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Quality education: a permanent challenge

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These days the farewell to the old year and the arrival of another summon to the review of some of the most significant stages and moments of a school period characterized by the implementation of the Third Improvement Process in General Education and the total integration of universities.

In this brief look it is also worth mentioning that Hurricane Irma –which affected the country a few days after the start of the school year– damaged a large number of the centers' infrastructure. In general education it affected 2,264 schools (of the more than 60,000 that exist) alone, and so far 78 percent of them has been recovered.

This situation caused that around 510 educational institutions to become evacuation centers, in which more than 50,000 people were assisted by pedagogical groups, executives, teachers and service workers, who stayed there before and after the passage of the devastating hurricane.

It is feasible to mention that even when 2017 ends, this is not the case with the school year, since it does not coincide with the fiscal year. However, from September to date, the country has celebrated dates of great historical significance, such as the first anniversary of the physical disappearance of Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz (November), and the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Che, in Bolivia (October).

Hence the permanent call upon the study of the thought of these two great men of the country's history.

Third improvement process: A medium-and-long-term task

The extension of the improvement process of the national educational system –which is being experimented in 68 centers of six provinces of the different educational levels three years ago– is nowadays a reality in 152 institutions of the country.

According to Silvia Navarro Quintero, director of the Central Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, the experience is carried out (in a staggered way) in 1st, 4th, 7th and 10th, that is, in the initial grades of each educational level, so that in three courses the entire education system will have been incorporated, including Early Childhood (previously preschool), and Technical and Professional Education, Special Education and Adult Education.

She said, "The improvement itself is worth it," especially in terms of updating textbooks, content, in terms of contextualizing what the child, adolescent, young people must learn in line with the transformations and social economic development.

Likewise, it is in line with the social demands and with the model of society needed today from the Guidelines of the Economic, Political and Social Policy of the Party and the Objectives of its First Conference.

Along with this task, the Ministry of Education also has among its priorities the training and qualification of the teaching staff, so last September two other pedagogical schools joined the existing 24, which have graduated more than 14,000 young people.

The head of the sector stressed, on more than one occasion, the importance of addressing this issue, because today around 18 percent of the teaching force that is in the classrooms does not have university titles.

If we manage that by 2020 -she said- a good part of these young people leave Higher Education centers, then we can count on more than 90 percent of our professors with university level, which will contribute to the quality of the teaching-educational process.

On the other hand, technical and professional education (ETP Spanish acronym) is constantly growing in order to meet the demand for skilled labor in all sectors of society, including the non-state sector of the economy.

Alexander Manso –department head of the ETP– said that today this education includes 103 specialties, 54 in the medium-technician category and 49 of qualified workers, and exhibits a cycle retention of 81.6 percent. This means that every 100 students only a bit more than 81 managed to graduate.

Rationality in resources and work force

Integration has characterized the work of Higher Education in recent years. In September, Cuban universities began the school year with this process concluded.

Of 69 centers and more than 200 faculties that existed, today these figures have been reduced to 50 and 160, respectively. Likewise, of the 12 Bodies of the Central Administration of the State

(OACE Spanish acronym) that had affiliated Higher Education institutions, they are only seven now.

In the last session of the National Assembly of People's Power, the deputy minister of the branch, Gil Ramón González, mentioned some advantages of the integration, among which highlights go to the rise in quality management. For example, in 2014, only 7 pedagogical careers were accredited, but by the end of 2017 they are already 24.

The process has also influenced the positive impact on the staffs and the improvement of the cadres; the increase in enrollments and in research and innovation projects; the takeoff of educational technology; the reduction of the workforce by more than 10 percent, as well as the more rational use of infrastructure, laboratories and equipment for common use.

One element worth highlighting is that all universities have significantly increased connectivity with the national network (Red Univ.) after been linked through optical fiber.

With respect to 2015, internet connection has grown three times in its total access and seven times through the centralized channel of the university network service, which favors more than 150,000 users.

The vice minister assured that the process has begun and there is still a long way to learn and do in a favorable atmosphere for its future institutional and political development and to improve its quality and relevance in solving the problems of each territory.

There are still many challenges, but undoubtedly the country is in a better situation to face them: qualified and committed force; indispensable material resources ensured, and the political will to carry forward whatever necessary transformations.

"Having a quality education, in the light of equity and inclusion is our banner," said Education Minister Ena Elsa Velázquez Cobiella, at the opening of the annual seminar to prepare the 2017-2018 school year. And without a doubt, they are working for that.

Translated by Jorge Mesa Benjamin / Cubasi Translation Staff

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