

Peru government aiming to step up investment in education

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The government in Peru is aiming to step up investment in education, building new schools and improving existing ones. To this end, President Ollanta Humala, who is working to meet his 2011 election campaign promise of extending education and health services to Peru's poorest sectors, boosted the education budget this year.



The government has increased education spending to 3.5% of GDP for 2015 from less than 3% last year, and aims to hike it to 6% by 2021. Prime Minister Pedro Cateriano has also announced 21,000 new student scholarships, on top of the 30,000 granted last year. However, experts say that bridging the gap in education infrastructure will take many years.

Peru aspires to raise its education standards and join the developed economies in the OECD, but in April the education minister, Jaime Saavedra, said 40% of state schools had no water supply or drainage, half of the school children had no internet access and many public schools did not have a head teacher or pedagogical support.

“Things are moving forward, but there is much more to do,” Saavedra said, adding that Peru owed a very big debt to the education sector and needed to continue to provide financial support.

Building more schools

Several infrastructure investments have also been unveiled. The education ministry, or MINEDU, has said that PEN2.4bn (\$768m) of its total 2015 budget of PEN20bn (\$6.4bn) would be spent on infrastructure. It is investing some \$58.4m to improve public school libraries across the country, the ministry said in April.

“This is the first time in seven years that MINEDU is investing by buying books to improve the learning process of high school students,” said Cecilia Ramírez, director of regular basic education.

The government added in April that it was investing PEN65.5m (\$21m) to build new schools and larger classrooms across the Amazon, Loreto, San Martín and Ucayali regions, which are among the poorest in the country.

A total of PEN55m (\$17.6m) has also been spent so far this year to upgrade schools in Lima, the capital.

There is still a long way to go, however. According to Pablo de la Flor, manager of the division of corporate affairs of Banco de Crédito del Perú, it could take more than 10 years to fully address the deficit in education infrastructure. He recommended private sector involvement through the Obras por Impuestos (Public Works for Tax) programme, which encourages companies to fund public works in lieu of tax payments.

Peru’s southern regions are receiving around PEN2bn (\$635m) in education infrastructure projects through the programme. According to the Peruvian Chamber of Commerce (Perucamara), these projects are going to benefit more than 1000 centres and around 94,000 students.

Quality concerns

The quality of education also remains a major concern. In the latest edition of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), carried out by the OECD in 2012, Peru was ranked last out of 65 countries for mathematics, science and reading comprehension.

In a 2014 public opinion survey by Barómetro de las Américas, Peru received the lowest public approval rating out of the 24 countries measured for its state schools at 45.1%, trailing Haiti at 45.5% and well below regional leader Costa Rica, which had an approval rating of 64.5%.

Yet education experts say the reality is more complex and that there have been some significant improvements. For example, Peru has performed reasonably well in meeting UNESCO’s 2000-15 “Education for All” targets. It was well off the bottom in a performance index for four of the six key categories.

Asked if Peru's education system was one of the weakest in the region, Ricardo Cuenca of the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos think-tank, said, "Far from it. The state school system here is above the Latin American average."

Education specialist Idel Vexler agreed, pointing out that in UNESCO's third regional comparative study, carried out in 2013 and known as the "Terce" study, Peruvian students ranked above the regional average in reading and mathematics.

Areas for improvement

Policymakers still see several areas for improvement. Many small schools lack head teachers, and others find up to 70% of their time taken by administrative tasks. According to some, educational leadership needs to be strengthened, with more training and increased salaries for teachers.

State efforts to support teachers include the passage in May 2013 of the Law of Magisterial Reform, which established mandatory evaluations for teachers as well as performance-based incentives. Some \$464m has already been allocated to enacting the measures outlined in the law.

However, concerns remain among teachers. The Single Union of Peruvian Education Workers, which represents 350,000 public sector teachers across the country, staged a 24-hour strike in mid-May – its second industrial action since the passage of the law – to demand that the minimum salary be doubled and pensions for retired teachers be raised.

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