

# From Bad to Best



## How One State and One Municipality in Brazil Are Eradicating Illiteracy and Innumeracy

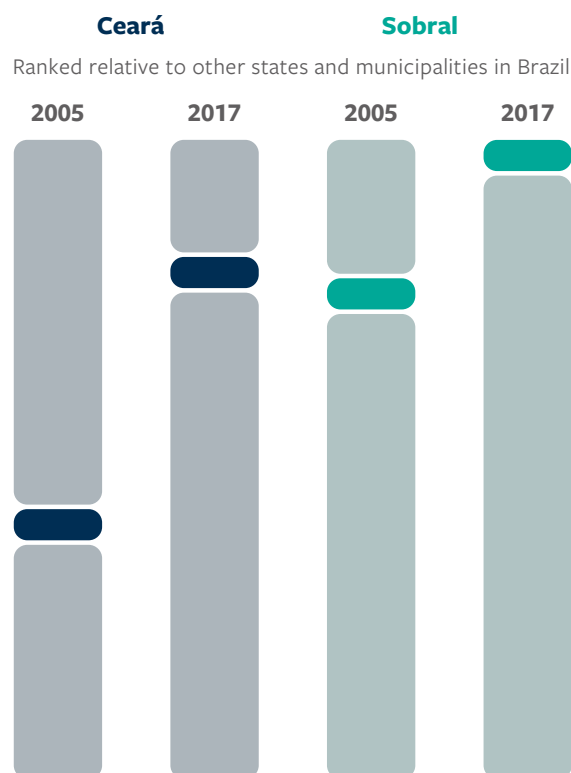
**One state on the northeastern coast of Brazil—along with its best-performing municipality—has transformed its education system in the last two decades.** Ceará is a poor state of around 9 million people, roughly the size of Austria or Papua New Guinea. It has few material resources: it is the fifth poorest of Brazil's 26 states. In the early 2000s, Ceará was unexceptional in its education system. It ranked in the bottom half of the states in student performance, and its policies were common to those in much of Brazil: low financing for education, few incentives for schools to perform, school principals selected for political reward rather than technical ability, and little measurement of educational outcomes. Ceará's municipalities, in similar fashion, were mediocre educational performers. Sobral, a mid-sized city in the north of the state, did not even rank in the top 1,000 municipalities of Brazil in educational performance.

Everything has changed. **Ceará has jumped to fourth place among all Brazil's states in the national ninth-grade assessment and sixth place in fifth grade.** Its gains are pro-poor and pro-diversity: gains in the wake of education reforms have been largest for poorer students and students of color. Sobral, that mid-sized city, is now first among Brazil's more than 5,500 municipalities for measures in both fifth and ninth grade. Its public schools perform better than the private schools in Brazil's richest state, São Paulo. Eighty-four percent of students achieve adequate literacy scores by the end of third grade. Twenty years ago, two in every five students in third grade could not read a single word.

How did a poorly performing, low-spending state achieve such a dramatic transformation? **It began with political leadership. Ceará's government placed learning at the center of the education policy with a series of reforms under three categories.** First, municipalities had incentives to achieve education outcomes. Ceará reorganized how the state consumption tax would be shared with municipalities so that municipalities would receive more resources if they made

progress toward clear goals in education, health, and environmental policies, with education representing the largest share. The financing formula promotes equity by rewarding improvements among the lowest-performing students, and it discourages manipulation by penalizing student absenteeism from the exams. Second, schools run by municipalities receive extensive support from the state under its literacy program, including a standardized learning assessment, literacy materials, workshops, and rewards for top schools that help lower-performing schools. Third, Ceará regularly monitors results. Schools use an externally administered assessment to measure student literacy in second grade, and these results inform both targets and support through professional development for teachers. These incentives and support could only work because municipalities had autonomy—and consequently accountability—to deliver education. Almost all primary education is run by municipal governments. Each of these elements played a role: World Bank research suggests that results-based financing in conjunction with extensive technical assistance accomplish far more than either separately. What about financing? While Ceará did increase its education spending as the result of a national policy to equalizing education financing across the country, its municipalities consistently fall in the bottom half of the country on per-pupil spending.

**The state of Ceará and its best performing city, Sobral, have achieved major gains in student learning.**



**It started in the city of Sobral. In the late 1990s, a new mayoral administration began a series of reforms that changed Sobral's learning path.** It grouped students into larger schools to reduce multi-grade classes, and provided transportation so that students could get there. It swapped out political criteria for selection of school principals and teachers in favor of technical criteria and enshrined that

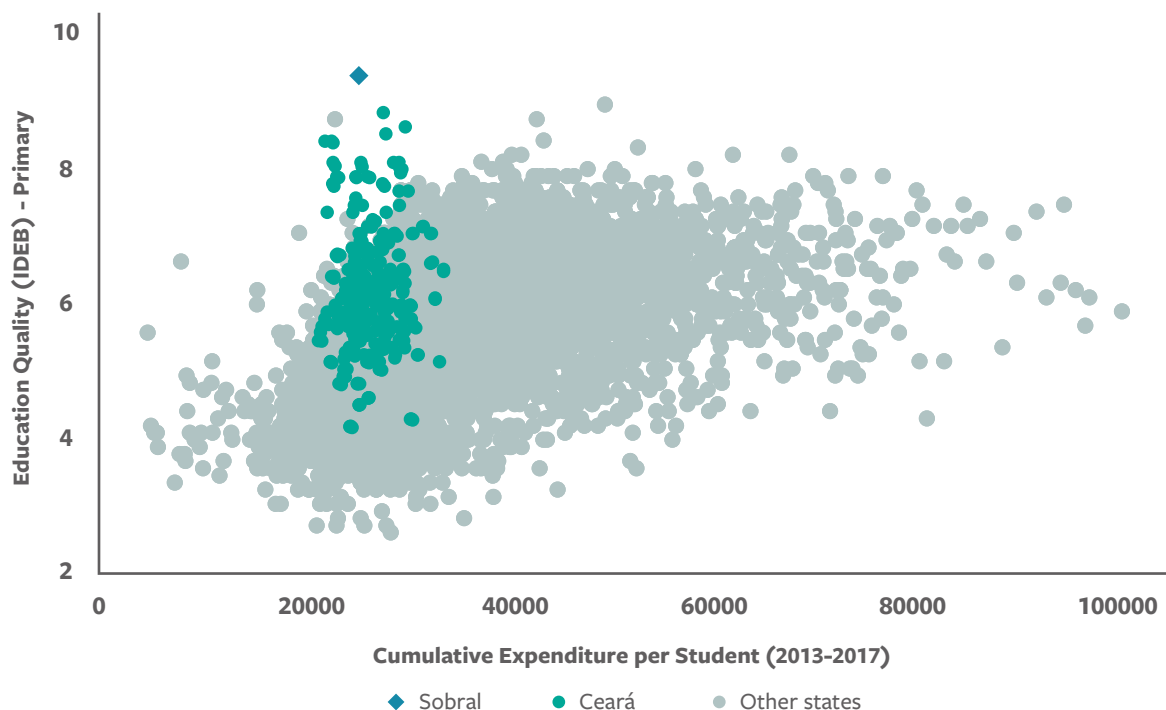
## The Conditions for Success in Ceara



in law. Even with these reforms, an assessment in 2001 showed dismal reading outcomes in primary school. Without early literacy, the city saw that no other educational gains could be made, so it set in motion a reform program that included six key elements. The first was strong political leadership. The second was a clear target: every student should be literate by the end of second grade. The goal came with financial incentives for teachers, focused teacher professional development, continuous assessment, and small groups based on ability level rather than age or grade for nonliterate students. The last four elements were the means to achieve that goal with the needed leadership: regular assessments that guide instruction, a focused curriculum structured around building literacy skills, practical teacher professional development with rewards for success, and school leaders with a high degree of autonomy but also support and accountability.

World-class education systems in high-income countries like Finland, Singapore, or the Republic of Korea can be difficult for many low- and even middle-income countries to relate or aspire to. Those high-performing countries have the resources for relatively high levels of per-student expenditures, and they have been high performing for long enough that it can be difficult to figure out how they got there. **The state of Ceara and the city of Sobral in Brazil provide practical examples that education systems with limited resources can achieve major learning gains with strong political leadership and a focused set of reforms.**

## Ceara's municipalities achieve more with less money.



This note was prepared by **David K. Evans** and **Andre Loureiro** and draws principally from the studies “The State of Ceara in Brazil is a Role Model for Reducing Learning Poverty” (by Loureiro, Cruz, Lautharte, and Evans 2020) and “Achieving World-Class Education in Adverse Socioeconomic Conditions: The Case of Sobral in Brazil” (by Cruz and Loureiro, 2020) that were prepared in the context of the Brazil Analytical and Advisory Increasing Efficiency in Education to Improve Learning in Brazil (P171447) and as a result of an ongoing collaboration between the World Bank’s Latin America and the Caribbean Education unit and the Global Education Unit to analyze, understand, and disseminate models of successful reform. All unreferenced material is from those reports. To learn more, read those studies.