

Absent sponsors: the neglect suffered by the education system of Honduras

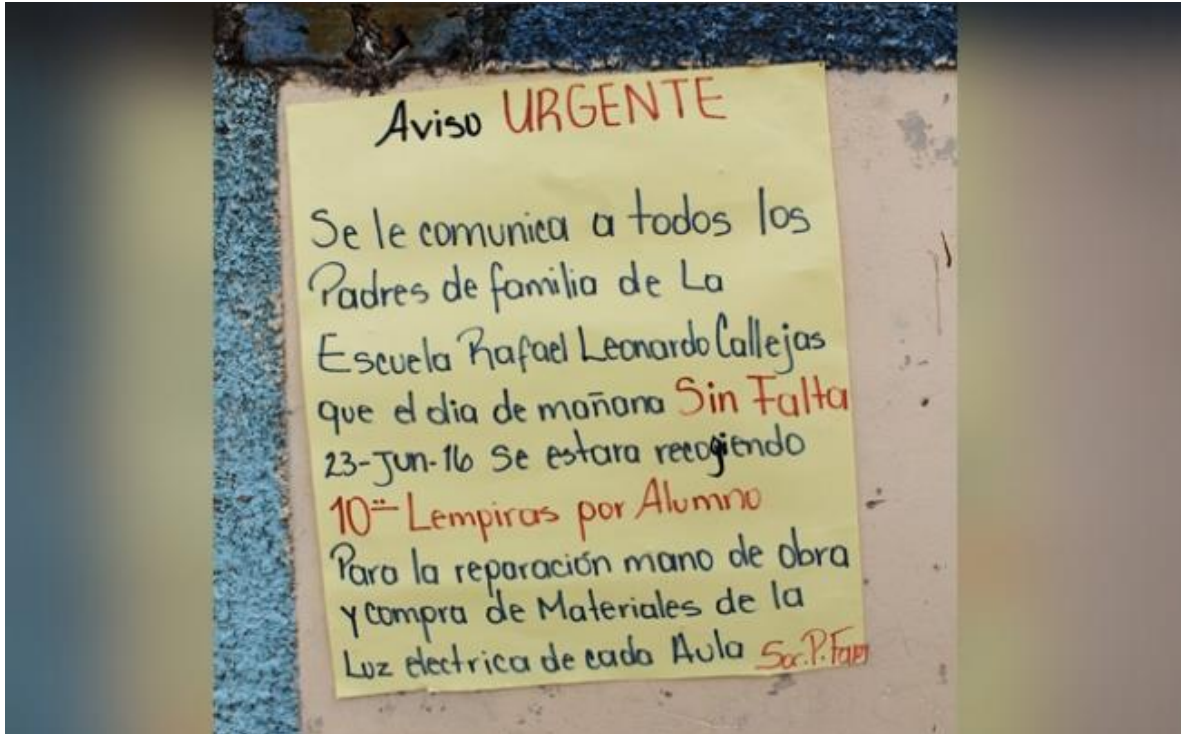


Photo: "Urgent notice: We communicate to all parents that the Rafael Leonardo Callejas school that tomorrow, June 23, 2016, we will be collecting 10 lempiras per student for the reparation of the labor and materials for electricity in each classroom." A sign put up on the wall of the school by the Parent's Society asking for help to fix the electricity problem in the school.

Thousands of Honduran communities have allowed public schools founded in the last three decades to carry the names of corrupt presidents, diplomats, public ministers, mayors, and even some politician's family members – with the expectation that they will receive decent facilities for their children's education and instruction. Time has proven, however, that this is not the best decision. Articles 151 and 153 of the Constitution of the Republic recognize education as an essential role of the State. However, many schools in the country reflect neglect and a lack of interest, not only by the government but also by those individuals who agreed to support the preschools, elementary schools or high schools, the majority of whom are powerful politicians.

"You see the beautiful school and its clean classrooms with trellises and whiteboards, but all of that has been done by the parents. The roof was contributed by parents, the desks, many have been donated by parents, and the teachers' chairs by them also. They say that teachers deserve a good chair", said Brígida Valdez, vice principal of the Nora Gúnera de Melgar Castro School in the Arnulfo Cantarero López neighborhood of the Honduran capital. Parents were also responsible for replacing the school's wooden doors with metal doors.

At the height of the campaign

A prime example of a corrupt household name is that of Rafael Leonardo Callejas, former president of Honduras, who was accused of accepting millions of dollars' worth of bribes from media outlets for the broadcasting rights to soccer games featuring Honduras's national team. Despite his sordid career, there are currently dozens of schools around the country that don the name of Callejas and his family members including his wife Nora de Melgar.

In February of 1990, a few days after President Callejas had been inaugurated, a school called "Doña Nora" was founded. Even then, the school did not meet minimum educational standards, and for two years it operated out of private homes. As well as being the president's wife, its namesake, Doña Nora, was the mayor of Honduras's capital city, yet the children of the school had to wait two years to have their own building. Even then, the building would have been impossible without the work of the school's principal and parents.

"In 1992, the FHIS (Honduran Foundation for Social Investment) started the first phase of construction and in 1994 they finished the building", said Brigida Valdez, the school's vice principal. *For her, the parents' help has been vital in maintaining the facilities. "With the free tuition funds [a government program schools can apply to that provides funds for school maintenance projects], we paved the floor of the patio because the children came to school nice and clean and returned home with their clothes full of dirt from when they were playing", expressed the teacher.*

And doña Nora?

Considering Nora and her family have always had political and economic power, Revistazo asked the teacher what Nora de Melgar had contributed to the school. She responded that the former first lady, former mayor, former congresswoman, former member of the Central American Parliament, and former presidential candidate has not been very generous with the educational institution that bears her name.

"Three years ago, she brought us some encyclopedias that we have in the library. Last year she was here on a littering campaign, and they had a meeting here. We publically made a pledge to collaborate with her, and she asked us for an estimate to paint the school. We gave her the quote, and she helped us," said the vice principal.

She explained that the community started working to fund the school when Nora was in the middle of the political campaign that would make her the mayor of Tegucigalpa and **"we chose the name in view of the fact that there are many nationalist politicians here,"** she stated.

There is a surplus of need

Brígida held that the school needs a guard, and the parents overexert themselves to make sure the building is not left alone at night. They are afraid that someone will steal the 16 computers they received from the government in 2009. **"The first computers were purchased for the school with the help of a congressman, and later in 2009 [the Presidential] administration included us in their project,"** said the teacher.

She explained that the current and previous presidential administrations did not give them any computers, and of the 16 computers they received in 2009, one is already broken beyond repair.

The teacher said that at the beginning of 2015, congresswoman Lena Gutiérrez donated 100 school desks, and finally this year the district directorate sent them 95 more, **"now we have new school desks that might not be the best quality but it is up to the teachers to take care of them because the kids will grab them and all you are left with is the little table [that was attached to the chair]," she claimed.**

Likewise, she said that the Minister of Education had donated materials to them but unfortunately the children still had to work with used textbooks. The math and Spanish textbooks have guides for

classroom development, but they have been scratched out. In other words, the students are using secondhand materials.

But the Callejas School is worse

“Our school is named Rafael Leonardo Callejas in honor of the former president, and we have never had a visit from Callejas. We have been to his house, and he did not even let us in to talk to him. When we were celebrating an anniversary we sent him countless notes, and he never helped us in any way,” said Ana Karina David, director of the school located in the Smith 1 neighborhood of Comayagüela, Honduras.

In 1992, the government constructed the walls and roof of what is now the Callejas School on a community lot. It was a room without a partition or a window, just a perimeter wall with a dirt floor. But with the efforts of parents and teachers the facilities changed.

“The school will be 24 years old and we have never received help from Mr. Rafael Leonardo Callejas, but we have moved forward with the help of the parents and teachers,” Karina recalls. She says they do not receive the support they need from the government or private businesses. **“The only thing we receive from the Minister of Education is the teachers’ paychecks,”** she said.

That is why, she said, the school lacks a computer, a printer and ink. The children even have to transcribe their exam questions as the teacher dictates them, like in old times.

“We have not received even a piece of chalk from the Minister of Education. As you can see, the school has been painted. We did it by selling tamales, donuts, popsicles, shaved ice. We did it on the street during the weekends outside of school hours because teachers are not allowed to handle funds,” she stated.

In contrast to her current reality the teacher said, **“I worked in a rural area in a school called Republic of Japan and the school was full. We had a tennis court and a volleyball court. We had help for the children. They received backpacks at the beginning of the year filled with school supplies from the list of things that the teacher requested and if we had an anniversary the Japanese embassy came and I didn’t have to make it happen,”** she said.

There is a neighboring school, she said, named Republic of Guatemala. Ambassadors visit the school and keep an eye on it to offer their support. **“And the difference is, what are we going to get from someone who’s corrupt? It’s pathetic,”** asserted the teacher who fixed her eyes for a moment on the transparency mural set up in her office. **“But thank God we have that mural open to the public so that anyone who wants to can see it, we don’t hide anything and the activities are done alongside the parents”** she stated.

They obtain some school supplies with the 30 lempiras (about \$1.30) that the cafeteria generates daily. Two hundred thirty-seven children from low income families attend the school and the majority comes from the most marginalized communities of El Carrizal, a neighborhood in the northern part of Comayagüela. The parents handle the money, said Francisca Leonila Valladares, treasurer of the Parents Society. She confirmed the lack of attention received by the school.

Mrs. Leonila said that the payment for security and cleaning services is made from the thirty five lempiras contributed by each parent monthly. From this money, they also purchase soap, brooms and mops. She stated that they collect a total of 5,500 lempiras (about \$235), which means their two employees do not receive even a third of minimum wage.

Ten lempiras to repair electrical systems

“The parents of the Rafael Leondardo Callejas School are informed that tomorrow, June 23, 2016, without fail, 10 lempiras will be collected from students to pay for the repair of and purchasing of supplies for the electricity in each classroom,” says a sign that was hung up on the wall of the school by representatives of the Parents Society.

We asked about the sign, and Karina informed us that a few days earlier, a short circuit burned the electrical system and the cost for the repair would be 5,000 lempiras. However, she said that the uncle of one of the students offered to repair the damages for 2,300 lempiras, and he would also provide the wiring and other used materials himself.

She justified the Parents Society’s collection knowing that otherwise, the children would continue to have class in the dark.

Dinora Velásquez, the mother of a sixth grader, complained about the situation, but she said that in light of the lack of attention that school receives from the government, the parents are used to being asked for help.

She says that taking into account the neglect of the school and the inappropriate reputation of Mr. Callejas, she would agree to change the of the school, an opinion that is also shared by Marina Ruiz and Leonila Valladares, two other mothers at the school.