

## **Guatemala signs Government Agreement canceling school fees.**

The document reaffirms that primary education must be compulsory and free for all. *Colectivo de Educación para Todas y Todos* celebrates the news and plans the way to monitor the new agreement implementation.

November 3, 2008

After the reports and pressure with regard to the Government non-compliance of its obligation to guarantee a compulsory and free primary education for all, on September 12 Government authorities signed Government Agreement Nº 226, canceling the school fees established in 1968. The document reaffirms free primary education and expressly forbids any kind of fees.

The text assures that “the entrance, enrolment and continuance at public preschool, primary and secondary education centers are not subject, conditioned or related to any compulsory or voluntary payment”. It also establishes that “no student shall be affected by her/his partial or total marks or in her/his classes’ attendance for not buying school supplies, not wearing uniforms or for her/his non contributions to activities that require economic resources”.

Although the Guatemalan Constitution establishes free education –as the Agreement itself declares-, in practice that right is not fulfilled in the country. “‘Voluntary’ fees were allowed, directly affecting the families living in poverty”, explains Victor Cristales, from *Colectivo de Educación para Todas y Todos*, Guatemala. “That is the consequence of the lack of investments in education. Principals and teachers are driven to the practice of collecting since the allocated budget does not suffice to keep schools open”.

### **Say NO to school fees.**

In that scenario, the Guatemalan *Colectivo de Educación para Todas y Todos*, member of the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education, has mobilized with the aim of reporting on payment collection at public schools of the country and at the same time, to put pressure on the Government to guarantee free education for all.

Among other activities, during the Global Action Week 2008 –whose main theme was “Quality Education for All: Put an End to Exclusion Now!” - the coalition started a campaign for free education, against school fees and for a larger budget for education. In order to disseminate information on the campaign, schools and communities were visited and films were shot: 18 videos were produced.

In July, Mr. Vernor Muñoz, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, visited Guatemala and verified that many families pay for various school fees and expenses that range between small contributions up to teachers’ fees payment. On said occasion, Muñoz sent an official communication where he expressed his concern with regard to the lack of free education in the country, the reduced investments in

education, indigenous people's right to education and the difficult working conditions of school teachers in the country.

### **New challenges**

By signing the Government Agreement, the Guatemalan Colectivo de Educación para Todas y Todos celebrates this achievement of laws and affirms that it is the result of the advocacy done by civil society that over many years has been working so hard to achieve this goal.

Nevertheless, the Forum is already planning to monitor the implementation of the above mentioned new law in order to obtain a change in the daily life of boys, girls and youths in the country. That challenge has been the topic of the Workshop on Free Education held on October, 4 held by CLADE jointly with the national coalition.

According to Colectivo, guaranteeing the budget allocation on the part of the National Congress is a major challenge. Moreover, budget allocation must take into account not only the enrolled students but also the ones who are outside the school system, thus expanding the coverage of public education and securing the necessary human and material resources.

At the same time and during the workshop it was stated that the Ministry of Education needs to have the technical capacity to execute resources, which must be properly used in a transparent manner. To that end, it is necessary to monitor their course and use.

The Forum also emphasized the importance that community individuals –students, teachers and principals, families and school communities- get together not only with the aim of monitoring but also to become allies in the fight for the right to education.

As a result, Colectivo has an intense agenda ahead. It will include strategies for the dissemination of information on the government agreement, sensitization campaigns on the issue, political advocacy and the media.