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## FEATURED Q&A

# What Will It Take to Improve Latin America's Schools?



In parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, students are learning little in their classes, the World Bank said in a recent report. A classroom in Guatemala is pictured above. // File Photo: Guatemalan Government.

**Q** School attendance in the developing world is on the rise, but in many cases, students are learning little in their classes, the World Bank said in a Sept. 26 report. For example, at the current rate of progress in Brazil, it will take 75 years before the country's 15-year-olds have the same math skills as their peers in the average OECD country, while it will take 260 years for them to match the reading skills of students in developed countries, the report said. To what extent are students in Latin American and Caribbean countries lagging behind? Why have some developing countries such as China and Vietnam been able to counter the trend? What does the skills gap in Latin American and Caribbean countries mean for the region's economies and for businesses operating there?

**A** Alberto Bustamante, director of education for Microsoft Latin America: "According to the OECD, some Latin America and Caribbean countries are achieving academic performance improvements, but not fast enough to catch up to OECD countries' average performance. In addition to this lag, the gap in the region is also widening for future skills-ready employees. During the last World Economic Forum, much was presented and discussed on the fourth industrial revolution and the disruption it is bringing to industries and consequently to employment and to the types of skills that will be in demand. Clearly, the education systems in Latin America and Caribbean need to accelerate their impact on traditional skills. At the same time, they also need to address the development of other critical 'soft' skills like creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication and

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## TODAY'S NEWS

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## NAFTA Talks Extended Into Next Year

With a sense of mutual exasperation, U.S., Canadian and Mexican negotiators abandoned their goal of reaching agreement by the end of the year and extended talks until next March.

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## Brazilian Court Confirms Batista Brothers Will Face Trial

Wesley and Joesley Batista, the former CEO and former chairman of meatpacking firm JBS, are accused of insider trading.

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### POLITICAL

## Guatemala Renews Visa of U.N. Anti-Graft Official

The Central American country renewed the visa of Iván Velásquez, head of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG. President Jimmy Morales had tried to expel Velásquez in August.

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Velásquez // File Photo: United Nations.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## U.S., Mexico, Canada Extend NAFTA Talks Into Next Year

Top negotiators from the United States, Mexico and Canada on Tuesday wrapped up their fourth round of talks on renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, with a sense of mutual exasperation and said they were extending the talks into next year. In abandoning their goal to conclude the talks

“Ministers have called upon all negotiators to explore creative ways to bridge these gaps.”

— Robert Lighthizer

this year, the three countries' representatives said the negotiations would run through next March and added that they would extend the amount of time between negotiating rounds in order to allow more time to consider proposals, Bloomberg News reported. “New proposals have created challenges, and ministers discussed the significant conceptual gaps among the parties,” said U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, reading from a joint statement at the close of the round of talks, just outside Washington. “Ministers have called upon all negotiators to explore creative ways to bridge these gaps.” Lighthizer added that he was “surprised and disappointed by the resistance to change.” Meantime, Mexican Economy Minister Ildefonso Guajardo said there were limits on what Mexico could accept, and Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland criticized what she called a “winner-take-all mindset.” The United States has been the target of criticism in the talks for pushing controversial demands on dairy, automotive content, government procurement, dispute panels and a sunset clause, which the other

two countries have rejected. “Yes we want an agreement, yes we want to find a win-win situation, but this won't be at the detriment to our national interests,” Guajardo told reporters after the joint news conference ended. Freeland added that a deal to improve NAFTA is “absolutely achievable,” though she also said that an approach that seeks to benefit all three countries cannot be reached with “an approach that seeks to undermine NAFTA rather than modernize it.” U.S. President Donald Trump has called the 1994 trade accord a disaster and has threatened to pull the United States out of it. Lighthizer told reporters that he is not focused on the possibility of the U.S. withdrawing from NAFTA. “I'm focusing on trying to get a good agreement,” he said. He added, however, that the United States, Canada and Mexico would do “just fine” without the trade accord.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Guatemala Renews Visa of U.N.-Backed Anti-Graft Official

Guatemala's government has renewed the visa of Iván Velásquez, the head of the U.N.-sponsored International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG, the Associated Press reported Tuesday. Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales had tried to expel Velásquez in August, arguing he had exceeded his mandate, after Velásquez backed an investigation into alleged funding irregularities in Morales' presidential campaign. However, the country's constitutional court blocked Morales from expelling Velásquez. An unnamed CICIG official told the AP that Velásquez's visa was renewed for one year, not the two years that he had previously received. The anti-corruption body has gained popularity among Guatemalans over the past decade by seeking to combat graft in the Central American country. The panel helped force then-President Otto Pérez Molina from office two years ago on corruption allegations. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Sept. 6 issue of the Advisor.]

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Panama to Send Delegation to China Amid Lifting of Visa Restrictions

The Panamanian government will be sending an immigration and security delegation to China as part of the process of lifting visa restrictions for Chinese visitors to the Central American country, Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela said Tuesday, Reuters reported. Chinese visitors to Panama will now need an electronic visa, which will be stamped in a consulate, in order to visit Panama, rather than obtaining a restricted visa through a lawyer in order to visit the country, as was the case in the past. The Panamanian government hopes the new measure will promote tourism and investment in the country.

## Brazilian Senate Returns Neves to His Seat

The Brazilian Senate on Tuesday rejected a move from Brazil's Supreme Court to place Senator and former presidential candidate Aécio Neves under house arrest, the Associated Press reported. The legislative body voted 44-26 to return the suspended senator to his post after the conservative politician, who is a close ally of President Michel Temer, was accused of obstruction of justice in a corruption case. Brazilian politicians have special jurisdiction in Brazil's Supreme Court and cannot be prosecuted by lower courts, but lawmakers say the judiciary cannot trump the legislature.

## U.N. Provides Grant to Jamaica for Fighting Climate Change

The United Nations Green Climate Fund has granted \$300,000 to Jamaica to boost the island nation's capacity to develop and put in place strategies to fight climate change, the Jamaica Gleaner reported Tuesday. The money will help pay for consultants to develop a program for engagement with the U.N. fund.

## FBI to Assist in Probe of Panama Papers Journalist's Killing

U.S. federal law enforcement agency the FBI will help authorities in Malta investigate a car bomb that killed Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, ABC News reported Tuesday. Over the last two years, Caruana Galizia, who died Monday, had focused her investigative reporting efforts on revelations from the Panama Papers, a cache of documents leaked from Panama-based law firm Mossack Fonseca, The Guardian reported. Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, himself a target of Caruana Galizia's investigations, called her death a "barbaric attack" and a "political murder," as well as an attack on freedom of expression, ABC News reported.

### BUSINESS NEWS

## Court Confirms JBS' Batista Brothers Will Face Trial

A Brazilian federal court has confirmed that brothers Wesley and Joesley Batista, the former CEO and former chairman of Brazilian meatpacker JBS, will face trial for charges of



Wesley Batista // File Photo: JBS.

insider trading, BBC News reported Tuesday. The two have been accused of selling JBS shares at a high price in May, weeks before details of a plea bargain the brothers signed

### FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

computational thinking. The region will need professionals who are life-long learners and are better able to adapt to an ever-evolving market. The success of the region's economies will depend on it. Latin American and Caribbean education systems should establish strong systems and culture for tracking performance and impact. Currently, it takes countries far too long to understand the effects of their initiatives and to identify and learn from the successes that individual schools or school districts are achieving. Similarly, institutions should drive every program and project with a clear and measurable outcome in mind for the short and long term, which, combined with a culture of continuous monitoring, would help to steer and adjust for success. Finally, teachers are at the center of the education transformation, and institutions need to enable them. This goes beyond professional development to include policies, infrastructure, incentives and support that encourage teachers and school leaders to innovate."

**A** **Maria Alexandra Velez, vice president of international government relations at Pearson:** "There is evidence that most Latin American countries have achieved increased economic growth and poverty reduction. This has translated to education progress, with expanded universal basic education, access to higher education and reductions in the education gap between rural and urban areas. However, there are marked differences in achievements across

leaked to the public and caused stock prices to plummet. In the plea bargain testimony, the brothers admitted to paying bribes to more than 1,800 politicians as they grew their business, Reuters reported. Police say the brothers made some 138 million reais, or approximately \$44 million, in savings through alleged illegal market dealings before entering into the plea deal. Though the testimony gave the Batista brothers immunity from prosecu-

and within countries. The good news is that leaders in the region have come to realize the importance of education in making their countries more innovative, competitive and better prepared to take advantage of an increasingly globalized world. There are

**“ Latin America is poised to advance its education agenda.”**

– Maria Alexandra Velez

intrinsic cultural differences, as well as political and economic variables that explain why Latin America lags behind China and Vietnam in education achievement. Alternate periods of economic growth and political instability have hindered the positive effects of well-guided but short-lived public policies. However, Latin America is poised to advance its education agenda. First, local innovation and social entrepreneurship are merging technology and digitalization to address challenges in teaching and learning. Second, governments are becoming more open to working collaboratively with other actors, including NGOs and the private sector, to support education reform that benefits the most needy. Access to early-childhood education is a good example. Finally, key actors are committed to improving education by measuring results from different interventions

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tion on corruption charges, both have already been arrested and are being held on charges of alleged insider trading. Prosecutors allege the brothers sold stock before the testimony with the knowledge that the value of the shares would fall afterwards. JBS' stock plunged more than 10 percent the day after the details of the testimony were revealed. The price drop was so drastic that share trading on the Brazilian stock market was temporarily suspended.

## FEATURED Q&amp;A / Continued from page 3

and programs and are learning and adjusting accordingly. I remain optimistic that these trends, matched with a more active civil society that demands adequate financial resources, will allow Latin America to fully benefit from its demographic dividend.”

**A** **Germán A. Ramírez, principal at GRG Education:** “There has not been a time in the history of Latin American educational systems when the stakes were higher, but also where the possibilities of breaking through endless cycles of institutional underperformance and low learning outcomes were also so promising. The World Bank’s solid data, exemplary case studies and actionable recommendations should encourage policymakers across the region to act accordingly or risk their societies being left behind. The report confirms what the PISA results show every so often: the regional systems are failing their main constituents, the learners. It is imperative to focus on improving student outcomes. The question is, how? The distinction between schooling and learning deserves reflection. What is the use of universal schooling if learners can’t end up with the literacy, numeracy and skills to succeed and live fulfilling lives in an increasingly competitive world? Most education systems in the region are outdated legacies from a

bygone industrial era. Formulated to respond to the need to ‘educate’ the masses, these systems have been falling short for decades. The time seems right for bolder approaches to testing innovative models, and perhaps,

“**Most education systems in the region are outdated legacies from a bygone industrial era.”**

— Germán A. Ramírez

for selectively adopting best practices from other national contexts (for example, South Korea and China). Policymakers and key stakeholders have the opportunity for reshaping the future of education in the region by aiming at increasing learners’ and families’ preparedness for schooling, focusing decisively on measuring learning outcomes, enhancing teachers’ readiness and motivation, and improving the systems’ equity and efficiency.”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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