



**BROKEN  
CHALK**

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United  
Nations Human Rights Council 4<sup>th</sup> Cycle – 50<sup>th</sup> Session

## **Right to Education**

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### **Country Review: Panama**

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**Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK**

**April 2025**

**By**

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**Broken Chalk** is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimizes worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

## Content

<b>I. Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>III. Digital gap</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>IV. Rising School Dropout Rates Due to Child Labor</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>V. Lack of incentive for public school teachers</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>VI. Recommendations</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>VII. References</b> .....	<b>6</b>

## I. Introduction

1. Broken Chalk has drafted the following report as a stakeholder contribution to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review UPR for the Republic of Panama. As Broken Chalk's focus is on combating human rights violations within the educational sphere, the contents of this report and the following recommendations will primarily focus on the right to education.
2. Panama's education system includes 6 years of compulsory primary education (Educación Primaria) for children aged 6 to 12. Secondary education is divided into two stages. The lower secondary stage is 3 years of compulsory middle education (Educación Secundaria) from ages 12 to 15. After completing mandatory education, students aged 15 to 18 can proceed to upper secondary education, known as Educación Media. This stage provides two primary pathways: the Academic Track, which emphasises general education subjects to prepare students for higher education, and the Technical/Vocational Track, which offers specialised training in various trades and professions.<sup>i</sup>
3. The enrollment rate in Panama's education system has improved significantly in recent years, particularly over the last decade, starting at the primary level. According to the data from the World Bank, the net enrolment rate for primary education means that 95%<sup>ii</sup> (2023) of Children in the 6-12 age group are enrolled in school. Middle education involves a gross rate of 83% (2021)<sup>iii</sup> of students within the age bracket of 13 to 15 years.
4. Despite all those regarding the quality of education, according to the PISA study (2023), 6 out of 10 15-year-old students do not understand what they read. One hundred seventeen thousand seven hundred ninety-nine children and adolescents between the ages of 4 and 17 do not attend any educational center. Thirty percent of them drop out of school because they do not have an academic offer nearby (UNICEF Panama, 2023).<sup>iv</sup> Poverty and inequality are the primary challenges impacting access to and quality of education in Panama. Despite being a high Human Development Index country, Panama experiences significant disparities, particularly in education. The gaps are most pronounced in rural areas and among Indigenous communities, where students often face the necessity of working on the land.
5. Efforts have been made to close the gap. This year, 7% of the government's expenditure on education, valued at \$ 5.4 million, is allocated to the Minister of Education (MEDUCA), representing a decline of 11.9% from last year, according to the World Bank<sup>v</sup>. Despite the challenge posed by the National Plan for the Elimination of School Ranches (Plan Nacional de Eliminación de Ranchos Escolares), there are more than 400 aulas ranchos still to be eradicated.<sup>vi</sup> It is argued that it is impossible to eliminate due to the shortage of funds. Additionally, investment in infrastructure is much needed to provide clean water and facilities for students.
6. The government, in collaboration with multilateral agencies<sup>vii</sup>, is working together to promote and enhance the nation's educational quality to a high level. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have accelerated the integration of technology tools into the educational system. This includes the development of online learning platforms and the provision of digital resources to facilitate remote education. MEDUCA continues its work on addressing the significant challenges of implementing the digital transformation initiative to provide access to computers. Despite all the controversy, such as the country not participating in the PSIA, the government continues to advance.

## II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

7. Panama was last reviewed in November 2020. The country received 181 recommendations, 146 of which were supported. Thirteen of the recommendations pertained to the Right to Education. Thirty-two of the recommendations pertained to the rights of the child.<sup>viii</sup>
8. Of the recommendations relating to the Right to Education, all 13 were supported. The main issues regarding education pertained to addressing the provision of universal preschool education, increasing access to education, especially for indigenous and adolescent populations, and economically disadvantaged rural people, decreasing the dropout rate, and improving education quality through increased budget allocation for programs.<sup>ix</sup>
9. The National report highlighted the government's efforts to provide lunch for school children in the public schools in the Ngobe Bugle region through the Study without Hunger programme (NURA), and complementary school meals programme which consists of the distribution of a snack to all students in state schools through the country to guarantee adequate nutrition for children. The government has implemented targeted measures, including mother tongue instruction in reading and writing, an early childhood care programme, the publication of books and materials in Indigenous languages, and flexible educational provisions for Indigenous communities.<sup>x</sup>
10. Regarding education, the stakeholders' report emphasised the need to improve bilingual intercultural education, with increased Ministry of Education budgets to better serve Indigenous communities. It was also noted that prioritising the education of Indigenous women and girls is essential to address literacy gaps, alongside the development of comprehensive classroom strategies tailored to the needs of Indigenous students. Additionally, the stakeholders pointed out gaps in Panama's educational curriculum, particularly the lack of information about the history and contributions of enslaved Africans, Afro-Antilleans, and indigenous peoples.<sup>xi</sup>

## III. Digital gap

11. The digital divide in Panama's educational sector reflects profound gaps in urban-rural, socioeconomic, gender, and disability-related disparities. Despite new government initiatives towards driving school transformation through technology<sup>xii</sup>, numerous obstacles prevail. For example, 88% of students in Panama attend schools in the state school system, but only 40% have access to the internet, and 30% have access to computers, respectively. In contrast, in private schools, which comprise a mere 12% of students, 90% have access to the internet, and 75% have access to computers<sup>xiii</sup>. The consequences of this digital divide have been exacerbated during the pandemic. According to a report by UNICEF, during the pandemic, 32% of rural communities in Panama experienced access to the internet. UNESCO statistics indicate that schools in Panama remained closed for approximately 211 days during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, Panama ranks 74th out of 81 countries evaluated by the OECD in PISA. Panama has decided to withdraw from the international student assessment and won't participate from 2025.<sup>xiv</sup>

## IV. Rising School Dropout Rates Due to Child Labor

12. Dropout rates rise, especially in secondary school. One reason is child labor. In rural communities, parents often take schoolchildren out of school to work as coffee pickers, care for their younger siblings, or perform household chores<sup>xv</sup>.

13. A 2023 report<sup>xvi</sup> by the U.S. Department of Labor states that Panama's Constitution, Family Code, and Labor Code set the minimum employment age at 15. However, an earlier law mandates a minimum working age of 14, which may lead children to leave school before completing compulsory education at 15.
14. The Family and Labor Code provides exceptions for children working in agricultural and domestic roles, allowing them to start at the age of 12. According to Article 119 of the Labor Code, children aged 12 to 15 can undertake light work in agriculture as long as it occurs outside regular school hours. The U.S. Department of Labor advises that the definition of "light work" should be clarified and detailed, especially regarding activities in agriculture and domestic settings.
15. Although Panama has a list of hazardous occupations prohibited for individuals under 18, it allows children as young as 14 to engage in dangerous work under training programs, which is inconsistent with international standards.

## V. Lack of incentive for public school teachers

16. According to the interview<sup>xvii</sup> conducted with an education practitioner in the sector in Panama, it comes to our knowledge, that the law in Panama allows retired teachers to remain in the public system and collect both salary and pension, which leaves no space to allow young teachers to enter the education sector and leave no incentives for them to upgrade the pedagogies y methodology thus leave them to old fashioned curriculum that don't adjust to the labor market's need. Additionally, teachers strike regularly, and education reform has been in a state of disrepair for years. Namely, every five years, a new presidential administration attempts to address the shortcomings in the education system from scratch, and every time, union opposition effectively halts reform.<sup>xviii</sup>

## VI. Recommendations

17. Broken Chalk appreciates the effort of Panama's state government in improving digital accessibility. It encourages the state to continue investing in closing the digital gap between rural and urban areas, as well as between the private and public domains, and in addressing disparities based on discrimination and economic inequality.
18. Broken Chalk recommends that the Government of Panama harmonise its labor and education legislation to eliminate contradictions regarding the minimum age for employment and compulsory education. It urges the government to amend the Labor Code to set the minimum employment age at 15, aligning it with the completion of mandatory education and eliminating exceptions that allow child labor in agriculture and domestic service from the age of 12.
19. Broken Chalk emphasises the need to strengthen monitoring and enforcement of child labor regulations in the agricultural and domestic sectors, where children aged 12 to 15 can engage in so-called 'light work.' It recommends explicitly defining permitted and prohibited tasks in these sectors to prevent child exploitation and ensure that employment does not interfere with children's education.
20. Broken Chalk recommends that the Government of Panama take concrete steps to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings, including the home, schools, and childcare institutions, by explicitly legislating its ban within the Family Code. Panama has committed to implementing laws against corporal punishment during the First Ministerial Conference on

Violence Against Children in 2024<sup>xix</sup>, but there is still no confirmed legislation ensuring this prohibition. Therefore, Broken Chalk urges the Panamanian government to expedite the legal process and align its national framework with international standards to protect children from all forms of violence fully.

21. Broken Chalk recommends that the Government of Panama review and reform the current policies on teacher retention and retirement to create opportunities for young educators to enter the public education system. This includes establishing a phased retirement system that balances the experience of retired teachers with the need for new talent, ensuring an improved and modernised pedagogical approach that aligns with the evolving demands of the labor market.
22. Broken Chalk urges the Panamanian government to implement a long-term, inclusive, and sustainable education reform strategy that transcends political cycles. This includes establishing a stable and participatory dialogue with teachers' unions to ensure that reforms are not constantly stalled and providing incentives for teachers to engage in continuous professional development, upgrading their methodologies to meet 21st-century education standards.

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xvi 2023 FINDINGS ON THE WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOR.

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xviii

xix [Panamá se compromete a aplicar leyes contra el castigo corporal durante histórica cumbre ministerial a favor de la infancia](#)