

How Does the Cuban Educational System Stack Up Against the US?



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Abstract

Cuba is a country with high poverty yet supports a strong educational system. A closer look at the Cuban educational system in comparison to the United States yields some interesting results. With the improved relations between the US and Cuban governments, US policy could be affected by the success of the Cuban educational system. This paper looks at the strengths of each society, comparing and contrasting them.

A recent development of improved diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba has brought renewed public interest to focus upon Cuba. The progress between the two countries has provided opportunities for educational travel to Cuba. Having recently visited Cuba on an educational trip, I was able to observe some schools in Havana and speak with a teacher, parent, and some students. My impressions have stuck with me, so I thought to share them with other educators.

First of all, everything in Cuba is run by the government. It is after all a communist country. All signage and advertising is government propaganda. Even the schools are run by the government. The Cuban government requires every child ages 6-16 to attend school. Similarly depending upon the state, children in the US must attend school from ages 6-16 or in some states until 18 years old.

The Cuban government reports that Cuban schools are the best in the Caribbean Islands. Even the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that nearly 100% of students in school have graduated each year from 2009 to present. UNESCO also reports that virtually 100% of Cubans are literate. About 10% of Cubans have a bachelors' degree, 3% earn a masters' degree and less than 1% complete a doctoral program. According to the US Department of Education, as of 2012-2013 we have a significantly lower graduation rate at about 70% nationwide. In suburban areas the rate is likely higher and in urban areas, the rate is typically lower. The Census Bureau reported that approximately 30% of Americans over the age of 25 hold a bachelors' degree, more than 10% earned a graduate degree, and nearly 2% hold a doctoral degree.

In America, we claim that the federal government imposes regulations and the state legislatures pass statutes that impact public schools, often without the funding necessary to carry out the new requirements. However, in Cuba the government fully funds the schools. Yes that means 100%. The Cuban government spends more than 10% of its central budget on education, while the US only spends 2%. In Cuba, there are no income taxes or property taxes for the residents. That sounds fabulous right? Schools have a rather small student population and they are located in the students' neighborhood. Transportation is nearly non-existent - only 2% of Cubans own a car.

Since the government manages transportation as well, there are not enough buses to transport students. Therefore, everyone walks. That means no school choice. School choice options in the United States have become popular lately.

Not only does the government completely fund the schools, but all public education is free in Cuba – even college. In the United Kingdom, for those students who pass the necessary exams to attend university must pay a nominal rate. However, the UK is socialist, not communist, so families pay a few thousand pounds a year as they are able. In Cuba, those who pass the exams attend college for free. Yes, I said free. However, there is a catch. Men must serve in the military for two years after graduating from college. Women have to work for the government for two years as well, but are not required to perform military service. As most people know, higher education in the US is definitely not free. In fact, most colleges and universities are well over \$20,000 per year and can exceed \$50,000. Students in the US who attend college on a ROTC scholarship are required to serve in the military for four to five years, but that is a choice some students make to help pay for college.

Like the US, students take standardized exams each year. In the US, the stakes are not that high, unlike in Cuba. The exams are administered three times per year in Cuba and hold high stakes for a child's future. Some Cuban parents, who are financially able, hire tutors so their children will have a better opportunity to score higher on the exams.

However, Cubans who hold government jobs are all paid the same. That means that doctors, teachers, bus drivers, and sales clerks all earn the same wages. They make the equivalent of \$30 per month. There are no unions to endorse and secure higher wages. No matter what a person's education is, the wages are uniform. Unfortunately, this equal distribution of wages creates low morale and can lead to corruption. Many Cubans have opted not to enter the government work force and look for ways to make money in the "black market."

According to Gasperini (2000), the Cuban education system has the following characteristics which include: government and political support, consistent educational policy, early childhood and health, equitable access to school, well trained teachers with high social status, low cost instructional materials, community participation, connections between school and work, and emphasis on social cohesion. In a country as poor as Cuba, the strong focus on education is impressive. I found one particular area of interest amazing - long term sustained teacher professional development (PD). Teachers have access to educational institutes, school based PD linking theory and practice both pre- and in- service, community of learners sharing units and lessons, action research with required presentations, links to the community in an activist role, accountability through evaluation, and held in high regard as a professional.



Students wear mandatory uniforms to school like those in the above photographs. One parent told me that students are sent home if they do not wear the proper uniform. Uniforms are usually solid colors like white and gold, white and burgandy, or white and blue. Each set of colors signify the grade level.

Most school hours are 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM, but students get an hour and a half off for lunch. That means that students are instructed for approximately six hours a day, which is similar to the US. From grade 4, English is mandatory in Cuban schools. Most students speak some English. In fact, most Cubans speak some English.

At one school, a student appeared to be placed outside as a disciplinary measure (see photo below on the right). In Cuba, corporal punishment is legal. Teachers are not permitted to mistreat students by words or actions. However, physical punishment is permitted.



Cuban classroom



Student placed outside school

Although we were not permitted to enter government classrooms, I asked one level 8 student, equivalent to our grade 8, what topics they were covering in math class. She told me solving systems of equations, which is algebra content. Having the opportunity to visit 4 middle level classrooms in the US last fall, grade 8 students were working on similar topics. Although, this comparison is not substantial, Cuban students may cover similar content in mathematics as its US counterparts.

However, Gomez and Hare (2015) write that the Cuban education system comprises little more than political indoctrination. With the recent leadership changes, there may be an overhaul to the education system. Some say that education is a means to social equality and feel this is greatly needed in Cuba schools.

The conditions of most buildings in Havana are deplorable. Cubans would say that no improvements took place from 1959 until about 2006. No houses could be bought or sold. Properties had to remain in the family. If families could not maintain them, they were abandoned. Even now, if a person wants to open a business, they must do so out of their homes. Countless restaurants, barbershops, and art studios etc. are run out of a front room in private homes. Much like many US schools, Cuban schools need a makeover.

One of the schools we visited had very few classroom supplies. The games were outdated and old. There is virtually no technology in schools or homes. Therefore, there is no internet or cable at school or home. Some families choose to get cable boxes for \$5 per month in order to watch 1 television channel. This is an illegal activity for which the government will sanction the family with a hefty financial penalty if discovered. Even the poorest schools in the US have the internet and some computers for students to perform research, write papers, and take standardized assessments. I was told that the reason the government does not permit any technology infrastructure is to control information.

I was able to interview an elementary teacher, but many Cubans are leary of Americans.

At first she pretended not to understand English. At that point, I realized she was on her break and just wanted some peace and quiet. Not unlike teachers in the US. In contrast, I found the students to be very friendly and happy to answer my questions about their schools.



Cuban elementary teacher



Cuban level 8 students



Chatting with a secondary student

In closing, visiting Cuba was very informative and educational. I learned so much about the challenges and hardships of the Cuban people as a direct result of the US embargo of 1959. However, they are a proud and patriotic people. I believe, the US does not need to go in and “fix” Cuba. In fact, we have many resources that could go a long way to supporting their country restoration. Historically, we may have made mistakes in our belief that we are the only country that “does it right.” Perhaps we should honor their century’s old culture and traditions and support the renovation of their school buildings. With their literacy rate being nearly 100% and their graduation rate virtually 100%, perhaps we have some things to learn from them. Cubans value education and teachers are held in high regard in the society. In fact, the Cuban government highly values education and invests a significant portion of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Few countries throughout the world invest so heavily in education as the Cuban government.

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