

Social Sector Practice

# Bringing major improvements to education in Colombia

Over the course of her eight-year tenure as Colombia's minister of education, Cecilia María Vélez White oversaw a massive overhaul of the country's approach to student enrollment and achievement.

*by Andres Cadena, Li-Kai Chen, Felipe Child, and Emma Dorn*

**Colombia suffered decades** of disappointing student outcomes and high turnover among education ministers before Cecilia María Vélez White assumed the post in 2002. During her eight-year tenure, she put in place new policies for resource allocation and student evaluations, and shaped the foundations for future change by building capacity and modernizing the education ministry. As a result, both enrollment and student outcomes saw major improvement (exhibit). Vélez White shared her insights and experience in the education sector with McKinsey.

**McKinsey:** What triggered the need for education reform in Colombia?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** It began in the 1990s, when Colombia's government made changes to the

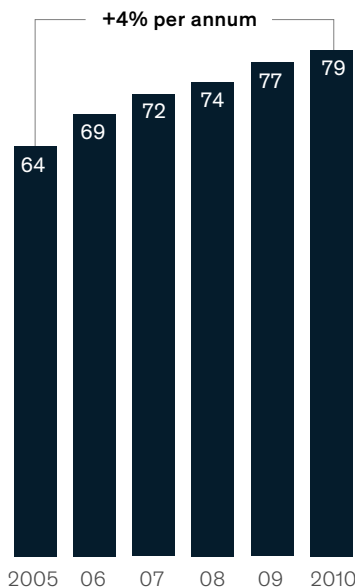
constitution, leading to a much more decentralized system. I was in the planning department at the time, and Colombia was in the midst of a very violent conflict. For a lot of people, the most important political issues were security, the economy, and employment—but we knew education would be key to the country's development. In 1994, the government passed a new law that launched our education-reform effort, which also used a decentralized framework.

However, not much happened between 1994 and 1998. Although our laws increased funding for education in that period, we didn't see an improvement in outcomes. The teacher's union was so powerful that the ministry was afraid to make decisions. That situation wasn't new: in 100 years, Colombia has had something like 120 ministers

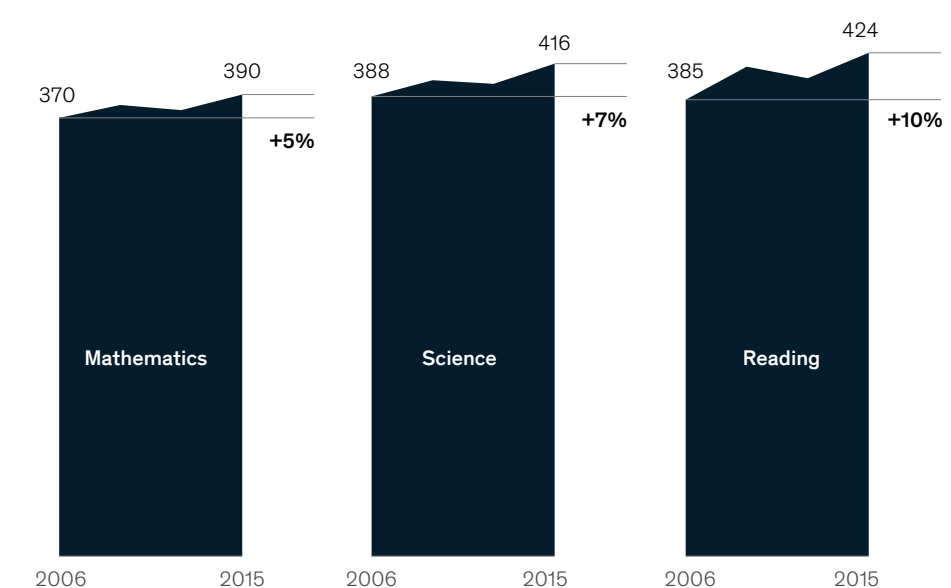
## Exhibit

### Colombia's education system saw major improvements from 2002 to 2010.

**Secondary enrollment, % of relevant population enrolled**



**Secondary education quality as measured by PISA,<sup>1</sup> score**



<sup>1</sup>Program for International Student Assessment.

Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; Program for International Student Assessment; UNESCO

of education because it has been so difficult to manage the sector.

**McKinsey:** That seems like a challenging situation for you to come into. When you first became education minister in 2002, what were your goals?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** We were very clear what we wanted. We had three goals: increase enrollment in secondary and higher education, improve quality through evaluations, and improve data-informed management across the education sector.

At the time, the focus was on providing resources to regions with low enrollment. We implemented a law in 2001 that turned this on its head and instead distributed resources according to the number of students enrolled. As a result, enrollment started going up. By 2010, secondary enrollment was nearly 80 percent, up from 64 percent in 2005.

To improve the quality of education, it was clear we needed to have clear standards and evaluations. To be able to understand what students were learning, we instituted examinations for all the students in the third, fifth, and ninth grades. This evaluation system provided information to teachers, principals, and administrators, and showed the broader public how the system was improving.

The third priority was to adjust the institutional framework of the strategy and improve management and information systems—so ensuring that we had up-to-date data to make decisions—and building capacity to implement those at the national and regional levels.

These goals stayed constant throughout my eight years as minister. People often want transformation to happen in a year or in the first few years of the government—but that is almost impossible. We succeeded because we stuck to our goals.

**McKinsey:** What kinds of support did you have for your goals? Was your success partly because President Álvaro Uribe cared about education?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** Education was very important to President Uribe. It was something that people didn't hear him talk about much, because the country was so focused on security policy. But he cared enough to bring me on and give me autonomy. He let me build my own team. He backed me very strongly—even in decisions that were very difficult or unpopular.

One result was that my staff was very good. There was no political interference in the nomination of my team; the president gave me the liberty to choose my own people. For example, someone who worked for me wasn't doing a good job, so I decided to fire her. She had a lot of congressmen backing her, and they menaced me. But the president backed my decision even though it meant confronting key political forces. That support made all the difference.

**McKinsey:** So you started out with two critical elements of successful government transformations: clear purpose and committed leadership and team. What did you do next?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** A major challenge was to face the teachers' union's monopolization of the public discussion with the ministry; the two sides were almost always at odds. One of the first things that changed was that we opened the discussion to multiple groups: civil, society, professional, and business. We focused the dialogue with the union on teachers' work conditions. We stopped fearing the union and instead started communicating with them better. We published more information, so the union had the opportunity to study the regulation projects in advance and could access the sector's information (one of the union's complaints was that it didn't have access to information about the education system).

But with that, we had to transform our internal processes, especially our system of information. We couldn't make good decisions because we didn't have accurate or timely data, or data was in silos. There were blockages, things took a long time, and we went around in circles because people worked outside the processes. In our transformation, we

**“Sometimes I had more information than the secretaries of the region, because I went to speak directly with the people.”**

organized the structure according to the processes, and we taught people how to work together.

**McKinsey:** It sounds like you spent significant energy setting up the foundation for change—building your team’s capabilities, ensuring information flow, streamlining processes—and that these things facilitated the transformation. What other factors contributed to your success?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** From 1998 to 2002, prior to being appointed minister, I was the secretary of education for Bogotá, Colombia’s capital. So Bogotá was like a pilot for the national reform. There were several benefits to launching education reforms in Bogotá: it is the largest city in the country, it has money, and the mayors and technical teams were good during that period.

**McKinsey:** How did your experience in Bogotá prepare you for the national role?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** For one thing, we understood how to coordinate with the local authorities. I knew how they operated—often in ways the national ministry wasn’t aware of before I arrived.

But the real key was understanding how decentralization had created a perverse incentive system. We were distributing national money

according to poverty, trying to help schools with low enrollment to bring in more students. But in effect, this incentivized those schools to keep enrollment low, because they’d get more money. They had no real incentive to grow enrollment, because it wouldn’t increase their income. Usually people said, “Well, we have to enroll more teachers.” And I said, “No, you have to enroll more students. And if you enroll more students, then you can enroll more teachers.” It really changed the way we managed the sector.

Based on my experience in Bogotá, I knew that there were ways to distribute funds according to the number of the students. Taking into account Bogotá’s experience, in 2001, the national government passed a law adjusting the original decentralization law that said we were going to distribute resources according to the number of students. It was very important as it allowed us to put students at the center of our policy. Our approach was really simple, and we found the instrument to develop it in the 2001 law.

**McKinsey:** Understanding what the education systems looked like in Colombia’s regions, how did that impact your communication strategy?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** I learned in Bogotá that you must speak a lot and improve communication at all levels of the system. In Bogotá, I had a

monthly meeting with all the school principals. At the national level, my partners were the secretaries of education of each region. Every two months, I met with them in person for two or three days. I realized we needed to hear them more than they needed to hear us. As we decentralized the administration, it became increasingly important to improve the capabilities of the regional education secretaries.

We also held large forums with teachers to discuss policy, both in Bogotá and across the country. Every Saturday, the president traveled around the country to a different region and I always went with him. We got to hear from people, and they spoke about the problems of the sector. Sometimes I had more information than the secretaries of the region, because I went to speak directly with the people.

It helped in many ways: managing the union, for example. We had a lot of information about what the teachers were thinking. Sometimes we would say, “Well, this is serious. We have to do something.” In my eight years as minister of education, we didn’t have a national teachers’ strike. We had partial strikes, but those teachers had a reason—the payment didn’t arrive on time or something like that. I said to my team, “If we don’t solve the problem, I’m going to strike with them.”

We also took on board the input we received. For example, we would talk about evaluating competence, but the teachers had a negative

reaction to the word *competence*. We hadn’t noticed that before, so we adjusted the conversation to talk about students’ *performance* instead.

**McKinsey:** You were very successful in your role. What happened after you left? How did you ensure progress was sustained?

**Cecilia María Vélez White:** We invested a lot in the transition, preparing documents to hand over and meeting extensively with the people who were taking over from us. The basic principles that we put in place are still there. The ministry is much stronger than it was before. The evaluation system is still in place and working well. The information systems are improving. There have been small changes in the enrollment formula, and they have introduced some political compromises, but overall things are working. In some areas, there are also new and better programs. And Colombia continues to improve on international assessments. Our transformation really delivered, although we still have a long way to go.

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For more on the elements of successful transformations, see *Delivering for citizens: How to triple the success rate of government transformations*, May 2018, McKinsey.com, which describes three elements illustrated by the Colombia case: committed leadership, clear purpose, and compelling communication.

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