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EDUCATING BELIZE:

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE

“Belize is paying a lot for education but getting little. More youth are outside the school system than in it and many fail to make the transition to the workforce. ... Action is needed if Belize is not to lose a whole generation of youth.”

- Inter-American Development Bank,
“Challenges and Opportunities in the Belize Education Sector”, 2013

BELIZE: WHY WE'RE HERE

Belize is a small nation in Central America, bordered to the north by Mexico, by Guatemala to the west and south, and by the Caribbean Sea to the east. Estimates of the national population vary from 340,000 – 360,000¹, with population density averaging at 15 people per square kilometer². In consideration of these low figures, Belize is often the forgotten nation of the Caribbean region. The small country, approximately the size of the state of Massachusetts, is occasionally omitted on regional maps and periodically has its sovereignty threatened by threats of invasion from the neighboring Guatemalan government (Rodriguez-Boetsch 6). In spite of its status as a sidelined nation, Belize is a haven of natural resources that have long been underestimated and underutilized. The country contains a broad spectrum of ecosystems and environments that lend themselves well to agricultural, fishing, and logging industries, as well as tourism—particularly ecotourism—contributing to the Belizean economy’s heavy dependence upon primary resource extraction and international tourism and trade. Though environmental assets are abundant in the small country, the population does not have adequate economic or educational infrastructures in place to maintain or engage the plentiful resources.

¹ The Statistical Institute of Belize. *The State of the Nation*. 2010

² The World Bank. *Country Statistics – Belize*. 2015.



Source: Lonely Planet Maps, Belize.

There is ample room for internal growth in Belize—as an English-speaking nation replete with natural resources; Belize could conceivably be at the forefront of environmental research and education, leading to sustainable resource development, as well as a hotspot for international tourism and investment. However, there are many limitations that inhibit the Caribbean country’s development economically and socially, such as pervasive poverty, large-scale emigration, and an unreliable infrastructure³. These disparate problems are all linked by one important facet of Belizean society: the education of its people. Recent literature suggests that a strong and effective education system is a necessary element in the development of a nation, and as the Caribbean region at large works to renegotiate the region’s global status through increased access to education for its people, Belize continues to lag behind in providing access to the basic resources which serve as a prerequisite for growth⁴. This report will firstly provide a description of the current manifestation of the Belizean education system, detailing its structural shortcomings and the social implications of those faults. Ultimately, the report will provide recommendations on how to better the education system in order to fully utilize the human capacity available within the country and aid in sustainable economic growth,

³ Osvaldo Castellanos

⁴ Inter-American Development Bank, *Challenges and Opportunities in the Belize Education Sector*. 2013.

addressing the socioeconomic factors at play within the status quo as well as case studies of successful schooling models in Belize specifically and in the Caribbean at large.

THE STATUS QUO

EDUCATION SYSTEM STRUCTURE

The Belize Ministry of Education oversees the country's school system. According to the Education Act of 1990, the national government will ensure access to a primary education program for children between the ages of 5 and 14 years old, for whom school is compulsory. The Belizean government partially finances both public and church-sponsored schools, guaranteeing the salaries of all faculty, though many expenses are left to be paid for by the school itself or by individual families. These additional expenditures, in primary school alone, can include textbooks, uniforms, computers, among other sundry fees, which often creates a financial strain for many students in Belize, wherein 31.6% of youth live in impoverished households.⁵

Though primary education is the only compulsory stage of education in the country, many parents elect to send their children to state-sponsored preprimary education, and many students are increasingly sensing the need to continue through secondary education after the completion of their requisite schooling. However, the cost of education increases dramatically after completion of the primary level—secondary education and all higher degrees require paid enrollment, which creates a very substantial financial strain and disincentives many Belizeans from pursuing an education past the primary level. The Belize National Selection Examination, administered at the end of primary schooling, determines access to secondary education and whether a student should enter general education or vocational training programs. At the end

⁵ The Caribbean Development Bank. *Report #495 Poverty Assessment Report – Belize*. 2002.

of the four-year secondary education programming, students take the Caribbean Examinations Council Certificate and GCE Ordinary-Level Examinations to complete their secondary education and allow them to qualify for tertiary education if they elect to pursue further degrees. (UNESCO/IBE)

There are 142 preprimary schools in Belize, 288 primary, 50 secondary⁶, and very few tertiary—tertiary programs are provided by 10 regional junior colleges as well as the University of Belize, Galen University, and the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies.⁷ Of the post-primary age population in Belize, comprised of 214,920 adults 14 years and older, 44.19% have reached only a primary level of education, 17% have completed a secondary degree, 7.84% have completed post-secondary schooling (vocational training, technical training), and just 3.89% have achieved a tertiary level of education. 19.85% of the post-primary age population never fulfilled their primary degree requirements. (SIB 2010)

SOCIOCULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATION

The population of Belize is divided into 13 distinct ethnic groups. The largest of these groups is the Mestizo/Latino population (49%), followed by the Creole population (24%), the Maya Ketchi population (6%), and the Garifuna population (6%). Less than 5% of people identify with any of the other individual ethnic groups, though they collectively comprise nearly 15% of the population.⁸ The three most common languages of the country are English, Spanish and Creole, with English as the official national language, as a result of Belize's long history as a British colony—the nation did not become fully independent until 1981, and still regards Queen Elizabeth II as the Head of State over the parliamentary democracy.⁹

Though the national population is generally accepting and peaceful even with the heterogeneity of the country, there is an evident disparity between each ethnic group as

⁶ "Belize." *International Education: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Issues and Systems*. 2013.

⁷ The Government of Belize. Ministry of Education. *List of Deans, Junior Colleges and Universities*. 2015.

⁸ Statistical Institute of Belize. National Census. 2010.

⁹ The British Monarchy, *The Queen and the Commonwealth*. 2015.

related to education. The table below, with information collected by the Statistical Institute of Belize in the 2010 census, shows that over 77% of the Caucasian population has completed secondary levels of education, though that ethnic subdivision comprises only 1.16% of the total national population. By contrast, only 24% of the Mestizo/Spanish/Latino ethnic group, with which nearly half of the national population identifies, has fulfilled a secondary degree of education.

Population by Ethnic Group and Secondary Level Education Completion

Ethnic Group	% Population	% Completed Secondary Education
Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese)	0.96	56.90
Black/African	0.47	66.04
Caucasian/White	1.16	77.18
Creole	24.10	40.16
East Indian	3.60	35.16
Garifuna	5.67	35.22
Hindu	0.21	68.80
Lebanese	0.13	74.48
Maya Ketchi	5.95	11.41
Maya Mopan	3.76	16.31
Maya Yucatec	0.83	15.56
Menonnite	3.34	3.98
Mestizo/Spanish/Latino	49.22	24.04
Other	0.35	58.76
Not Reported	0.24	16.10

Table 1 – Statistical Institute of Belize 2010

A second interesting feature to note about the education of the Belizean population is the discrepancy between males and females. Importantly, women do not have restricted access to education in Belize, and actually tend to be enrolled at higher rates than men across higher education levels, as represented in the following table. Also, while Belize nationally has low retention and completion rates, females tend to fare better than their male counterparts at all levels. Two of every five children enrolled in primary school complete their primary schooling on time, with a 48% completion rate for girls and a 38% completion rate for boys. This statistic

is reflected also in secondary-level completion rates, at which level 63% of girls and 57% of boys complete the requisite four-year education. Similarly, at the tertiary level, the graduation rate for women is higher than that of men, though the overall tertiary graduation is only 15.4%.¹⁰

School Enrollment by Education Level and Sex in 2010

	Total	Males	Females
Preprimary	6,933	3,476	3,457
Primary	67,047	34,092	32,955
Secondary	18,799	8,895	9,904
Tertiary	8,110	3,186	4,924

Table 2 – Statistical Institute of Belize 2010

Many analysts attribute these differences to the high level of gang-related activity in Belize's largest urban epicenters, such as Belize City, as well as to the pressure placed on young men to find work that can help support their families. These contemporary problems creates an important and persistent paradox—many young men are pulled from the education system to pursue opportunities for livelihood, though their advancement through the education system is the very thing that could allow future generations to have greater, more fruitful, and more secure opportunities.

UNEMPLOYMENT

According to the Statistical Institute of Belize's (SIB) Labour Force Survey report from the spring of 2013, the national unemployment rate rests at **11.7%**. There are many variables that

¹⁰ Inter-American Development, *Challenges and Opportunities in the Belize Education Sector*. 2013.

contribute to the way that unemployment interacts with different classifiers. The SIB presents that variation as follows:

Regional: Stann Creek district has the highest rate of unemployment at **15.0%**, while Toledo district has the lowest at **8.0%**. Rural to urban unemployment rates both average around **11.5%**. Notably, Toledo is also the smallest of the 6 districts in terms of population, and is the only district that is predominated by the Mayan ethnic group—the other districts are comprised largely of Mestizo and Creole populations¹¹. It is likely that Toledo, with its lesser population density, is better suited to a low-scale, unspecialized economy than the other districts with more urban populations.

Gender: Nationally, there is a **6.1%** unemployment rate for men, and a **20.2%** unemployment rate for women. This disparity seems to be at ends with the data supporting higher levels of female school enrollment, particularly at higher education levels. Though the educational statistics would seem to imply greater employment opportunities for women in consideration of their higher levels of education, Belize's social structure is still patriarchal—boys are encouraged to drop out of school to secure employment, and though young women may complete higher levels of education, there are fewer opportunities waiting for them upon graduation. This statistic is significant also in how it diverges from past studies. In previous reports, the SIB found that the female unemployment rate was around double that of males—still an objectionable difference, but significantly less dismal than the findings of the more recent report.

Ethnic: Creoles have the highest rate of unemployment at **16.2%**, while Mestizos have the lowest rate of unemployment at **9.9%**. Just as with the disparity between unemployment of males and females, this statistic seems to be at odds with the education levels of the various ethnic groups in Belize. Creoles have attained secondary-level education at a higher rate than Mestizos, by a full 16% (refer to Table 1). However, Mestizo is the ethnicity with which the

¹¹ Statistical Institute of Belize. *National Census*. 2010.

biggest proportion of the population identifies, and that may act as a contributing factor in that group's maintenance of a low unemployment rate.

Age: The 14-24 year old age bracket has the highest unemployment rate at **22.1%**, while the 55-64 year old bracket has the lowest, with **5.9%**. These numbers point to Belize's economy as relatively immobile—one indicator of a strong domestic economy is employment opportunities for students post graduation, but in Belize, it seems to be that adults with age and experience are more often employed than recently educated young adults. This certainly impacts the retention of students—when young adults see so many of their peers completing their schooling without opportunities to be gainfully employed afterwards, the perception of education's ability to foster success is diminished.

Nationality: Citizens born in Belize have a higher than average unemployment rate of **12.7%**, while those born abroad have a significantly lower rate of **7.1%** unemployment. The majority of Belize's immigrants come from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, while a much smaller minority comes from North America—the United States, Mexico, and Canada. The fact that immigrants are employed at substantially higher levels than domestic workers in Belize speaks to the inability of the Belizean education system to adequately cultivate an educated, skilled labor force.

Education: Those without completion of any formal level of education have a surprisingly low rate of unemployment at **8.1%**. The rate of those with a primary level completion is **14.9%**, similar to those with secondary level completion at **14.1%**. Those with a completed tertiary degree have only a **7.6%** unemployment rate.¹² It is quite discouraging that unemployment rates are about the same for those with a primary level of education and those with a secondary level of education, and that both of those rates are higher than the rate of unemployment for people without any formally completed education.

¹²

<http://www.sib.org.bz/Portals/0/docs/publications/other%20statistical%20reports/LFS%20April%202013%20Report.pdf>

In fact, in 2009, the average monthly salary in Belize dollars (BZ) for a worker with no education was \$421 BZ, while those with primary levels of education earned on average \$437 BZ—an almost inconsequential difference. The margin does improve when accounting for secondary level educated workers, for whom an average salary was \$895 BZ. The difference increases further with vocational and tertiary training, which each earned an average of \$1303 BZ and \$2214 BZ, respectfully¹³.

Thus, unemployment is a grave reality for many citizens of Belize. The way that (un)employment interacts with various sociocultural factors plays a significant role in unpacking the influence that the Belizean economy has had on retention in schools. For the people of Belize, for whom 18% of jobs come from primary sector work and 69% of jobs fall under direct services¹⁴, there is minimal hope that education will improve chances of social mobility, as there is little economic demand for labor that is highly skilled or well educated. And without the expectation that education will further the career opportunities available after schooling, there is little motivation for students to stay enrolled, complete their requisite education within the prescribed time period, or advance through higher levels of degrees.



Source: Flickr Margaret Cotrofeld. Ambergis Caye and Chacalam, Belize. 2011.

¹³ *id.* at 4

¹⁴ Statistical Institute of Belize. *Belize Labor Force Survey*. 2013.

MODELING FOR THE FUTURE

In consideration of the dismal statistics about the current state of education in Belize, most opportunities and channels for change have been regarded by the public with only cautious optimism. It is far easier to call for reform than to actualize it—where can real reform come from in Belize, and what specific facets of education must be emphasized to produce the desired, metamorphic results?

Officially, it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Belizean government at large to prioritize education and execute reformative policies. Informally, though, it is a national, and even an international, effort. Local communities must speak out against the current system's misgivings, and consider wherein the disparity between their children's education and the education of the local economy's labor force resides.

And where does this “new education” focus? Belize has traditionally placed a high level of importance on ecological consciousness and environmental sustainability – the role of the new education system, then, could be to raise students with the knowledge to reconcile those priorities with a world that is developing industrially at an exponential rate.

Though there are many factors which have contributed to a failing education system in Belize over the nation's three-decade history, hope for the future can be found by examining certain models within Belize and abroad that have successfully challenged the status quo of a Central American education.

COSTA RICA: CASE STUDY ON A NATIONAL SCALE

Costa Rica is a useful example of a Central American nation with similar social dynamics and ecological prospects to Belize that has been especially successful in reconstructing and reforming its education systems, leading to a robust and competitive economy. Costa Rica took a reformative approach to challenging its existing education structure in the 1970s, when the Minister of Education introduced ambitious principles under which education policy would newly function. The goals of the Costa Rican reform were to emphasize inductive thinking, active participation of students, school-community interaction, usage of technology and stronger ties between education and the productive sector of the economy.¹⁵ It was with these objectives in mind that the Costa Rican government set out to establish a revitalized education system that would work in tandem with a bolstered Costa Rican economy.

An important element of the reformation plan was the Minister's effort to obtain support from bilateral, international entities with experience in developing quality education programs in other countries. Organizations such as UNESCO, OAS and the Federal Republic of Germany were generous supporters of the Minister's mission, and helped to fund the new project as well as helping to structure the project's strategy and trajectory. A second important piece of the Minister's reformative plan was the inclusion of teachers in the conversation about restructuring curricula.¹⁶ Though the plan received significant opposition, it was the role teachers played in developing educational objectives and discussing school capacity that grounded the project in pragmatism and applicability, and allowed reformation to take shape.

¹⁵ S. Lourié, *Education and Development: Strategies and Decisions in Central America*. 1989.

¹⁶ *ib id.*

Even in consideration of Costa Rica's long-standing independent statehood status, the process of educational transformation in Costa Rica was, and continues today to be, slow and cautious. This ought to provide a point of hope for Belize; as such a young nation, Belize can expect to continue undergoing positive transformations for many years into the future. Though change may be a long process, it is thoroughly possible in the young country, and even probable. And as in the case of Costa Rica, education reform proves itself capable of bolstering and revitalizing entire domestic economies. Between 1963 and 1973, the percentage of Costa Ricans with moderate and higher incomes had increased by 15%, and the percentage of employed individuals with secondary and/or tertiary degrees increased by an impressive 45%.¹⁷

OCEAN ACADEMY: CASE STUDY ON A LOCAL SCALE

Within Belize, there have already been isolated attempts at reforming education in order to fortify Belize's stake within a larger global order. The Ocean Academy in Caye Caulker is one such example. The Ocean Academy's SEaTIDe (Social Enterprise, Technology, Innovation and Development) program was founded in order to combat the lack of academic opportunities with real-world application available to students in Caye Caulker¹⁸. The approach the Ocean Academy takes towards education is unique in its focus on the particular rather than the general—students learn applied skills in a range of subjects, from hospitality to software development to accounting. A fundamental part of the school's curriculum is taking the learned practices and applying them to the real world; students are given the opportunity to become social entrepreneurs of their own right and generate their own local economy as well as producing the funds to support their own educational program.

¹⁷ *Ib id.*

¹⁸ <http://oaseatide.com/seatide/>



Source: Ocean Academy

The lead objective behind this innovative approach to schooling is to mold generations of students who can create their own jobs and industries rather than being dependent upon the preexisting, immobile economy. Though the school has been open only since 2008, this method of teaching and learning has already proven itself valuable: prior to the Ocean Academy's launch, only 10% of young adults in Caye Caulker pursued education past the primary level. However, in the past seven years, 87% of students in the community have enrolled in secondary education programming.¹⁹ These initial results are already impressive in consideration of the context from which they come. While the Belize national government has struggled for decades to improve the quality and accessibility of education for the country's youth, Ocean Academy has aptly and quickly transformed the education of a whole community of Belizean youth. In spite of the considerable challenges facing the education system of Belize, the Academy has fostered successful, thoughtful students who deftly defy the passive attitude towards education that is pervasive throughout the young country.

¹⁹ Ocean Academy. "SEaTIDe, Capital Campaign" 2015.

The government of Belize supports 17% of the school's budget, while school attendance fees, supplemented by student's social entrepreneurship projects, funds another 17%. A majority of the school's funding comes from external, private donor sources and grassroots fundraising. This school's innovative approach to academia is precisely what Belize and its students need – an outlet for learning useful, relevant, and applicable skills in order to create opportunity, drive down unemployment rates, and increase job availability in the tertiary and quaternary economic sectors.



Source: Flickr – Margaret Cotrofeld. San Pedro, Belize 2011

PLANNING FOR CHANGE

HORIZON 2030

In 2010, the Belizean government released Horizon 2030—the government's twenty-year plan for reformation of many interdisciplinary aspects of Belizean society. The second thematic priority listed in the proposal is titled as "Education for Development – Education for Life"²⁰ and encompasses many specific objectives with the intention of restructuring and implementing a system of education which functions as a social good rather than simply as a societal expectation. The document lists three main goals for the education element of the project:

²⁰ The Government of Belize. *National Development Framework for Belize 2010-2030*. 2010.

provide free, compulsory and quality education through the secondary level, integrate relevant studies in the areas of arts, sports, technology, the environment, and entrepreneurship; and foster an inclusive, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual system.



Source: Government of Belize, Horizon 2030 PDF

Horizon 2030 outlines many specific objectives that will be used to manage and track the progress of the broader goals. Promisingly, the objectives listed trend less towards an increase in expenditures and more towards a renovation of curricula that will focus on technologies and real-world skills, much like Ocean Academy's SEaTIDE. The proposal also emphasizes the need to bring the innumerable adults with inadequate education into the fold, with plans to launch Adult and Continuing Education (ACE) programs that are accessible in both rural and urban areas with both online and in-person participation method options.²¹ However, the

²¹ *ib id.*

Belizean government, in contingency with organizations such as the Caribbean Development Bank and the United Nations, has made numerous previous attempts at reforming the education system, all of which have proven largely unsuccessful. As such, it is important to note the attempts being made by the national government at changing education's status quo, but the future of education in Belize is fraught with hope more so when considered in the context of the private sector and discrete, individualized efforts at reformation.

SUGGESTIONS: MEETING THE NEEDS OF A CHANGING WORLD

The measures being taken now by the Belizean government at large and with smaller, localized efforts such as Ocean Academy are important to the development of the Belizean education system and the strengthening of the country's domestic economy. Though these steps are both positive and promising, there remain other avenues that have yet to be pursued in Belize, and which may serve as small building blocks for the continuation of the work thusly presented. Some recommendations for further prospects include:

- **Increasing access to vocational and tertiary education:** While Horizon 2030 outlines much in the way of increasing access to primary and secondary education for students, there is little emphasis placed on making higher education a priority in the near future. While the government's spending on postsecondary education tripled from 5.5% in 2001 to 14% in 2013, and despite the government spending two to three times more per student at postsecondary levels as compared with primary and secondary levels, there has been little increase in attendance of higher-level programs²².
- **Using technology to bridge relationships:** As Cisco CEO Annmarie Neal states, "the ability to work fluidly around the world is a competitive advantage: understanding how to leverage the globe, time zones, where the work can best be done, where there are skills that best match the task, either because of the culture or the training."²³ As the

²² *ib. id.* at 4.

²³ T. Wagner, *The Global Achievement Gap*. 2008.

government places greater emphasis on the know-how of technology usage in education curricula, it would be worthwhile to consider the benefits of using technology to build relationships between students in Belize and students elsewhere, or even between students of different Belize districts. Building an infrastructure for shared information between the coastal region in Caye Caulker and the urban culture of Belmopan, for example, may help to accomplish multiple tasks at once: building an inclusive education with awareness of the environment and its regional differences, and using technology to link all of the concepts together.

- **Broadening Internet accessibility and usage:** The government of Belize does not currently fund technology in classrooms nationwide, and as such, the availability of the Internet in schools is quite limited. In order to truly democratize and globalize the education of Belize's youth, the students should necessarily have access to Internet resources. Belize Telemedia, a telecommunications company, began their own "Internet to Schools" program in 1995 as a response to the need for this crucial element of education, initially focusing on providing Internet access to secondary and tertiary schools.²⁴ 20 years later, they have expanded the program to include some primary schools, and fund broadband Internet for 45 schools overall. This program is a wonderful start to providing more breadth and depth to the Belizean education system—but these efforts need to be expanded by public and private entities to include students nationwide.
- **Molding innovators for economic prospect:** To truly realize Belize's potential, the country needs innovative, creative entrepreneurial minds to take charge of the barren economy currently upheld. This requires that students must be educated in the concepts of business and must be encouraged to find new ways to combat the problems facing their own communities daily. The expectation cannot be that all students eventually find their way to the same jobs as those which employed their parents, and their parents' parents—it must be shown that education is useful because education carves a pathway for self-determination in the job market, allowing young

²⁴ <http://www.belizetelemedia.net/education2.php>

Belizeans to aggregate better control over the economy and compound economic opportunity for themselves and the older generations willing to learn the necessary skills to compete in today's globalized economic market.

- **Shared language learning:** English is the official national language of Belize, which gives it a distinct advantage for trade and relationships with the U.S. and U.K. in contrast with its Spanish-speaking neighbors. However, only 62.9% of the Belize population considers themselves fluent in English, while 56.6% regard themselves as fluent in Spanish and 44.6% in Creole.²⁵ Though there is overlap between these statistics, they show that there is not a singular language that a vast majority of Belize speaks. This is inherently problematic for the infrastructure of a nation only 360,000 strong—to build sound industries and policies, relationships must be founded a priori, and those are grounded largely in language. It would benefit the desired national community for schools to emphasize bilingual learning across all regions, rather than focusing only on the language spoken in a particular school's local community.

Though there are persistent problems existing in Belizean society in conjunction with a weak education system and fragile economy, the young, sparse, sometimes-forgotten nation has the promise and poise to be a strong global force in the future, much like neighboring Mexico or nearby Costa Rica. With the prospects of the Horizon 2030 plan and the efforts of programs like the Ocean Academy, the future of Belize's youth in generating an entrepreneurial economy, employing the incredible natural assets of the country, and embracing a global need for access to these incomparable ecological resources, is bright and attainable. Belize is sitting at a crossroads—wherein there is the promise and potential to act as a world leader in environmental research and as an agent for economic change in underdeveloped countries, and further inaction will only deprive the world further. The country is poised to architect enormous change internally and, ultimately, externally. It is a matter only of providing Belize's future, the young students with the drive to advance, innovate, and succeed, with a chance to do so, by giving them the singular tool they need most to succeed: real education.

²⁵ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2098.html>

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