BETWEEN 1950 AND 1980 social inequality denied the poor access to education. Today, when policy is much more enlightened, Brazil suffers from the educational deficit caused by its history. The shortage of human capital hinders economic development. For example, according to a survey by the National Confederation of Industry (CNI), there is a shortage of 150,000 engineers. Quite simply, the root of the shortages of skilled labor, in this and other areas, is that Brazilian basic education—from preschool through high school—does not prepare students to go to college. According to IBRE researcher Fernando de Holanda Barbosa Filho, because thousands of young people are not learning “they feel discouraged and drop out to get any job. Enrollment in high schools reaches only 51% of those eligible,” he says. The goal, according to the National Education Plan (PNE) 2011–20, is to increase high school enrollment to 85% by 2020 and get more 15- to 17-year-olds into school by 2016.

The task is arduous. Since the 1990s under the Cardoso administration, Brazil has significantly expanded elementary education—currently, according to the National Household Survey of 2011 (PNAD), 98.2% of children between 6 and 14 are in school. This expansion was partly due to investments made by the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Fundamental Education and Valorization of Teachers (Fundef) begun in 1996, which pooled resources from states, municipalities, and the federal government. In 2007, it was renamed the Fund for the Maintenance and Development of Basic Education and Valorization of Teachers (Fundeb) and now also covers preschool and high school. Another important step was the creation of tools to assess student performance and define policies for improving education. The main ones are the Evaluation System of Basic Education (Saeb), the Brazil Exam, and the Index of Basic Education Development (IDEB).

“The Brazilian educational system has not kept pace with demographic changes . . . . In the 1990s, there were major improvements. This does not mean that education has changed dramatically, but an institutional framework was built. Progress will take time; some is already happening,” says IBRE researcher Fernando Veloso.

Despite clear progress, the changes so far are not enough. Brazil still faces enormous challenges. Brazil is currently ranked 53rd by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organization for
Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), behind such neighbors as Mexico (49th), Uruguay (47th), and Chile (45th). Topping the list is China. “Brazil has been one of the three countries that have improved their evaluation the most since 2000—but that is because there is still such huge scope for progress,” says Veloso.

As for other regions of Latin America trying to catch up, the key to progress is to find ways to improve the quality of education in order to train a large cadre of skilled workers, technicians, engineers, and scientists to meet labor market demand. “It’s very hard to expand both the supply and the quality [of education services],” Barbosa Filho says. “If the system is very good, it is easy to replicate it. But if it has only a few islands of quality, as shown by the results of the National High School Exam (Enem), you need to rethink what should be done.”

According to these experts, deficiencies are related to empowerment and training of teachers, resource management, and high dropout rates. “Maybe it’s time to work on tracking each student, identifying their problems and trying to resolve them. The worst students are simply abandoned,” says Veloso, who also argues for increasing school hours and dramatically changing pedagogy courses. Teacher training, he says, “is pure ideology with hardly any practical experience in the classroom.” Barbosa Filho points out that “The majority of teachers did poorly in college. Obviously, teachers’ low pay and prestige also explain why we cannot produce schools that offer good education.”

**INVESTMENT VERSUS MANAGEMENT**

OECD’s *Education at a Glance*, published in September 2012, shows that Brazil is investing more in education. In 2009, it spent 5.5% of GDP on education compared to 3.2% in 2000. Nevertheless, quality may not be related to the resources allocated for a particular purpose. The formula for success is good management. “Money and quality do not necessarily go together,” Barbosa Filho observes. “Take, for example, states where per student spending is much higher than the national average, like Roraima and Rondônia states, in the northern region; even with those resources, education in these states is not the best education in the country. They are throwing money out of the window. In Brazil, we spend too much and spend it badly,” says Barbosa Filho. Veloso agrees. He argues that resources should follow successful programs: “We have to use successful initiatives, such as those increasing school hours, maybe apply those experiences in schools with weaker performance and then expand them.”

**EDUCATION COMES FROM HOME**

However, it takes more than management and resources to encourage learning. It is also up to parents, especially the lower middle class, to motivate their children in terms of the importance of a better education,” says Veloso. Lack of awareness of the relevance of education is a cultural problem, but there are signs this is changing, thanks to the increase in schooling, and consequently incomes. “Studies show that the socioeconomic environment directly affects student performance. Learning is more difficult in areas where families have lower per capita income,” Veloso explains. He points out that young people often need to get a job early in life to help support their families. The good news is that this problem will tend to diminish over time. “There is nothing more convincing of the importance of education than what we feel in our pocket. I believe this new generation is already feeling it and they will pass it along to their children,” he concludes.