

America should learn from Cuban education

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In the aftermath of a historic election, the debate about how much power the federal government should be given, particularly in terms of education, will always be present in the United States. With a communist political system, Cuba's government maintains complete authority and control over social and political issues. While the United States would never transition to such an authoritarian system of government, and I'm not suggesting this as such, it could learn from Cuba's educational system. Specifically, Cuba's high accountability standards, continual professional development for teachers, high access rates for all genders and races, among others, could be replicated if the United States wanted to have a high quality education system.

At the World Conference on Education for All in 1990, scholars gathered to develop consensus on what factors should be associated with a high-quality and highly effective educational system. These factors range from the institutional organization of a country's educational system, such as supportive policies and sufficient funding and material resources, to school-based factors like clear goals and highly effective teachers. The Cuban government independently included several of these factors when creating their educational system, which helps account for their high achieving students.

Multiple studies have illustrated the high correlation between a pupil's test scores and his or her socioeconomic background. Cuba breaks out of that mold as one of the countries in which, despite students' relatively low social standing, students generally perform very well and have higher test scores than their low income would predict. Moreover, Cuban students outperform those in other Latin American countries with similarly low levels of wealth and receive the same high quality education that only wealthy, upper-class students would receive in other Latin American countries. So what is so unique about the Cuban education system that creates such high-achieving students? The communist system of government that encourages high-quality teaching with well-defined goals to ensure that schools focus on student performance.

One of the biggest takeaways from studying the Cuban education system is the positive impact that low income inequality can have on a country's system of education. While poverty does exist in Cuba, even the very poor have access to food, shelter, healthcare and education. Additionally, by enforcing child labor laws, providing free healthcare to all and guaranteeing adult employment, Cuba works to ensure that low-income students are able to attend schools and do not have to work or go hungry. While a communist government affords few individual liberties, through large governmental oversight, the Cuban government assures that low-income students are given the same educational opportunities as higher income students.

Additionally, Cuba's system of measuring teacher performance helps assure that teachers continue to improve their craft with a reliable feedback and monitoring system. The United States largely keeps teachers accountable through monitoring student test scores, which results in educators focusing on teaching students content to pass exams more than developing critical thinking skills. In contrast, teachers in Cuba are presented with a portfolio of lessons and a video example of another teacher giving a lesson. This not only allows for greater collaboration among teachers, which would help all of the teachers improve, but would provide feedback for teachers with low pedagogical skill.

Cuba is able to ensure such a high quality educational system because it requires families and teachers to conform to state-sponsored standards for students' learning and has the unique governmental structure in place to guarantee conformity and control. One of the ways to achieve such collective interests, in which everyone is concerned with granting all students a high quality education, is that the state has to be much more of a guarantor of quality education for all. In other words, much like Cuba, the United States needs to take public responsibility for the success of its students. By tackling debilitating issues like poverty and income inequality, which both negatively impact a child's educational attainment,

and setting high standards for teachers through developing effective performance measures, the United States can move toward guaranteeing all students a high quality education.

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