

As COVID-19 pandemic rages, World Bank backs restructuring of education in Brazil

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With millions of families around the world facing financial disaster, governments, aligned with international banks and giant companies of the education sector, are using the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to implement distance education permanently.

In Brazil, the efforts to effect a major restructuring of public education took a critical step forward in 2017 with the sanctioning of the high school reform by then-President Michel Temer and the accompanying rollout of the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC).

The reform was promoted by the government as progress toward a gradual implementation of full-time schools in a country where education is organized in three shifts and a large portion of adolescents attend night school due to the need to work during the day. However, it in fact spelled the expansion of technical education under control of corporations and private trusts, ignored social inequalities preventing students from attending schools during the day, and projected an effective decrease of hours for disciplines such as Biology, Physics, Chemistry, History and Geography, which would reduce or completely eliminate work for teachers in those disciplines.

School reform was already being gradually implemented before the federal project went into effect in 2017. In Rio de Janeiro, municipal schools have gradually adopted the single-shift system since 2011. Since last year in the state of São Paulo, the INOVA program offered courses for teachers who decided to become certified for corporate-directed new disciplines such as “Life Project” and “Technology”. A few full-time schools were already functioning as prototypes throughout the country.

Since the advent of reform, distance learning has already been allowed as a percentage of total classes in high school, up to 20 percent and 30 percent for night students. For Adult Education (EJA), 80 percent of classes can be done remotely. But now, during the pandemic, distance education is being aggressively promoted as the new normal for the entire school system, both during and after the pandemic.

“Todos pela Educação” (All for Education), an NGO “exclusively financed by private enterprise” was created in 2006, with the blessing of the then Workers Party (PT) minister of education and later 2018 presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad. It kickstarted on Wednesday, April 9, what is meant to be the first in a series of online meetings to discuss education both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The event was attended by the

heads of national education institutions, both public and private, and, most significantly, by representatives of the World Bank.

The wide interest in what will happen to students, educators and the school system was shown by the size of the audience, with more than 4,000 people watching, a number that took Todos pela Educação panelists by surprise.

A large number came from the densely populated southeastern state of São Paulo, but also, significantly, hundreds attended from the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, where a mass teachers strike took place at the end of last year. Significant numbers responded from the other southern states of Paraná and Santa Catarina, the center-west states of Mato Grosso do Sul and Minas Gerais, and from Rio de Janeiro, while there were attendees from every other state. The majority were from public schools, but there were a significant number from private schools.

The online meeting began with a welcoming speech to the private sector by the National Commission of Education (CNE) president, Luiz Roberto Liza Curi, who repeatedly touted the importance of “working with all sectors of society.” He continued: “It is fundamental that the private sector is able to be used to amplify the diversity of the classroom model.” What he meant was illustrated by the speeches and presentations of other panelists, which promoted the transition to an education system completely adapted to corporate needs.

Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro, who is coordinating the school calendar changes due to the COVID-19 crisis as a member of the CNE, was one of the first speakers. She has occupied top positions in education over the years, as president of the National Institute of Education Studies and Research (INEP) during the right-wing PSDB administration of president Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the 1990s and as state secretary of education in the capital Brasília and in São Paulo. She was also a key figure in the high school reform and the BNCC in 2017 as the Ministry of Education’s executive-secretary. She spoke about the “big challenge ahead which is the return to classrooms. It is discussing whether these activities [during the COVID-19 pandemic] will be validated or not after going back.”

The alliance of corporations and governments in the effort to restructure the school system was highlighted by the fact that, just before the online meeting took place, another online encounter had finished earlier to discuss the Fundeb, a national education program that distributes federal funds to local and state governments. It was attended by dozens of education officials,

including Guimarães de Castro, the president of Undime (National Union of Local School Administrators), Luiz Miguel Martins Garcia, NGO representatives of the Lemann Foundation and Todos pela Educação, and deputies from the Congressional Joint Task Force for Education.

During the Todos pela Educação online meeting, Ildo Lautharte, World Bank economist, delivered a presentation that amounted to a list of directives for the transformation of Brazil's education system along the lines of distance learning and homeschooling, declaring that "the offer of distance learning should be kept up both pre- and post-pandemic."

Among the suggestions in the presentation was that during the pandemic teachers should be provided with a structure and should learn how to use distance education tools. Teaching should be done with the use of computers or by broadcasting of classes on TV or radio, depending on access to digital equipment. The presentation also advocated the implementation of homeschooling during the pandemic. He added that parents "engaging" their children should be given tips and receive regular messages of support from the school system. Supposedly, "engaged parents" are a critical factor for the success of education currently, directly implying that responsibility for the possible low school performance of children should be shifted to the backs of working-class parents.

The presentation followed the line of an article published on the United Nations website by Rafael Muñoz titled "The international experience with the impacts of COVID-19 on education." Muñoz, the World Bank's coordinator of the Economic Area for Brazil, collaborated on the article with Lautharte and André Loureiro, senior economist of the World Bank. He wrote, "In educational terms, it's crucial to evaluate which distance education practices could be maintained after the reopening of schools, benefiting from the structure put in place during the pandemic."

Pablo Acosta, the World Bank's human development coordinator for Brazil, who spoke after the CNE president, signaled the Bank's readiness to aid in the transformation of the education system. "The federal, but also state and local governments, can expect not only financial, but also technical and strategic assistance," he said.

Another key speech during the online meeting was that of Garcia of the administrators' union, who explicitly rejected any vacation time for teachers in the post-pandemic world. "I've been hearing trade union officials asking if it will be necessary to cancel vacation and recess to compensate for the classes. [They are] discussing if it's fair to take the vacation from the teachers. We are living in a moment of exception, and it will be necessary to make a national pact, to have a very frank conversation with society as a whole."

Before opening up for questions, Todos pela Educação co-founder Priscila Cruz showed the NGOs' true colors, stating despicably that "People say that 'distance education can generate inequality.' It could produce some inequality, but we need to measure what the impacts are." Cruz is frequently interviewed by leading Brazilian newspapers and broadcasters as a spokeswoman for philanthropic education.

If those who took part in Wednesday's meeting have their way,

in the post-COVID-19 world, educators will be even more exploited than before, with a fierce competition for jobs in the distance education sphere, intensified by the extreme unemployment levels. Teachers would be divided between those who are certified in distance learning and those who aren't. Many would be compelled to work both in the classrooms and in the online sphere under a goals-based calendar to meet pre-established targets. Both the students and teachers would be evaluated through the application of expanded "standardized testing," which will dictate whether a school or individual educator "deserves" funds or wage increases.

Significantly, many in the YouTube comment section of the online meeting stated their opposition to these plans to transform the school system, coordinated entirely with the corporations and banks and on the backs of rank-and-file teachers, students and parents. One comment read, "They even call the banks, but don't call the students?", while another said, "a big screwing of the bourgeoisie to use a world crisis to IMPOSE this change...proposing distance education".

Denouncing the conciliatory speech by the president of Undime, one commenter said, "Since when does Todos pela Educação represent civil society?" A teacher commented, "How do you work if not even adequate internet access is made available to the teachers. We have to prioritize the knowledge of the students." Pointing out the enormous social disparity in the access to digital learning, one commenter said, "Giving online classes is easy, making digital platforms available is too. The hard part is for the student who was skipping classes two days of the week because he didn't have the [money for] a bus ticket having internet access to all of these classes."

The COVID-19 pandemic is seen by the ruling elites as an opportunity to accumulate ever-greater sums of money at the expense of the overwhelming majority, the working class and poor. The continuation and intensification of the assault on the education system and workers' rights are being prepared by giant companies disguised as philanthropic NGOs, which are taking advantage of the current state of isolation and the threat of mass unemployment.

Educators and workers must reject this reactionary agenda based upon profit interests and form rank-and-file committees to organize against the offensive on their jobs and rights, to guarantee full wages and benefits for all teachers and school system workers both during the pandemic and after it is over, and to fight for the best methods for the education of their students.



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