

[Speech made by the President of the Republic of Cuba, Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, at the official inauguration of the school year 2002 - 2003. Revolution Square, September 16, 2002 \[1\]](#)

Date:

16/09/2002

Workers and students in the educational sector;

Professional and volunteer construction workers;

Leaders of the Communist Party, Young Communist League and mass organizations that participated in the feat of renovating or building 779 schools;

Heads of enterprises and state entities that cooperated in this major work:

Today, September 16, as was previously planned, we are officially inaugurating the school year and strongly proclaiming the need to carry forward to its final consequences the profound and unprecedented educational revolution we are currently undertaking. It is not only our people's basic duty for humanity and social justice, but also an imperative of our times and our future. Likewise, our achievements can be of benefit to many other peoples in the world.

The fight for national liberation brought with it the eradication of illiteracy, the spread of teachers and schools to every corner of the country, the transformation of the educational system and its content, the diversification of education, and the creation and development of technical and professional schools. At the same time, universities grew in number and extended throughout the entire country; special education programs were established for the tens of thousands of children and adolescents with special needs; secondary and higher education were put within the reach of all young people, with the creation of hundreds of thousands of full scholarships; and many other educational programs were developed at a rate never before witnessed anywhere else.

Novel methods were used at every stage to overcome seemingly insurmountable difficulties and obstacles, in the midst of relentless subversive and aggressive actions launched from abroad, a rigorous and merciless economic blockade, and attempts to impose technical and scientific isolation. These conditions have lasted for more than four decades, and continue to persist today.

Thousands of schools of all kinds were built and equipped. Hundreds of thousands of teachers and professors were trained. The training of cadres for the defense of the country and the Revolution was never neglected either. The military vocational schools and academies of our Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Ministry of the Interior forged tens of thousands of high officials, whose proven patriotic spirit, internationalism and courage have been demonstrated in the heroic and victorious missions discharged within the country and abroad.

A huge effort has been made in the educational sector since January 1, 1959. This is shown by the fact that for every sixth grade graduate at that time in history -and the total number was barely 400,000- the Revolution has graduated two university professionals or intellectuals.

The large number of scientists working today in the country's hundreds of research centers or units is testimony to the progress achieved. That is why some talk about the first and second educational revolutions that preceded the current stage.

Honor and glory to the men and women who achieved such feats! Without the enormous human capital created by the Revolution, we could never have even dreamed of the great educational revolution that Cuba is carrying out today, whose significance will transcend the borders of our own country.

What we have done up until today has been based on universally accepted concepts and methods that emerged from the elitist societies of the wealthiest and most developed capitalist countries. The Revolution undoubtedly introduced some of its own formulas, geared to our goal of bringing education to the masses, to all the citizens of our country, especially the children and the youth.

Today we are striving to perfect the work accomplished up until now, and proceeding on the basis of entirely new ideas and concepts. Today we are seeking for what should be and will be, in our judgment, an educational system that increasingly corresponds to the equality, full justice, self-esteem and moral and social needs of all people in the type of society that Cubans have decided to build.

Such goals will never be within the reach of a capitalist society. The required doses of humanism and solidarity do not exist and never will exist in such societies, and their rates of education and culture, no matter how great their technology and wealth will lag further and further behind those of Cuba. There are already many indicators that provide irrefutable proof of this fact.

The full awareness of the need for a profound educational revolution in our country emerged at the beginning of the battle of ideas, almost three years ago. At that point in time, we found ourselves obliged to mobilize all of the people and to seek the support of international public opinion, including that of the United States, to fight the inhuman and colossal injustice committed when a humble, hard-working, honest and decent Cuban father was robbed of his five-year-old son, the victim of a tragedy the like of which have become an all too common occurrence, brought about by a murderous law adopted over 35 years ago to encourage illegal emigration and to destabilize the country.

The participation of children and adolescents in the marches and rallies, their moving eloquence, their spirit of solidarity and patriotism, the fruit of the selfless efforts of their teachers and professors, in close cooperation with their parents, had a considerable influence on the interest shown for and the attention paid to the problems and difficulties caused by the special period, like the shortages of textbooks, sketchpads and other school supplies, as well as to other problems that could affect the marvelous training that our children, adolescents and young adults had received thanks to the educational programs of the Revolution.

We knew that Cuba occupied first place among all the countries of Latin America by a wide margin. Cuba's children possessed almost twice the average knowledge in the basic subjects of primary education: language and mathematics. This fact was recognized by international organizations, and was a source of great satisfaction. In a search for further data and reflections, daily meetings were held in which leaders of the Party, the Youth and the mass organizations participated alongside representatives and leaders of our primary, secondary and higher education students organizations. In this way, we were able to more deeply study the existing flaws, the problems, difficulties and shortcomings which, in spite of the extraordinary successes achieved, were affecting our educational system, and with it, the results that a society like ours should and could attain in all areas that make up its loftiest and most desired goals.

For example, for various reasons there was a marked decrease in the number of students who applied to join the teacher training colleges, to earn university degrees as primary school teachers. Hundreds of classrooms in the capital had more than 40 students; the average was 37. Most of the teachers had graduated between 15 and 30 years earlier. One day, the schools would have abruptly been left without the most experienced and highly qualified teachers. There was a growing shortage of teachers for the

11, 12 and 13 subjects taught in the three years of junior high schools, in a single session of classes and with many students. There were also reductions in the amount of material covered. I am mentioning only some difficulties, as I do not want to repeat others that have been explained before.

There were objective as well as subjective factors involved. But what was fundamental was the need to move beyond old concepts.

The fact that secondary education was in crisis all over the world did not serve as any consolation to us.

In the battle of ideas, new ideas came up among us every day; and each new idea led to others. Many were related to education, and not simply with regard to schooling, but also in terms of the economic, cultural and political education of all our people. Measures and more measures were adopted along the way. Each new idea was tested out beforehand and subjected to serious experimentation in real-life conditions. Not a moment could be wasted; we could not just sit back and wait. Resources were scarce. Feasible solutions had to be sought. The newsprint tabloid format used to publish the University for All materials, valuable literary works, or the content of especially important televised Round Table discussions, was a consequence of the shortage of resources needed to print books since spending just one dollar, it was possible to print materials at a cost 150 times lower than that of any book sold in any bookstore in the world.

Perhaps the most transcendental idea was that of using the mass media, audiovisual equipment and computers to transmit knowledge to children, adolescents and adults in the schools and in their homes. The use of television and video has had a major impact on primary and secondary education. Today, there is a television set for every classroom in the country, a total of 81,169, and a VCR for every 100 students. In the last school year, 44,790 computers were delivered to schools and more than 12,000 young people were trained to teach computer skills not only in the universities but also from kindergarten to Grade 12. Actually, very interesting experiences had been registered on the children's capacity to assimilate it

All 2,320 of the country's rural schools that did not have electrical power were equipped with solar panels in order for them to take advantage of these technologies as well.

Another equally transcendental idea is that of taking university education to every corner of the country. That is, in fact, a necessity imposed by the tens of thousands of new teachers and professors trained in intensive courses, the social workers, the art instructors, the workers and technicians following higher education courses, the students from the comprehensive upgrading of youth and other ongoing programs, many of which will have to pursue their university studies while working on their respective assignments and living at home.

It would be impossible to list all of the examples that could be cited. Many of you present here know how many of these initiatives emerged and developed. The work has been intense, the results encouraging.

The first conclusion to be drawn from what we have achieved is that we urgently need to continue working and to improve what has already been done. You could almost say that we are just beginning.

I shall try to briefly offer a few figures.

The state budget allocation for the year 2002, including the investments already made, is estimated in 3,121 million pesos, which is 11.4 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. This is an indicator in which we have always been above all the other countries of the hemisphere.

The total number of students in educational institutions is 2,623,300; of these, 423,277 are boarding students and 635,739 are semi-boarding students. The remaining 1, 564,284 students go home every day after classes.

Primary school, including kindergarten: 995,581

Junior high school: 502,533

Senior high school: 161,017

Special education: 55,668

Technical and professional education, including the intensive training of teachers; the training of art instructors and physical education and sports instructors; and vocational and professional art schools, among others: 606,653.

The number of those studying in the universities under different modalities is already 201,257.

There are also 100,591 students in the schools for the comprehensive upgrading of young people between the ages of 17 and 30 who were unemployed and who today have the possibility to study while receiving from the State a monthly allowance corresponding to their educational level.

In the coming weeks, schools will be opened for no fewer than 90,000 workers from the sugar cane sector affected by the downsizing of payrolls resulting from the restructuring of that industry, a direct consequence of the extremely low sugar prices on the international market and the considerable net losses in hard currency sustained by the country.

These workers will receive a decent remuneration based on their previous wages. At the same time, they will be acquiring extensive general and professional knowledge that will raise their self-esteem and be of great benefit for both the workers and the country. For the first time in history studying becomes a full time job.

The number of teachers and professors currently working to carry forward these programs is 222,286.

Total number of workers in the education sector, both teaching and non-teaching: 433,200.

Number of educational centers: 13,343.

Throughout the country, over the last eighteen months, 4,453 new classrooms were created, with a capacity for over 90,000 students. In the capital's primary schools, the ideal goal of 20 or fewer students per teacher and classroom has now been achieved. In the rest of the country's provinces, the goal of 20 or fewer students per teacher and classroom has been fulfilled in the majority of primary schools and in classrooms with more than 20 students, there are two teachers instead of one. In all of Cuba there are only 19,000 primary school students, or 2.6% of the total enrollment, which still do not enjoy these favorable conditions, but this will be remedied during the current school year.

Our greatest challenge today is at the junior high school level. For example, in the capital of the Republic, there are 167 junior high schools, with an enrollment of 89,900 students, which provide a total of only 1,657 classrooms of different sizes, that is, for 30, 35, 40 or even 50 students. Due to this limitation, there are around 35,000 students who have only a single session of classes every day, either in the morning or the afternoon.

Every day, about 50,000 junior high school students leave school at noon to go home or elsewhere for lunch, and part of them do not return in the afternoon for the rest of their classes or for extracurricular activities, some of them optional, in the case of the tens of thousands who have a single session of classes. As a result, many junior high school students can be seen on the streets during school hours. In the junior high schools of the capital we need the equivalent of almost 1,200 classrooms for 30 students each, along with measures to deal with the lunch problem, to perfect the organization of the activities

and to improve the students' discipline combined with a more demanding stance on the part of teachers and relatives, so as to overcome these difficulties. With the cooperation of almost all of the existing professors determined to teach two or more subjects, the reinforcement of the comprehensive teachers in training and the optimal use of the modern audiovisual means available, the adolescents will increase the knowledge that they can and should acquire in that important stage of their lives.

The other provinces that are facing similar problems at this educational level will solve them with their resolute and tenacious efforts.

Why is Cuba heading towards a top place in education worldwide? It is no longer possible to compare it with the countries of Latin America and the rest of the Third World.

Let us take a look at a few figures from various sources on the state of education in the developed countries, and compare them with the figures from our own country.

Primary school enrollment rate:

Cuba 100; Spain 100; France 100; the Netherlands 100; Italy 100; Japan 100; Norway 100; Portugal 100; Sweden 100; Denmark 100; United Kingdom 99; Finland 98; Canada 95; United States 95; Ireland 92; and Germany 86.

Sources: UNESCO and Euridice.

Percentage of students who reach fifth grade:

Cuba 100; Germany 100; Denmark 100; Finland 100; Japan 100; Norway 100; Canada 99; United States 99; France 99; Italy 99; Spain 98; Sweden 98; Ireland 97; and Portugal 97.

Sources: UNICEF and UNESCO.

Educational achievement in mathematics:

Third grade: Cuba 78.2; Canada 54.4; England 40.2; Iceland 34.1; Ireland 53.7; Japan 77.4; Norway 31.6; Portugal 45.4; Scotland 44; United States 54.6; and the Netherlands 59.6.

Fourth grade: Cuba 81.6; Canada 70.4; England 53.2; Iceland 56.9; Ireland 71.3; Japan 86.7; Norway 63.7; Portugal 60.7; Scotland 62.4; United States 70.3; and the Netherlands 83.4.

In third grade, we are rated above them all.

In fourth grade, we are surpassed only by Japan and the Netherlands.

Sources: OECD and UNESCO.

Existence of educational channels:

Canada yes; Japan yes; Denmark no; Spain no; United States no; Finland no; France no; Ireland no; Norway no; the Netherlands no; Portugal no; United Kingdom no; Sweden no.

Source: Public information.

Cuba has something more than an educational channel. Every day, the two national channels broadcast 10 and 12 hours of educational materials, in addition to the educational channel presently in full development. This currently covers the capital of the Republic and a large part of the provinces of Havana and Santiago de Cuba, and before the end of the current school year, it will extend to all of the

provincial capitals and major cities, as well as a large part of the rural communities. It will also provide many more hours of educational broadcasting as part of a system organically linked to all levels and types of education in the country.

No other country in the world is doing anything like it.

Source: Public information.

Existence of TV sets in every classroom

Cuba, yes; Germany, no; Canada, no; Denmark, no; Spain, no; United States, no; Finland, no; France, no; Ireland, no; Italy, no; Japan, no; Norway, no; the Netherlands, no; Portugal, no; the United Kingdom, no; and, Sweden, no.

It is the privilege of an educational method that only exists in our country.

Source: Public Information.

Ratio of teachers per number of inhabitants

Cuba one per 42.23; Denmark one per 53.6; Portugal one per 54.7; Sweden one per 55.4; France one per 62.7; Ireland one per 64.6; Canada one per 66; United States one per 67.7; Spain one per 68.5; the Netherlands one per 69.6; Japan one per 77.8; Germany one per 78.7; Finland one per 79.2; Italy one per 83.5; and the United Kingdom one per 83.95.

Source: UNESCO.

Maximum number of students per classroom in primary school:

Cuba 20; Canada 25; Spain 25; Norway 25; United Kingdom 25; Denmark 28; Germany 30; United States 30; Finland 30; France 30; Japan 30; and Portugal 30.

In the cases of Germany and the United States, there is not a single figure for the whole country; it varies from state to state.

Source: Public information.

As can be seen, we are already far above the most developed countries in most of the main educational indicators. Almost without noticing, we are leading the way. They do not have the slightest possibility of surpassing us within their capitalist social and economic models. As our current projects continue to mature and we gradually overcome the deficiencies and difficulties we face, we will even further increase our advantage.

These educational indicators will be accompanied by the efforts of tens of thousands of art instructors who are already in training, the explosion that will take place in the arts in general and in other intellectual fields, and the rapid advances of our people towards an ever-higher degree of comprehensive general culture.

These are not simply dreams or fantasies; the realities are already becoming visible. And it is well worth fighting for them!

Patria o muerte!

Venceremos!

Speech made at the official inauguration of the school year 2002 - 2003

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