

Overview of K-12 Schooling in Costa Rica

I. Structure of the Education System

A. Education in Costa Rica is both free and mandatory for all citizens of the country (CostaRica.com).

B. Grade Levels

1. The public education system consists of six years of public elementary school and five to six years of high school (CostaRica.com).
2. The K-12 school system is divided into preschool (under age 7), primary school (ages 7 to 12), lower-secondary school, and upper-secondary school. Preschool, primary school, and lower-secondary school are compulsory, and they, as well as upper-secondary school, are free and funded by the government (Andrés and Del Valle).
3. Primary and lower-secondary school levels are composed of three cycles. Cycle I (first, second, and third grades) and Cycle II (fourth, fifth, and sixth grades) are both included in primary school. Secondary education consists of two cycles, Cycle III and Cycle IV. Cycle III (seventh, eighth, and ninth grades) is the last compulsory cycle. Upon completion of Cycle II, students receive a primary school diploma (Andrés and Del Valle).
4. Cycle IV is subdivided into three streams: the academic stream, the arts stream, and the technical stream (Andrés and Del Valle).
5. The first three years of high school consist of general education, and the remaining two to three years provide students with specialized training (CostaRica.com).

C. Schooling Options

1. There are private schools that hold classes in several languages, follow U.S. curriculums, and offer degrees such as the International Baccalaureate, accredited by the IBO in Switzerland, and a U.S. High School Diploma, accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (CostaRica.com).
2. Currently, there are over four thousand schools in Costa Rica (CostaRica.com).

D. Grading

1. Educational institutions use a 100-point scale to grade the performance of students (Costaricaeducation.Info).
2. Sometimes, a 10-point scale is used (Costaricaeducation.Info).
3. The academic year in Costa Rica runs from the first week of February to the last week of November or early December (Costaricaeducation.Info).

4. Students have a holiday of about 2 weeks in July and an “Easter Week” in March or April (Costaricaeducation.Info).

II. Quality of Education

- A. Costa Rica’s education system is ranked 20th in the "Global Competitiveness Report” of 2013-2014 and is described as of "high quality" (K12 Academics).
- B. Dropout rates, both in school and in tertiary education, are high, and in 2015, those students who were still in school at age 15 were two years behind their peers in other OECD countries (Doran).
- C. In 2014, Costa Rica established the National Network for Child Welfare and Development to improve coordination between different public and private providers. The project provides food services and educational stimulation and has benefited more than 32,000 children, most of which are infants in impoverished families (OECD).
- D. The literacy rate in Costa Rica is 95% in residents age 15 and older (CostaRica.com).
- E. The average school career is less than in other countries such as Panama, Colombia, and Cuba (Doran).
- F. Over the last three decades, the country has invested nearly 30% of its national budget in primary and secondary education (CostaRica.com).

III. Educational Equality

- A. Just 20% of 4-year-olds from the poorest households have access to preschool provision, compared to 80% of their wealthier peers (OECD).
- B. From 2000 to 2015, participation in the first year of preschool increased from 7% to 63%, and participation in the second year increased from 83% to 90% (OECD).
- C. Costa Rica is now giving more attention to the quality of teaching and learning. Most recently, the government has launched a major initiative to combat dropout in the most disadvantaged secondary schools (OECD).
- D. Use of a uniform in public schools is obligatory in order to reduce social and economic distinctions (K12 Academics).
- E. The average dropout rate in Costa Rica is about 22%, ranging from 0.1% to 58% depending on the region. Rural schools have a substantially higher dropout rate than their urban counterparts (Doran).

COVID-19 and Costa Rica Schools

I. COVID Effect on Schools

A. COVID-19 in Costa Rica

1. On March 16, 2020, Costa Rica declared a state of emergency, under which schools and all non-essential businesses were closed (Broom).

2. Costa Rica's borders were closed on March 19 (Broom).
3. Dr. Mario Ruiz, medical director for Costa Rica's social security system, states that Costa Ricans have mostly abided by the stay-at-home and other lockdown orders from President Carlos Alvarado's government (Padgett).

B. Remote Learning

1. Costa Rica is using social networks to relay daily reading plans for students and parents and challenge students to develop campaigns to contain the spread of the pandemic (UNESCO).
2. Although dining rooms could not operate, schools allowed parents to pick up food packages intended to last 22 days in order to avoid hunger at home (Jones).
3. 'Rural zones are the most affected. In these zones, they don't have the means of technology to complete the tasks that the Ministry of Education are setting (online)' (Jones).
4. 'Rural zones don't have optimum access to technology to be able to follow the rhythm of classes online' (Jones).
5. An ESL teacher stated that some students don't have adequate internet connectivity, and there were a few dropouts simply because "their connection was in and out during the whole class and you can't learn a language only hearing 50% snippets" (Jones).
6. Schools have not reopened yet. The reopening of schools will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis by a team of officials and may be able to open gradually in some areas in Phase IV of reopening, although a date for entering into Phase IV has not been established. Costa Rica is currently in Phase III (World Health Organization).

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Access to Education in Costa Rica

- I. History of Education
 - A. Costa Rica was among the first countries in Latin America to achieve universal enrolment in primary education and today most students make the transition to secondary school (OECD).
 - B. Since the 1869 constitution, elementary school, which is kindergarten through sixth grade, has been free, mandatory and paid for by the government, a decision that has been kept in every single constitution since (Quesada).
 - C. In 1949, leaders of Costa Rica put together a constitutional committee that created the 1949 Costa Rica constitution, which redirected the entire budget that was dedicated to the military to finance education, keeping elementary school mandatory and free but now with more resources to bloom (Quesada).
- II. Access to Education
 - A. Costa Rica has a lower enrollment rate (73%) than countries such as Venezuela (85.9%), Panama (79.7%), and El Salvador (74%) (Doran).
 - B. School abandonment at the secondary level is a prevalent issue (Doran).
 - C. School dropout rates range from 0.1 percent to over 58 percent at the secondary level as compared to less than 2 percent at the primary level (Garneir-Rimolo, Wachong-Castro & 2 Mora- Rodriguez).
- III. Dropout Rate in Costa Rica
 - A. For the 166 schools with the highest dropout rate, there was a 1.7 percent drop in the mid-year school desertion rate, which is attributed to efforts by a program designed to motivate students to stay in school called “Yo Me Apunto” in Spanish, or “I’m Signed Up” (Anders).
 1. The program “Yo Me Apunto” is a program that, with the support of UNICEF, seeks to ensure that no child or adolescent is left out of schools. It aims to ensure a quality education for all children and adolescents (Vizcaíno).
- IV. Rural and Urban Access to Education
 - A. According to “The Ticos: Culture and Social Change in Costa Rica,” “Some schools in the most rural parts of the country only have two students, but regardless of the number of children in the pueblo, they will always have access to education” (The Borgen Project).
 - B. However, children in rural areas often miss days or weeks of school to work or ultimately must drop out to help support their families (The Borgen Project).

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