

[Speech given by Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, at the opening ceremony for the "José Martí" Experimental School in Old Havana, September 6, 2002 \[1\]](#)

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Dear teachers and students of the José Martí Experimental School;

Compatriots:

There is a widely held belief, backed even by international organizations involved in education, that the state of junior high school education in the world today is a disaster. I share this opinion, and will not hesitate to state some of my own views on this issue, including the situation in Cuba.

The traditional system of teaching in junior high schools, a system inherited from the West and designed for elite minorities, does not in any way fulfill the requirements for a quality education for all children and adolescents.

One of the measures that contributed the most to the success of primary school education in Cuba was having the same teacher accompany the same group of children, instructing and educating them, from first through fourth grade. In grades five and six, the task is shared by two teachers, who also continue with the same students until they have completed primary school.

When children reach junior high school, which encompasses grades seven, eight and nine, there is a radical and abrupt change in their lives. Under the current system, teachers specialize in certain subjects, which they teach to numerous different classes; they might teach hundreds of different children at a time. As a result, no one has any special responsibility, since the teachers do not and in fact cannot get to know all of these children personally and learn about their general conduct, personality, temperament, personal problems and difficulties at home. Nor can the teachers develop a relationship with their students' parents or guardians and thus ensure their support for the work of the school and the comprehensive education of their children.

Students pass into the hands of 11, 12 or even 13 different teachers, depending on the grade they are in. These teachers, for their part, teach their particular subject to four, five, or in some cases up to ten different classes, with 30 to 40 students in each, on any given day, with an average of 200 to 300 students per teacher. It is a challenge for teachers to even remember all of their names, no matter how brilliant and capable they may be. I often wonder if a teacher working in such conditions could actually manage to read and analyze in depth the test answers or essays written in the tangled handwriting of 200 or more teenagers. Such a system has no relation whatsoever to a genuine education; it is merely a rudimentary, inefficient and complex method of instructing.

It is a system that turns students simply into groups of pupils that come and go from one teacher to another, with no room for the integration of their knowledge, culture and values. At this early age, students are subjected to varying and sometimes contradictory treatment and criteria on the part of their teachers. No matter what efforts are undertaken by school principals, counselors and other administration staff, this is far from the ideal way in which to educate 12-year-old children, who are

entering a decisive and irreversible stage in the development of their personalities and their lives as a whole.

The application of such a method in practice is plagued with insurmountable difficulties. The number of teachers needed is multiplied. If a teacher gets sick or cannot teach his or her classes for any other reason, 200 or more students are affected. Countless hours of class time are lost for this and other similar reasons.

This extreme specialization in teaching at such an early age is absurd and unnecessary. Training highly qualified teachers for each subject requires incalculable time and costs, which are not within the reach of the vast majority of the world's peoples. These teachers are able to transmit very little of their profound knowledge in any area of the sciences or humanities, despite the exhausting and self-sacrificing labor of teaching numerous different classes over the course of several hours every day. Moreover, this entails insurmountable obstacles when it comes to having so many and such a variety of professionals as are required.

If 25,000 junior high school students were to be taught 10 different subjects, there would have to be 1000 teachers, an average of 100 per subject, if the number of classroom hours per week were more or less the same for each subject. Although this is not exactly the case, the variations in classroom time further complicate program planning and the exact need for teachers by subject. In Cuba, the subjects which are most decisive and thus accorded the highest number of classroom hours a week are Mathematics and Spanish, and these are also the subjects with the greatest shortage of teachers; the same is true for teachers of such important subjects as History, Physics and English.

When young people completing senior high school decide to enroll in a teacher training college, each one, as is only natural, expresses his or her choice of subject. Some subjects are much more popular than others. Perhaps only 30 out of 1000 will opt for Mathematics and Computer Sciences, 140 for Geography, 55 for Spanish and Literature, 35 for History and 110 for Biology. Naturally, no one can be forced to become a teacher of one subject or another. The choices made and the number of graduates will never coincide exactly with number of teachers needed in every subject area at all the junior high schools. A valiant and self-sacrificing teacher once told me that for many years she had to teach Ancient History to the 500 students at a junior high school all on her own, because there were no other teachers who could give this course.

This situation has led to what has become the greatest difficulty facing this level of education: the shortage of teachers for many subjects; the desperate search for help from university students willing to teach for an hour or more a week in courses lacking teachers specialized in that subject; the almost permanent use of students still attending teacher training college; the call for university-educated professionals to lend a hand as volunteer teachers; the adjustment or establishment of schedules adapted to the shortage of teachers. Schools are forced to establish schedules that are far from ideal in order to cope with the shortage of specialized teachers for each subject. In such circumstances, it is impossible to implement genuine and efficient programs of training and education at an educational level so vital to the professional capacity and the future of the students who attend school at this level, which in our country encompasses almost 100% of all adolescents.

In the concrete case of our capital city, a detailed analysis of the state of junior high school education revealed that the number of classrooms is much lower than the number of classes at this level, and the fact that the classrooms are used by different classes in different grades makes scheduling even more complicated. Some use the classrooms early in the morning and others take them over after midday. When there are no classes being held, the rooms are used as laboratories or for other purposes. The fact is that of the eight hours the school day should last, students are actually only in class for six.

There is another factor that complicates the situation at this educational level. Junior high school students, unlike the vast majority of primary school students, apart from a few exceptions, do not have the possibility of eating at a school cafeteria. They either have to go home for lunch or buy something to

eat elsewhere. Children from homes with modest incomes, whose parents are not home at this time of day because they are working, or for any other reason, must therefore either heat or prepare their own lunches, using gas stoves or liquid fuel burners, which pose the risk of household accidents. Others go to the homes of friends who live nearby. Sometimes they are late in getting back to school, and quite often they do not go back for the afternoon activities at all. Control over these students is lost, and this has a detrimental influence on their education, discipline and conduct. The number of students who do not show up for supplementary activities can be as high as 30%. This does not tend to be the case in small and medium-sized towns and cities in the rest of the country.

There are also hundreds of thousands of junior and senior high school level students enrolled in different kinds of boarding schools throughout the country, and they receive all services free of charge. The difficulties are focused primarily in the city of Havana, and so this became our starting point to confront the state of junior high school education, in the midst of the special period and the blockade.

We had reached certain conclusions, including initiatives to be undertaken, but first they needed to be subjected to rapid yet rigorous experimentation. As an initial step, we asked to see the textbooks used for the various subjects taught in the seventh, eighth and ninth grades. We wanted to see if we ourselves could understand them, and if we would be able to explain them, despite the years that have passed since we studied and passed these subjects. We also wanted to see the new elements that undoubtedly would have been introduced since then by educational specialists. The textbooks were excellent, aside from a few possible and necessary improvements.

At one point I asked a senior official from the Ministry of Education to tell me in all honesty what percentage of the contents of these textbooks was taught to students in the capital. And he very frankly told me, "45%." Others I approached about the matter were openly skeptical, and said that they would judge it to be a third of the total contents at most.

We reached the conclusion that a student graduating from grade 12, who had been prepared for entry to a university, could easily assimilate and transmit this amount of knowledge.

This led to the ambitious idea of training comprehensive teachers for junior high school education, and we decided to put the idea to the test with the support of a select and enthusiastic group of university professors and highly experienced educational specialists.

At the beginning of the summer of 2001, the Young Communist League and the Federation of Middle-Level Education Students put out a call for 100 volunteers from among the recent senior high school graduates. A few more had to be included because of their overwhelming enthusiasm. After they were well informed as to what their mission would be, on August 1 of that same year they began a program of intensive study, boarding at the school itself, with classes six days a week, morning, noon and night and sometimes even into the early morning hours. The program was carried out at the Social Workers School in Cojimar, a neighborhood in the municipality of Habana del Este. It was summer vacation time, and the hottest month of the year. We were so impressed by their dedication and determination that we took to calling them "The Brave Ones", and that is what the thousands who are now following their example will be called as well.

Essentially, what they needed to do was to update and increase their knowledge until they had a good command of the content of the subjects taught during the three years of junior high school, with the exception of English and Physical Education. They also had to learn basic methodology and techniques for imparting knowledge in those subjects, and to be prepared to teach classes to junior high school students while continuing their university studies as students themselves of teacher training colleges.

An unused building at a senior high school institute in the countryside, near the town of Caimito in the province of Havana, was repaired and refurbished. In December of last year, 360 volunteer students from junior high schools in the municipalities of La Lisa, Marianao and Plaza, who were in seventh, eighth and ninth grade and had their parents' permission, enrolled in this school, which carried and

continues to carry with honor the name of Yuri Gagarin.

They were divided into groups of 15 students, with eight groups for each grade of junior high school. Logically, the most difficult task facing the "Brave Ones" was ninth grade, yet many of them specifically asked to teach it. Their enthusiasm and spirit were truly admirable.

Every "Brave One" was put in charge of a group of 15 students —up to a total of 24— leaving six as back-ups for these 24. The remaining 89 continued to study and acquire experience at Gagarin School, where the experiment was taking place, under the observation of the team of eminent educational experts who had trained them.

After a number of weeks, these remaining students were sent to various secondary schools in the municipalities of Marianao, La Lisa and Plaza. They were put in charge of groups of 15 students in seventh, eighth and ninth grades, who had been studying under the traditional system of teachers specializing in certain subjects. In every case, systematic contact was maintained with the parents of the students participating in the experiment. The changes in the students were visible, including increased interest in and application to their studies, as well as academic results considerably higher than the national average. Also visible was the pleasure of these students' families.

A full 98.2% of the students at Gagarin School successfully passed the course. Those teaching ninth grade stood out particularly, with a 100% success rate. This proved that the training of comprehensive teachers for junior high school was entirely possible. With every year that passes, every one of these young people, combining their daily teaching work with higher studies in education, complemented in turn by their ongoing practical experience, will reach ever-higher professional levels. In our view, this is the only possible solution for the serious shortage of teaching staff at the junior high school level.

According to this new conception, each comprehensive teacher will teach only 15 youngsters, and will remain with these same students all through grades seven, eight and nine. These teachers will be friends, counselors and guides for all of their students; they will maintain close and systematic contact with their parents, keeping them informed and winning their cooperation. Audiovisual resources and computer labs will help improve the current situation, although the shortage of classrooms and teachers will persist for a while, as new school facilities are created and the teaching personnel needed for this new system are trained.

The success achieved so far and the goal of perfecting this conception led to the idea of converting this historic school, which was once attended by Julio Antonio Mella and other outstanding Cuban revolutionaries, and is located between the municipalities of Old Havana and Centro Habana, two of the capital's most humble neighborhoods, into the José Martí Experimental School. Here we can continue to study the various aspects involved and the results obtained at Gagarin School and the junior high schools in other parts of the capital.

Although the ideal would be groups of no more than 15 students, the reality is that some of the school's classrooms are quite large and can fit 30 or even 45 students, and there are not enough classrooms in all. This has forced us to look for alternatives and to experiment with groups of 30 or 45 students with two or three teachers, depending on the specific case, yet always maintaining the principle that one teacher will be specifically responsible for 15 students within these larger groups. In addition, there are the standard principles that all teachers must be able to teach any subject, and that they must do so in an essentially integrated manner. No student will ever be left without a class.

The José Martí Experimental School will begin the school year with the following groups:

- o 6 groups of 15 seventh-grade students per classroom, with one "Brave One" per group.
- o 10 groups of 30 seventh-grade students per classroom, with two "Brave Ones" per group.

- o 7 groups of 45 eighth-grade students per classroom, with three "Brave Ones" per group.
- o 1 group of 15 ninth-grade students with one "Brave One".
- o 10 groups of 45 ninth-grade students with 10 teachers already working at the school, who will teach four or more subjects.

It is highly gratifying to note that 95.9% of the country's junior high school teachers who teach classes as specialists in a certain subject have offered to teach two or more subjects. Others have stated their willingness to teach all subjects, something perfectly possible given the knowledge, experience and high cultural level of our dedicated junior high school teachers. This in itself would practically eliminate the shortage within the current system and improve the situation in all of the junior high schools.

One of the problems with the system of highly specialized teaching is that the teachers, after working with successive large groups of 30 to 40 students per class, tend to finish the day visibly exhausted. Therefore, the system we are proposing would objectively benefit those currently teaching at this level, freeing them from a heavy burden. In addition, many of them could move up to teaching at the senior high or even the university level, since facilities for the latter will be increasing in number throughout the country, as we have explained on other occasions.

This school, which bears the glorious name of José Martí, already has an additional advantage: 100% of the students will eat lunch at the school. Moreover, the food they are served will be of the same quality as the food at the schools for the special intensive training programs recently created by the Revolution, given this school's role as an important center for experimentation.

Convinced of the wisdom of intensively training new junior high school teachers, given the results of the experiment already carried out, and the enormous and disturbing shortage caused by the system copied from the West, on the evening of September 9 we will be inaugurating a course at Salvador Allende School for the intensive training of junior high school teachers. For this first course, 4500 students have been selected from among the young people who recently graduated from senior high school throughout the entire country. Every year, thousands more young senior high school graduates will enroll there, to study this noble profession under the guidance of more than 400 eminent educational specialists, who also hail from throughout the entire country.

At the same time, the country's teacher training colleges will train around 3000 new junior high school teachers each year. The junior high school teaching will undergo radical changes at an accelerated pace. While there will be 20 students per classroom in primary schools, there will be a teacher directly responsible for every 15 students in secondary school.

Nevertheless, the total number of teachers will barely increase, since they will take on the teaching of almost all subjects. Just 30,000 teachers could attend to over 350,000 students, which would even leave a number in reserve as substitute teachers. It should be kept in mind that, in addition, the Educational Channel is already playing an important and growing role in support of all levels of education.

The problems facing senior high school education still need to be studied in depth. At this level, specialization seems to be essential. At this age, as well, young people's personalities and characters are already more fully formed. Yet it will still be necessary to seek the highest quality and look for new ways to ensure the building of an awareness, of a comprehensive general culture, of a school-family relationship and personalized attention for each and every student.

Nothing can come in the way of the Cuban people's unstoppable progress towards a comprehensive general culture and the highest rank in education and culture among all the nations of the world!

Long live socialism, which has made this great dream possible in a Third World country!

Speech given by Fidel at the opening ceremony for the "José Martí" Experimental School, Old Havana

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Patria o muerte!

Venceremos!

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