



# Open Schools

by Claudio Magnifico

In Guatemala, a presidential program called Open Schools (*Escuelas abiertas*) is one of the most important efforts in the country thus far to prevent violence, provide some factors of protection to youth, and encourage the constructive use of free time on weekends. The program works on a number of fronts to link communities, families, organizations, local authorities, civil society, and central government in efforts to strengthen youth leadership and promote culture, art, sports, and technology in activities made available especially to disadvantaged youth.

The Open Schools program started by working with already existing schools. It improves, strengthens, and transforms these educational institutions and extends their work to spaces that were previously denied to the community. The goal is to reconstitute a sense of community that favors youth in places that are struggling with all of the risks associated with poverty, exclusion, and lack of opportunities. The program builds community spaces around learning activities for children, teenagers, and youth. It also seeks to recognize and legitimate new languages and life activities that young people are interested in—things like extreme sports, and regenerative cutting-edge alternative art.

Christhian, 16, says that attending break dance workshops in Palín, Escuintla, helped him to leave behind a past that was linked to violence. “The little bit of time that you’re there dancing makes you feel free,” he says. “In Open Schools, we have had the space we need to practice things that allow us to get out of that world. . . . Now I try to motivate other kids. I tell them that I know how they can change their lives, because these guys are in the same situation that I used to be in.”

When she was twelve years old, Jackeline wanted to be like the gang members in her neighborhood. Her participation in Open Schools helped her to start thinking about other possible ways of living. She became part of the youth council and began to feel like she could use her leadership abilities to do something positive. Jackeline also took job-training courses that helped her “to make better decisions by using everything I learned at home and then later in other places.”

The Open Schools workshops invite the participation of adults as well as youth, so all the members of a family can share and enjoy recreation spaces. That’s the case with Graciela from San Martín Jilotepeque who arrived at Open Schools mostly hoping to find new opportunities for her





## Youth in the Americas

In the Open Schools program, schools rely on the help of community leaders and volunteers and organize workshops that respond to young people's interests

children. Once there, however, she found she could work on her own development, and this has helped her to see new possibilities for her own life. At the same time, she saw that her children were succeeding in Open Schools. Her daughter Lidia was a national level salsa champion in the first dance festival the program held in 2009, and her son Edgar, was already using a computer at age thirteen. Graciela has recently decided to go with her children to the dance and music workshop where she is learning to play the guitar and sing.

In the Open Schools program, schools rely on the help of community leaders and volunteers and organize workshops that respond to young people's interests. But the program also builds spaces that develop more formal processes of investigation and research. The goal is to help teenagers in situations of risk to deepen their capacities and achieve recognition, and to show that a teenager's reality can change just as fast as his or her ability to create that change.

To date, 220 Open Schools have been created in high-risk urban areas, and 260,000 young people have been able to participate in the program on weekends. They are guided by some 2,500 community leaders who work in coordination with the program's technical staff. The program is committed to responding to the interests of young people within a youth culture and to serving youth from different Guatemalan towns. The process is generating a movement that is manifested on radio programs and in festivals, concerts, championships, and expositions that tap a synergy of youth and community efforts. In some cases, public policies help strengthen the program. For example, when young people want to go back to school but don't have the economic resources, they can appeal to a national scholarship program where Open Schools participants receive preferential treatment.

Currently, the government invests an estimated total of eight dollars per beneficiary per month in this program. Prospects for the future include: expanding the program to cover more young people, institutionalizing the processes, deepening youth organization, and providing certification for levels of learning. Plans are also underway to establish relationships with other training institutions in order to generate job opportunities and improve the quality of life for beneficiaries. ❖

---

*Claudio Magnífico is the National Director of the Presidential Program of Open Schools Guatemala.*