

Child Labor and Violence Explain Low School Attendance in Brazil

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Brazil's Ministry of Education (MEC) publicized a report revealing the principal causes which led students benefiting from the Bolsa Família (Family Voucher), a program that provides a stipend to families on the condition that their children attend school and be vaccinated, to miss school during the months of February and March of 2008.

Among the reasons are: illness among the students, negligence of the parents, premature pregnancy, begging, child labor, and domestic violence. There were 172,452 children and adolescents with low school attendance during this period.

The Brazilian federal government has been monitoring the school attendance of children and adolescents who benefit from the Bolsa Família since 2005. In 2007, the Ministry added a control whose effectiveness are not yet determined: every time a child registered in the program misses more than 15% of school days, the school has to note the reason for the lack of attendance.

In this latest report, more than half of these notations are classified as "without an identified motive". This indicates a problem needing to be solved but there remains doubt over whether the school really does not know why the student is missing or whether the school is simply not interested in reporting it.

São Paulo is the state that leads the ranking with the greatest number of students with low attendance. There were 54,464 in the first two months of the school year, of which 34,531 were classified as having unidentified motives, and 6,321 were caused by parental negligence.

In second place was Minas Gerais, with 17,783 recorded, and Ceará was in third place, with 10,844. The families who do not comply with the minimum required attendance of 85% for students between the ages of 6 and 15 are subjected to sanctions which range from warnings to loss of the stipend. In February and March of this year, 1.2% of the beneficiaries in this age group had low attendance.

Since 2007, MEC's Secretariat for Continuing Education, Literacy, and Diversity (Secad) has carried out the Projeto Presença, an online system which monitors the causes of student absences. The system is used by more than 12 thousand people, by school employees and municipal and state secretaries of education who have been trained in all of the country's 5,564 municipalities to operate the system of sending data through the Internet.

Now, the challenge is to guarantee that the data, with a nominal list of students who are victims of various rights violations, does not merely become another set of statistics.

In accordance with the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education, the control of school attendance is the responsibility of the school. In spite of these, according to article 56 of the Statute of Children and Adolescents, the directors of elementary schools are obligated to communicate with the Guardianship Council any cases that involve maltreatment of their students, repeated unjustified absences, truancy, and high levels of grade repetition. However, the lack of preparation of the educational system to deal with these problems make it difficult to fulfill the law.

The MEC is trying to change this reality. In 2007, the Ministry trained 700 professors to deal, in the classroom, with physical and psychological violence, negligence, sexual exploitation, and child labor.

The project Schools Which Protect received an investment of 3.7 million Brazilian reais (US\$ 2.3 million) in 2007. In 2008, the budget projected 6.5 million reais (US\$ 4 million), but up to the end of the first semester, nothing was spent and there is still no word on when the program will be re-instituted.

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