all of these aspects the Ministry of Education was poorly rated by its officials, by entrepreneurs and by external users, as well as the experts who carried out the study.

From this perspective, the results of the study are not surprising at all. The factors that were analyzed -particularly those that refer to transparency and institutionalism- are related to the historical deficiencies in the administration of the educational sector, which contribute to create the opportunities for corruption to emerge. The absence of standardized procedures, of parameters for the assignation of resources and of a clear notion of accountability, have

promoted the installation of practices in this sector which, even if they don't strictly constitute a deviation of public funds towards the enrichment of private persons (as has been the case in the infrastructure sector), can be qualified as the "systematic use of public office for the benefit of those in charge with a significant impact on impartiality and quality of educational services".

The struggle against these practices presupposes an effort on various fronts. It is not enough to fight the individual factors that contribute to their existence; the creation of an institutional environment and of organizations that reduce significantly the opportunities of their emergence is of paramount importance.

This document describes in some detail, the case of the city of Bogotá Colombia, which during the past decade, began a process of transformation in its system of public education, thereby improving significantly the results of the sector and the perception that the public has with regard to its transparency. Although this process did not have as its goal the struggle against corruption as such, in practice it has contributed to significantly reduce actions such as political clientelism and discretionality among its officials in decision making regarding resources and people.

THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR IN BOGOTA: DIMENSIONS AND CHALLENGES IN TRANSPARENCY

Since 1995, Bogotá manages directly the resources that the national government assigns to the local educational sector. In addition to these and together with the resources that the city itself contributes, the budget of the Secretaría de Educación Distrital (SED) in 2003 amounted to US \$368 million dollars, of which 70% is destined to payroll expenses, 27.6% to recurrent expenses of educational facilities and 4% to new investment. Thus, the education budget is the largest among the entities of the Capital District, with the exception of the public utilities companies (water, energy, telephone and public transportation). The expenditure constitutes 11.1% of the total expenditures of the city.

The public education system is complex and of large scale. 54% of the total enrollment is financed directly by the State. Of the 860,000 students that make up this percentage, 84% go to public schools; the rest go to private schools under contract or to the recently created concession schools. During 2002, 151,000 children requested admission to the public system, which only offers a limited number of placements each year; this issue requires mechanisms that assure that the available placements are assigned to those that most need them. In order to meet this demand, 22,000 new placements and 50,000 grade zero placements were made available

The teachers on payroll amount to 26,376 (as of July, 2003). This number, added to the administration employees constitutes the largest in all of the

administrative entities in the city. Given the extension and the geographical dispersion of the city, certain locations are more popular with the teachers and administrative personnel of the schools than others. This provides opportunities for pressures on the central administration to ensure acceptable locations for the interested parties.

The 363 public schools of the city operate in 667 facilities, that not only require sufficient and timely presence of the teaching workforce but also health, maintenance and security services that are contracted by the SED. Daily, the SED provides transportation for 24,000 students within almost 700 school routes that are also under external contracts; it provides almost 180.000 snacks to the poorest grade school students. This means that 5.2% of the recurrent expenses (approximately US\$19 million dollars) are executed through outsourcing contracts with third parties.

From the point of view of transparency, at least three important challenges in the administration of education in the city are imperative. (a) the fair assignation of school placement; (b) the efficient distribution of teaching staff and (c) the contracting of services of diverse kinds. I will now refer to the way in which the city has faced each of these challenges and to the results that it has obtained thanks to the comprehensive reforms that have been implemented and the way in which the different processes are carried out.

- INCREASE IN THE SCOPE AND ASSIGNMENT OF SCHOOL PLACEMENTS

Between 1998 and 2002, Bogotá increased its public education system by 231,000 new placements. This was possible thanks to a combination of strategies that consisted in the total utilization of the installed capacity, the construction of new infrastructure and the contracting of educational services with private schools. 50% of this increase was achieved without increasing expenses, thanks to the establishment of parameters for the assignation of teaching staff, which allowed for the destination of surplus resources for the construction of 23 new schools among other projects.

The assignation of these new school placements was a first rate challenge for the SED. Access to education was not necessarily viewed by the public as a right, but more as a privilege reserved for those who had money to pay for a private school or contacts with influential people in the administration. The first step was to establish priorities for the assignation and to make them public. The SED established and made public the fact that the new placements would primarily benefit the poorest populations, and that these would identify themselves according to existing objective mechanisms for the focalization of social investment, which are sufficiently acknowledged and widely accepted.

As the second step the SED established and made public the procedure that would be used to assign the school placements. In the inscription stage, all of the aspirants had to fill out a form. This information is introduced into the *enrollment system*, a specially developed application that allows cross reference

of information on the demand and the existing supply, and the automatic assignation of the school placements. The assignation is communicated to the families by telephone, by letter or by means of lists posted at the schools and on the Web page. The system includes the main criteria for the assignation, which are socioeconomic strata of the students and the distance between their home and the school; this last factor being determinant for the permanence, given the scarce capacity of a poor family to pay for transportation.

The same criteria apply to the assignation of school transportation services and snacks. The poorer students, who cannot attend a school that is near their home because of the lack of availability, are transported on school buses contracted by the SED to schools in other areas of the city. In addition, the poorest children that are enrolled in grade school receive a snack that provides them with 30% of their daily caloric needs.

The pressures on this procedure are easy to presume. The notion of equality has been traditionally linked to universality, without consideration to the socioeconomic situation of the families; there has been a tendency to identify equality with universality ("everybody has equal rights"). This argument has been defended mainly by middle income groups represented in public corporations and thereby exert pressure on the administration by way of budget control, or by the so called "political control".

Since the middle income groups have been loosing payment capacity (economic clout), it has been sometimes difficult for the SED to defend these criteria. However, the position of the administration with regard to this issue has been sufficiently clear: in view of the restriction of resources, the only alternative is to focus on the poorest population. Moreover, the consistency in the application of these criteria has given the administration the legitimacy it requires to justify the exclusion of some in favor of others.

The process that has been described above has had a significant impact on the educational statistics in the city, mainly with regard to fairness in providing the service: the placements created since 1998 have been exclusively assigned to children of the lowest socioeconomic strata, thus having poor families avoid payment for educational services or keeping their children out of school ; 54% of the enrollment in the city today is financed by the State, (versus 45% in 1995). Last, and certainly not least, the city has the legitimacy and the necessary the instruments to act in order to carry out this process directly, without the need of its citizens to resort to intermediaries.

- **ADMINISTRATION OF THE HUMAN RESOURCE: ASSIGNMENT ACCORDING TO PARAMETERS AND RELOCATION OF TEACHING STAFF**

A poor distribution of the teaching staff in the schools of the city affects not only the equality of the service provided but increases unnecessarily the costs of rendering the service, making it inefficient. An analysis of the teaching staff

carried out in 1998 showed that the assignation of teachers favored the areas of the city with better socioeconomic levels that did not evince problems in the availability of educational facilities; it further showed that there were insufficient numbers of teachers in the areas with larger and poorer populations. Furthermore, several teachers were located in other official entities, and some in private schools, carrying out tasks not related to class work. As a consequence, the available teaching staff was insufficient and the city had to reach agreements in order to hire additional teachers to meet the needs of some schools, which in turn, decreased the availability of resources for other needs.

The transformation of the procedures for the assignment of the teaching staff was in keeping with the process of increased coverage. As mentioned above, half of the new placements that were generated since 1998 resulted from the total utilization of the installed capacity and of the optimization of human resources. The first step in this direction was the formal adoption of parameters for the assignation of teachers for each school. The application of these parameters showed the existence of a surplus in the number of teachers in certain schools and areas that were transferred to areas that needed greater coverage. The service commissions were abolished and the teachers returned to their classrooms.

The transfer of teachers to other schools was not without its problems. Obviously, there was resistance due to the fact that frequently, the transfers brought with them greater displacements and some important changes in the working conditions. The greatest criticism came from the syndicate that deemed this policy as harmful to the morale of the teachers and accused the administration of persecution and impoverishment of the working conditions of its members.

One of the most well known (and recognized) practices of the Colombian educational system is the payment of money for relocation or the influence of local politicians in this decision (in exchange for votes, for example). Therefore, an additional strongpoint for this crucial issue, from the point of view of transparency in the educational system, is the procedure that was adopted for the relocation of teachers in the schools. This procedure, sufficiently regulated and accompanied by the tool of public information –it is carried out every year on predetermined dates and on line- made it possible to end the arbitrary relocations and allowed the request of any teacher to be considered in equal conditions, without regard for contacts with influential persons within the administration. Thanks to this, this procedure is well accepted among the teachers, although it is not possible to meet all the requests satisfactorily for them.

With time, the advantages of this measure have become more evident to the community in general, who has understood that it promotes greater equality in school services and allows the liberation of resources that can be directed to meet other needs. Without this decision, the administration would have had to

build 74 new schools that would have cost US \$195 million dollars and in their operation or an increase of the teaching staff, approximately \$60 million dollars. Today, with the concept of a global teaching staff and flexible schedules the parameters and the standardizing of the teaching and administrative staff of the educational institutions of the District has been completed providing ample coverage and without requiring an increase of the staff.