

World Bank pushes privatized distance learning in Brazil

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In the first week of June, Rossieli Soares, the secretary of education of São Paulo, Brazil's largest industrial state, announced the purchase of millions of dollars of digital equipment for teachers, to be subsidized by the World Bank. This initiative follows the model developed by this agency of international financial capital—in partnership with billionaire philanthropists like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, as well as giant education companies—to put in place low-cost private education programs in Asia and Africa.

Persistently high student dropout rates were already widespread in schools throughout Brazil before the coronavirus pandemic. Exactly how millions of dollars' worth of digital equipment, to be paid for by the workers themselves through cuts in education programs, wages and jobs, will bring impoverished students back to school—whether virtual or not—is left unexplained by Soares.

According to a survey by APEOESP, the São Paulo teachers union, using reports sent by teachers, an average of only 25 percent of students are participating in online classes. According to the state government's own data, only 47 percent of students had access to the distance learning app created during the pandemic for state schools.

Moreover, while this policy is carried out, education officials in both the government and the private sector are warning that the social and economic impact of the pandemic will provoke an enormous increase in student drop-out rates. In 2014, a survey of 271 institutions by the Brazilian Distance Learning Association (Abed) found that, among the obstacles to adequate learning, "student evasion" was the most cited, with 116 institutions declaring it as the biggest impediment. The main reason for the dropouts was the lack of time for students who had to work.

A 2018 study by the education NGO Todos pela Educação found that 36.5 percent of all 19-year-olds in Brazil had not finished high school, a percentage that corresponds to 1.2 million young people, indicating widespread financial pressures that force youth out of education.

The fact that the pandemic intensified pressures on poor students to miss classes or abandon school completely in order to help with household expenses is ignored by the government, as well as the education NGOs and private education companies.

The World Bank loan to subsidize the acquisition of thousands of tablets and computers by teachers was promoted as a way to "facilitate their work." Under conditions of increased financial hardship and mass unemployment, the loan, to be paid for by the workers themselves, is designed to introduce new obligations on the digital platforms for an already overwhelmed and ever-poorer workforce.

Such platforms will be made tools not for better teaching, but to

widen performance evaluations, which will be implemented through mass measurable criteria. These criteria are designed by the same private sector organizations that have been campaigning with high-level government education officials and representatives of international financial interests for more distance learning platforms and large-scale exams.

Amazonas, Brazil's largest state, was used as a model for distance learning. Having its entire territory located inside the Amazon rainforest, the state started its program in 2007 due to difficult access to thousands of isolated riverside and indigenous communities. São Paulo's current secretary of education, Soares, was Amazonas' secretary of education during two administrations, and was later appointed as secretary of basic education in the federal government, playing a key role in the national pro-market high school reform approved in 2017. In 2018, he became minister of education during President Michel Temer's acceleration of the austerity measures which had been initiated under the Workers Party (PT) government of Dilma Rousseff.

In the beginning of April, João Doria, the ultra-right governor of São Paulo, who has been promoted during the COVID-19 pandemic as a champion of science and reason against Brazil's fascist president, Jair Bolsonaro, and commended by PT former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, announced cynically: "So that no student is excluded, the four major telecommunications companies—Claro, Vivo, Oi and Tim—reached a deal with the government providing free internet access."

Similar deals were reached in the Federal District and the state of Paraná. The distance learning platform developed by the São Paulo Education Secretary (Seduc), expected to be used by a million high school students, is based on the Amazon Web Services (AWS) cloud, which, according to the state government, is being provided "at no cost."

The real meaning of these deals is shown by Doria's record of intense cuts and privatizations along with the simultaneous contribution of hundreds of millions in donations from big business during his brief one-year mandate as mayor of São Paulo's capital in 2017. In the first three months of his administration, Doria announced 255 million reais (US\$81.5 million) in donations, including 15 million reais (US\$4.8 million) from Microsoft toward access to its online education platforms and training for teachers. Later he would announce the use of only 18 percent of the city's annual budget for investments, the lowest in 10 years, having used a mere 7.5 percent by July.

Both the high rate of school dropouts and its social causes have been seen for years as an opportunity to place students in a lucrative market

of private schools for low-income families and, more recently, the market of distance learning and “gamified” learning.

A study published in 2009 by the Getúlio Vargas Foundation’s Center of Social Policies (CPS), in partnership with the NGOs Educuar Dpaschoal Foundation, Todos pela Educação and the Unibanco Institute, declared that among the main reasons for school dropouts were “restrictions on income and [access to] the credit market which prevent people from exploring the high payback provided by education in the long term.”

The study offers as a solution “providing education credit, awarding of scholarships or the transfer of conditioned income.” In other words, student dropouts are to be exploited as a lucrative market through exploiting the calamitous state of public education and offering a supposedly better quality education in the private sector. During the last decade, these efforts assumed the form of propping up distance learning and “technology-based learning,” and took a significant step forward with the approval of the high school reform of 2017.

The expansion of standardized testing took a new step in the beginning of May with the approval of a yearly edition of an originally bi-yearly nationwide set of evaluations, known as Saeb, created to track student performance in public and private schools. Moreover, for high schools, the test will become a new type of national admissions exam for federal and state universities, becoming a parallel version of the current exam, the ENEM.

Former minister of education Abraham Weintraub, who last week left the Bolsonaro government to alleviate its growing political crisis, had campaigned to keep the November date for the ENEM exam unchanged. However, Weintraub was forced to concede after the Senate approved postponing the date by an almost unanimous vote on May 19. Since the beginning of the pandemic, students have opposed maintaining the original date. By May 14, a petition created by the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB)-controlled student union, National Union of Students (UNE), had gathered 170,000 signatures.

The resistance to changing the date of the ENEM was driven by the private schools in Brazil, which differentiate themselves from public ones by supposedly better preparing students for the exam. They are seeking to be reopened as quickly as possible, since they were forced to give discounts on tuition because of both the online teaching and the loss of income by the students’ parents. The daily *Folha de S. Paulo* reported on June 1 that up to 50 percent of small- and medium-sized schools may go bankrupt because of the pandemic.

At the same time, the maintenance of the ENEM date and the pressure to reopen the schools are part of the back-to-work campaign. In the beginning of last month, Weintraub said that maintaining the date was “a pressure so that the governors will act” to reopen the economy.

Weintraub conceded to the demand for a postponement in the midst of an intense political crisis that immediately revolves around the tactical disputes between Bolsonaro and his closest ministers, many of whom are active and retired military officers, and sections of Congress and the Federal Supreme Court (STF). These disputes are rooted in the fear that the grossly indifferent and criminal response of the Bolsonaro administration to the COVID-19 pandemic, now repeated by the state governors, will create an uprising from below that escapes the control of all capitalist organizations and institutions, including the pseudo left. The almost weekly oscillations in the politics of a return to work and now the reversal on postponing the ENEM after months of intransigence expresses this anxiety in ruling circles.

Brazil recently rose to second place in terms of total COVID-19 deaths and has the highest rate of increase in infections. Meanwhile, the massive protests against police violence in the United States are assuming an ever more international character, threatening to inspire an escalation of the uprisings that shook South America last year.

During the pandemic, many states throughout the country made deals with communications and education conglomerates and companies to implement distance learning, and have been promoting their respective campaigns for a return to work. This includes Camilo Santana, the PT state governor of Ceará, and Flávio Dino, the PCdoB state governor of Maranhão. On June 10, Dino stated that there are “advances that can allow at the moment the opening of private activities.”

In the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where Governor Eduardo Leite is now pushing for the opening of schools, a small number of education workers went to the governor’s building to protest, with one of their signs reading “Schools closed mean lives saved!” Leite is continuing the policy of almost five years of paying teachers’ wages in installments, delays in payments and wage freezes.

There is widespread opposition to these policies, not only in Rio Grande do Sul, but throughout the country. In Búzios, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, teachers planned a 72-hour strike on the online platforms after the education and administration staffs were called to go to school to discuss resuming classes. In Fortaleza, capital of the state of Ceará, strikes by education workers are also scheduled against the back-to-work campaign.

In São Paulo, Doria announced on June 24 that the state plans to bring 13 million students, from kindergarten to college, back to school starting on September 8. During the announcement of the plan, the secretary of education, Soares, promised cosmetic measures to prevent the transmission of coronavirus in schools, such as the use of masks, social distancing and sanitation protocols, but did not refer to teachers, students and school employees being tested.

Teachers who followed Doria’s announcement of the plan on social media promptly responded in the comments section, writing, “No vaccine, no back to work!” and calling for a “Strike for Life!”

Teachers, students and their parents should reject all efforts by capitalist governments for a premature return to work and schools that threatens to worsen an already catastrophic situation caused by the pandemic in Brazil. The Brazilian Socialist Equality Group (in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International) calls on teachers to build rank-and-file safety committees to save their lives and those of their students and families.



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