

Medellin: Lessons Learned on the City's Strategy to Achieve SDG 4

Blog

Microplanning of education

Cities are at the centre of designing and implementing effective strategies to ensure universal access to quality education in their territory.

How can cities plan and manage education to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including SDG 11, sustainable cities and communities, and SDG 4 to ensure universal access to quality education? In this blog post, the last in our series on the [‘Local challenges, global imperatives: Cities at the forefront to achieve Education 2030’](#) research project by IIEP-UNESCO, we look at the key role the City of Medellin, Colombia, plays in educational planning and management.

Background

The study was conducted by the [University of Antioquia](#) in close collaboration with the Secretariat of Education between 2021 and 2023; the data collection being interrupted by the global health crisis. The research consisted of an analysis of key documents shared by the city administration, such as budgets, organizational charts, and the city's education strategy, alongside in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key stakeholders from the local education community. These included education officers, school principals, teachers, parents' associations, non-teaching staff, students, civil society organizations (CSOs) and private companies.

A Commitment to Innovation, Sustainable Development and Education

Medellin, the capital city of the Antioquia Department, is the second largest city in Colombia with a population of over 2.5 million as of 2021. Over 98% of its

inhabitants live in urban areas. The city has experienced rapid development over the past decade, a process which has been accompanied by innovative projects and public policies, including on education. This trend led to Medellín's membership of the [Global Network of Learning Cities](#) as well as the [International Association of Educating Cities](#). Medellín is globally recognized as an [innovation hub](#) for its [innovative solutions to pressing urban and social challenges](#). Local initiatives provide evidence of leading practices in terms of inclusion and the democratization of culture ([ACI, 2020](#)), which have been widely recognized at both national and [international levels](#). The city's commitment to facilitating educational projects through social organization has transformed it into a [learning ecosystem](#) promoting social mobility.

Medellin's Education Responsibilities in a Decentralized system

In Colombia, decentralization reforms initiated in the late 90s aimed to address social and economic inequalities as well as the unequal access to public services throughout the country. Public administration was restructured into three levels, national, departmental, and municipal, with greater autonomy given to subnational levels to develop initiatives and manage their own resources. Medellín became a certified territory in 1993 allowing it to manage its education provision technically, administratively, and financially. Its Secretariat of Education oversees compulsory education, from pre-school to high-secondary education, with responsibility for infrastructure investment, provision of educational materials, scholarship funding, teacher salaries, and supervision of teaching and learning processes in schools. While the Secretariat has a mandate for hiring, promotion and staff transfers, in practice the Ministry of Education often leads these processes. Collaboration with the Social Affairs Permanent Commission, which is responsible for culture and social well-being, and which validates the city's education policy and budget, is a testament to Medellín's commitment to a holistic approach to education.

The city has some freedom to adapt the school curriculum to local needs. For example the [Ser + STEM](#) (Being + STEM) education approach focussing on science, technology, engineering and mathematics for tenth and eleventh grade, and the [Buen Comienzo](#) (A Good Start) initiative which ensures access to education and care for children under five have proven successful.

The city is organized around a nucleus of 16 communes and five townships enabling localized planning, administration, and supervision of education programmes and processes. This structure allows nucleus leaders to create new projects aligned to their unique contexts, contributing to the city's educational goals. Strong partnerships with CSOs and the establishment of parents' councils for each school, bolsters access to and the delivery of quality education.

A Holistic Plan for City Development and Education

Medellin's long-term strategy for education is guided by the [Plan Educativo Municipal de Medellín 2016-2027](#) (Municipal Education Plan of Medellín) and the [Medellin Futuro: 2020-2023](#) plan. The former seeks to build a comprehensive, integrated, and sustainable educational system that upholds every student's right to education. The latter, Medellín Futuro, envisions public services within the city with Education and Cultural Transformation as a strategic priority. Interventions aligned with these plans, such as teacher capacity strengthening and local curriculum development, support the city's education innovations.

Both plans were developed through consultations with local stakeholders, enabling dialogue with CSOs and other education actors to generate new ideas and innovative policies. However, as noted in our research on other cities, some school communities and stakeholders were not adequately consulted during the strategy design phase.

Challenges in Inclusive Education in Times of Crisis

The global health crisis had an impact on the delivery of education in Medellín and highlighted existing inequalities. Disparities in terms of study space, connectivity, digital literacy, and parenting challenges were evident among students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The Secretariat of Education responded to some of these issues by providing food and technological equipment in partnership with CSOs. Particular attention was given to students with special needs to ensure they received appropriate special education and support from other local public institutions.

The challenge was to start taking education where it had never been before, and that was education from home, with teachers in a very different role (...) and their lack of literacy in technology. More than 60% of public school students in Medellin did not have any connectivity nor a computer (Municipal authority)

Counselling and support strategies such as the [Entorno Escolar Protector](#) (Protective School Environment) project aimed at creating a safe physical environments and nurturing students' psychological, mental, and emotional well-being. An index was developed to identify students at risk of dropping out to ensure a rapid policy response. Finally, the crisis prompted a shift to a more decentralized approach, granting greater autonomy to schools in terms curriculum design and implementation.

Monitoring Progress: Medellin's Observatory for Educational Quality

In 2015, Medellin established the [Observatory for Educational Quality \(OCEM\)](#) to provide technical support to the Secretariat for Education. The OCEM monitors key education indicators at the local level for policy decision-making, as well as evaluating educational policies and programmes. Indicators include dropout rates, test results in reading and mathematics, success and failure rates, as well as programme specific and contextual indicators.

We are permanently measuring (indicators) because the Observatory also has the whole area of plans, programmes and projects. So, it is the one that is looking at the indicative plan, the action plan, the development plan... through its indicators it is giving us, well, like the route (Education Planning Sub-Secretary)

The global health crisis further underlined the Observatory's importance as it designed a tool to monitor student retention, school connectivity, and dropout risk. These results informed targeted interventions to vulnerable students and schools to reduce the digital education gap, improve student access and retention, and enhance quality of education.

Looking Ahead

As Medellín continues its transformative approach to education, it faces several challenges. Ensuring that local stakeholders play a greater role in the education strategy design process and a more robust communication strategy to deliver the local education objectives are essential steps forward. A more participatory approach to the co-design process will improve stakeholder support for Medellín's vision. Strengthening the Observatory's role in rigorous implementation evaluation and fostering synergies among education stakeholders in the city are also crucial.

[The 'big' transformation the city aims at should not be only quantitative] but also qualitative because education is not only about indicators (Private school leader)

Medellín's approach highlights the key role cities can play in planning for quality education. While each city has its unique context and challenges, the experiences of [France](#), [Kigali](#), [Manila](#) and Medellín, as offer valuable insights for cities worldwide to learn from one another's approaches towards creating sustainable, lifelong learning communities.

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