# What Factors Influence Satisfaction with Public Schools in Latin America and the Caribbean?

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Key Findings:

- Age and education level positively predict a person's satisfaction with public schools

- People satisfied with local public road, water, and health services in a country are more likely to be satisfied with their public schools

- Concerns about corruption in the education sector are associated with lower satisfaction in local schools

- Belief in the government to do what is right is a significant predictor of satisfaction with public schools
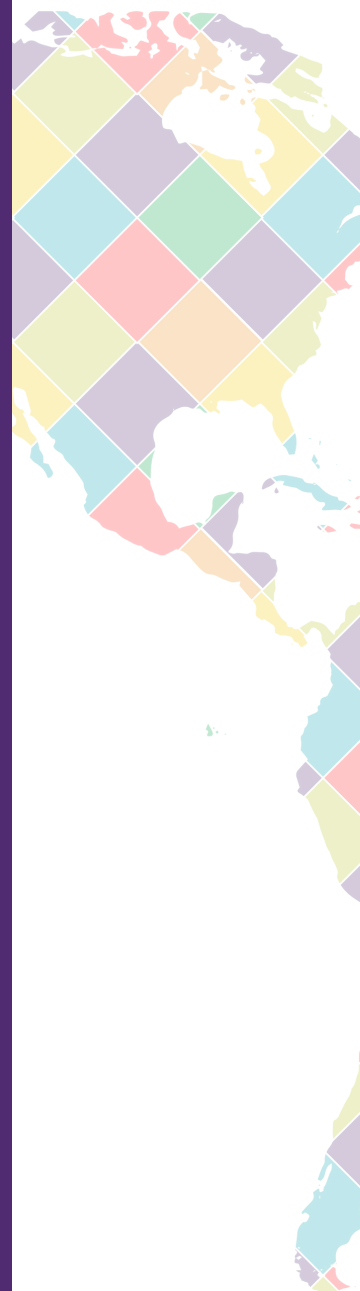
With the quality of democracy in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region declining over the last decade, it is imperative for leaders to know what their constituencies need so they can improve those areas of life.[1] One sector of public life – schools – provides a useful indication of whether citizens are satisfied with governance.[2] More specifically, since public schools are a government service, citizens' perceptions of these schools are a direct assessment of their belief in the government to deliver sufficient public goods.[3] These assessments shape citizens' evaluations of national leaders.[4] Additionally, satisfaction with public schools can be an important indicator of the general mental and emotional health climate of a region.[5] In that broader sense, satisfaction ratings for public schools provide important insight into larger societal dynamics.[6] It is thus valuable to examine satisfaction with public schools in the LAC region.

This *Insights* report analyzes predictors of individuals' satisfaction with public schools. These data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic; although not directly considered in this report, the pandemic may have influenced the results, which is important to keep in mind. The 2021 round of LAPOP's AmericasBarometer survey measured satisfaction with public schools by asking the following question:

SD3NEW2: [And thinking about this city/area where you live…] And with the quality of public schools? Are you…

Individuals answered on a 1-4 scale, where 1 indicated "Very satisfied" and 4 indicated "Very dissatisfied."
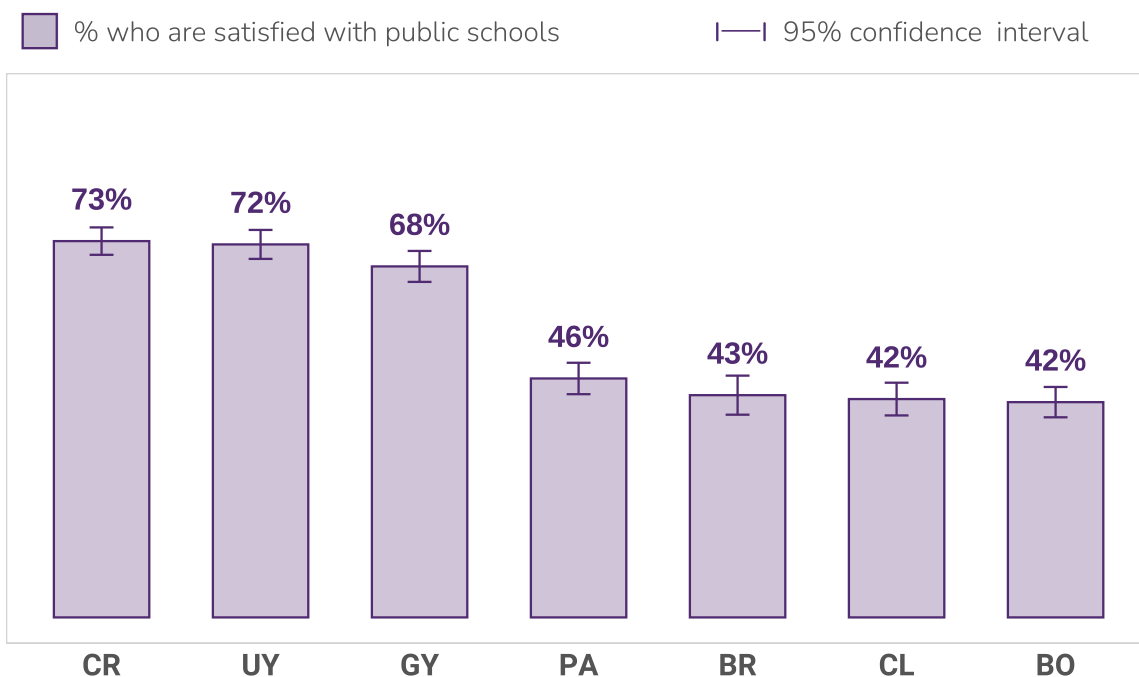
Satisfaction with Public Schools by Country

Figure 1[7] is a comparative chart (with 95% confidence intervals in gray) showing public school satisfaction rates – that is, the percentage of those who report being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the quality of public schools where they live – among the public in seven Latin America and Caribbean countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Guyana, Panama, and Uruguay. All data are from the 2021 AmericasBarometer; the question was asked only in the countries shown in the figure. In all, 9,620 people responded to the question. The pattern seen in public school satisfaction rates places the countries into two, distinct buckets. The first bucket has a public school satisfaction rate of approximately 67-73% and includes Costa Rica, Guyana, and Uruguay. The second bucket has a public school satisfaction rate of approximately 41-47% and includes Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, and Panama. Much of the literature on this topic indicates that school satisfaction is primarily associated with an individual school's communication strength – that is, the frequency with which parents have the opportunity to interact with their child's school personnel and the frequency of correspondence that parents receive from their child's school system.[8]

This local-level factor does not easily explain why such a stark national-level difference exists in public school satisfaction ratings between the two buckets in Figure 1. Global rankings by the *US News and World Report* also fail to provide an explanation for the pattern in Figure 1; those rankings indicate that Brazil and Chile have stronger education systems than Costa Rica, Guyana, and Uruguay.[9] While the cross-national differences warrant more attention, the remainder of this report focuses on individual-level predictors of variation in responses among those in the LAC region.

Figure 1.

Satisfaction with Public Schools

Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

## Sociodemographic Factors and Public School Satisfaction

To evaluate who is satisfied with public schools, I start by using an OLS regression analysis to assess the variable's relationship with age, education, wealth, and gender.[10]Country fixed effects are included, but not shown in the figure.

Figure 2[11]shows that on average in the LAC region, those in the oldest age bracket are 0.14 units less satisfied with public schools in the region (on the 1-4 satisfaction scale), compared to those in the youngest age bracket. A similar negative correlation exists with regard to level of education; in general, the higher the education level a person has, the less they tend to be satisfied with the public schools in their area.

Finally, wealth and gender identification are not statistically significant predictors of public school satisfaction for individuals in the LAC region.

Figure 2.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Predictors of Satisfaction with Public Schools
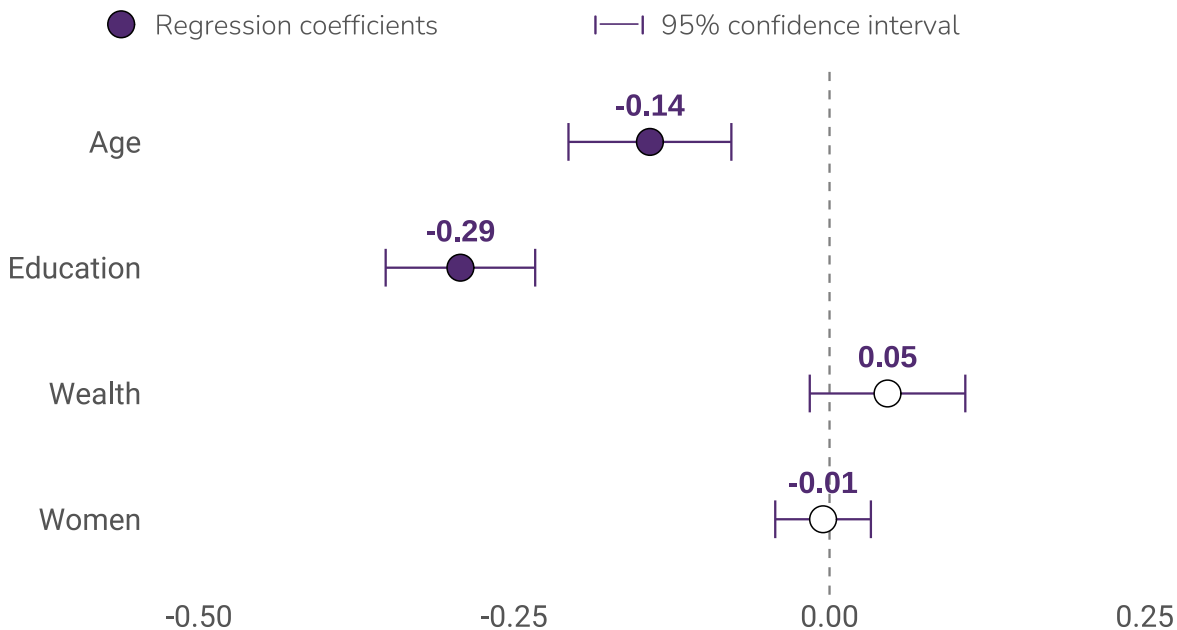
Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

Additional Explanations of Public School Satisfaction

In this section, I consider several additional factors that could be related to evaluations of local public schools: satisfaction with other local services and views of corruption in public education. The goal is to measure how close a connection there is between evaluations of different public services and to determine the link between views of corruption in education and assessments of local education service provision.

My first expectation is that satisfaction with other services – local public roads, water, and health services – will be linked with satisfaction for public schools.[12] Some scholars note that a good predictor of satisfaction with public schools is the quality of other often-interrelated public services in their region (e.g., the quality of roads connected to schools).[13] I test the traveling capacity of this finding to the 2021 AmericasBarometer.

My second expectation is that concerns about corruption in the public education sector will be connected to evaluations of local public education service provision. Previous research indicates that a strong predictor of a person's current satisfaction with public schools is that person's general belief about the general education system, regardless of where those beliefs may stem from or how evidence-based their beliefs are.[14] I operationalize concern about corruption in the public school sector with a question that asks individuals to identify which of seven public domains they believe is most affected by corruption.[15]

Figure 3 is based on a regression analysis that contains the same variables included in the analysis for Figure 2, plus operationalizations of the concepts tested in this section. The results show that evaluation of services in the domain of roads, water, and health are all positive, statistically significant predictors of the dependent variable. This comports with prior research.[16] It is interesting to note that of the three additional public services assessed, satisfaction with public water services seemed to have a weaker effect on public school satisfaction than satisfaction with public road or health services. Figure 3 also displays a negative, statistically significant correlation between satisfaction with public schools and the belief that the education sector is the most corrupt sector of the government. This is also as expected, as it aligns with prior research.[17] A person's satisfaction with public schools is influenced by their overall beliefs about the education system, so it follows that a belief that the education sector is the most corrupt sector of the government is a negative, statistically significant predictor of satisfaction with public schools.

Furthermore, in robustness checks not shown here, I find that each of the new variables added to Figure 3 did not seem to influence each other significantly when analyzed simultaneously (versus on their own) in the regression analysis. I conclude that each of these variables independently matters in predicting a person's satisfaction with public schools.

Figure 3.

Public Service Predictors of
Satisfaction with Public Schools
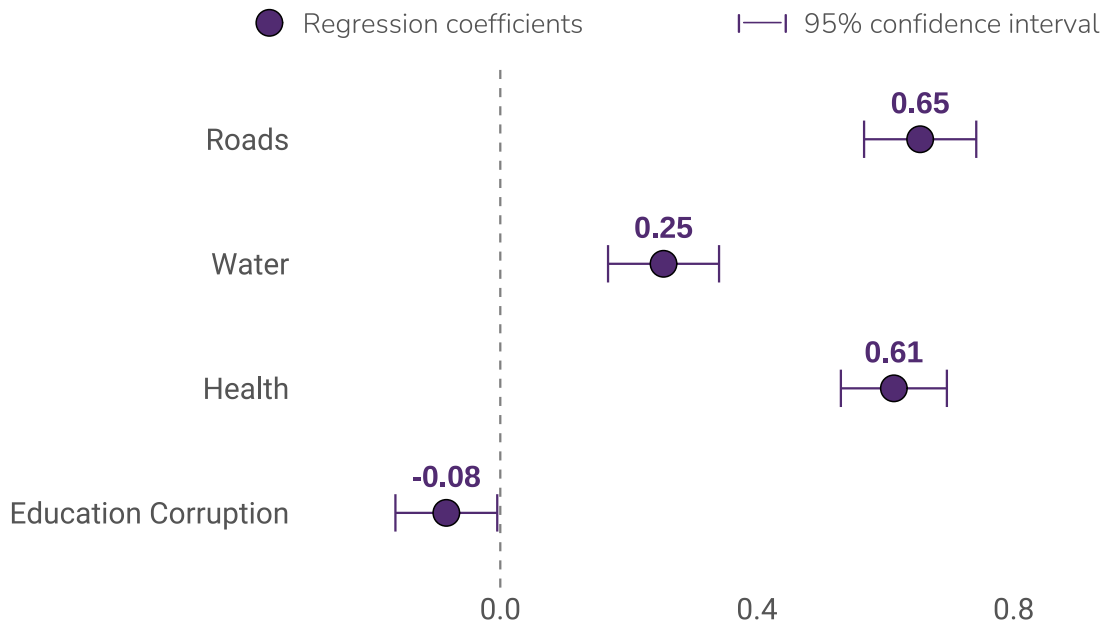
Source: AmericasBarometer, 2021

To extend this analysis, I also tested this regression with a measure of how much an individual trusts the government to do what is right.[18] When included in the analysis below, it revealed a positive significant correlation with public school satisfaction (coefficient = 0.19). The coefficients for satisfaction with public road, water, and health services remained positive and statistically significant. However, the addition of the government trust factor made the corruption in education variable's correlation statistically insignificant. Further research is warranted into why trust in the government is so influential in public school satisfaction modeling as well as how that measure connects to concern about corruption in education. It may be that increasing trust in governance and government at the national level has important implications for increasing satisfaction rates with local public schools.

Discussion

This *Insights* report shows that satisfaction with other local public services – especially health and roads – is the strongest predictor of a person's likelihood to be satisfied with public schools in the country. Additionally, I find that people who view education as the most corrupt government sector were more likely to be dissatisfied with public schools in the country, though the substantive size of this effect is small. Furthermore, older and more educated people are more likely to be dissatisfied with public schools in the country.

The results of the analyses confirmed expectations that people who are satisfied with other public goods are more likely to be satisfied with public schools. This makes sense to the extent that a person's belief in their government to provide for them encompasses, and is interconnected with, all aspects of public good, from infrastructure to education to health.[19]

In part due to the limited number of relevant topics contained within the 2021 AmericasBarometer questionnaire, my analysis leaves important questions unanswered regarding satisfaction with public schools. For example, it would be worth investigating what specific expectations the public has of public schools, given that these expectations could significantly influence how people respond to the satisfaction question. Additionally, it would be worth investigating whether these results differ between parent and non-parent populations and across subgroups who send their children to private versus public schools.[20] It could also be useful for future research to consider how racial identity and religiosity predict public school satisfaction, as several LAC countries have a history of social exclusion for social minority groups and that may influence how members of these groups are treated by public school systems.[21]

This report reveals significant gaps in satisfaction across and within countries in the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region. Knowing what drives that variation is imperative to understanding citizens' experiences and views of governance, particularly in the domain of education. These views matter because education matters, and because they provide insight into how LAC citizens view their government's overall capacity to care for the public.[22] To the degree that political leaders are responsive and held accountable, they have electoral incentives to address these issues.[23]

Notes

1. Zovatto 2020.

2. Bland et al. 2021.

3. Bland et al. 2021.

4. Bland et al. 2021.

5. Daily et al. 2020.

6. Daily et al. 2020.

7. All figures in this report use the following AmericasBarometer dataset version: Merged_LAPOP_AmericasBarometer_2021_v1.2.

8. Bejou 2013; Desianti, Nurlaila, and Tukiran 2021; Griffith 1996; Oberfield 2019.

9. US News 2022.

10. These independent variables were re-coded and re-scaled from 0 to 1. The dependent variable is coded so that 1 represents an evaluation of "Very dissatisfied," 2 represents "dissatisfied," 3 is "satisfied," and 4 is "Very satisfied." Age is a cohort variable, grouping the individuals' ages in years. Movement from 0 to 1 in age is from the youngest category to the oldest category. Wealth is measured based on a factor analysis of household possessions, such as a car, TV, refrigerator, etc. Movement from 0 to 1 in wealth is from the least wealthy to the wealthiest. Education is categorical by the highest level of education obtained by the individual. As it is coded here, the lowest category is no or only primary education while the highest is post-secondary education. Therefore, movement from 0 to 1 in education is from no or only primary education to post-secondary education. Gender is a dichotomous measure labeled as "Woman": self-identified women and those who responded "other" are represented by a 1, while men are represented by 0. Individuals who identify as non-binary/other are included in the "woman" category because they appear in the dataset in insufficient numbers to analyze independently.

11. In Figure 2, the dots represent the change in predicted probability associated with each variable, and the bars represent the 95% confidence interval around that estimate. Coefficients represent maximal effects; the coefficient for age, for example, indicates the change in probability of reporting satisfaction with public schools between the youngest cohort and oldest. Dots to the right of the red line signify positive relationships, and dots to the left of the line indicate a negative association. When the bar for an independent variable does not intersect the red vertical line, that variable is statistically significant (p < .05).

12. These independent variables were re-coded and re-scaled from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating a response of "Very dissatisfied" and 1 indicating a response of "Very satisfied." Satisfaction with public road services is measured with the following variable: **SD2NEW2**. And thinking about the city or area where you live… Are you very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with the condition of the streets, roads, and highways? Satisfaction with public health services is measured with the variable **SD6NEW2**. And with the quality of public medical and health services? Are you…[Read alternatives]. The response options are identical to those of **SD2NEW2**. Satisfaction with public water services is measured with the variable **SD5NEW2**. And with the quality of your water service? Are you… [Read alternatives]. The response options are identical to those of **SD2NEW2** and **SD6NEW2**.

13. Lewis and Pattinasarany 2009.

14. Griffith 2006; Song, An, and Meier 2020; Thompson 2003.

15. This independent variable was re-coded as a binary variable (0, 1). The most corrupt sector is measured with the variable: **SOC2ACOR**. And thinking now about corruption, in which of these areas do you think there is the most corruption? [Read alternatives. Mark only one answer]. The response options include (1) Education, (2) Health, (3) Water, (4) Electricity, (5) Transportation and roads, (6) Social assistance/welfare, and (7) The environment. I coded the responses of individuals who answered (1) Education as a 1. I coded the responses of individuals who answered any of the other six sectors as 0.

16. Lewis and Pattinasarany 2009.

17. Griffith 2006; Song, An, and Meier 2020; Thompson 2003.

18. This independent variable was re-coded and re-scaled from 0 to 1. An individual's belief in the government to do what is right is measured by the variable: **ANESTG**. How much do you trust the national government to do what is right? [Read alternatives]. The response options for this variable are: (1) A lot, (2) Somewhat, (3) A little, and (4) Not at all. I coded the responses of individuals who answered (1) A lot as a 1. I coded the responses of individuals who answered (4) Not at all as a 0.

19. See work by Bland et al. 2021; Griffith 2006; Lewis and Pattinasarany 2009; Song, An, and Meier 2020; Thompson 2003.

20. The 2021 AmericasBarometer survey asks whether there are children under the age of 13 in the house, but it does not distinguish between parents and relatives of those children and does not ask about what type of school (public or private) the children attend.

21. Gandelman, Hugo, Ripani 2011; Rice 2017.

22. Bland et al. 2021.

23. Bland et al. 2021.

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