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Venezuelan Textbooks Teach Math, Science, Socialism

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Students here study math by calculating the benefits of government land takeovers. They practice English by reciting where late President Hugo Chavez was born and learn civics by explaining why the elderly should give him thanks.

Pro-administration messages scattered through the pages of Venezuela's textbooks have become yet another point of conflict in this hyper-polarized country, where Chavez's socialist party won a bare majority in the presidential elections of 2013.

Parents recently tossed books into the streets in front of some schools and burned them, acts the loyalist media compared to censorship by the Nazis in 1930s Germany. As children head back to school after winter break, many Venezuelans remain outraged over texts that treat the founder of a deeply divisive socialist revolution with the sort of reverence U.S. textbooks reserve for George Washington.

Math lessons include calculations of how much production has increased as a result of the government's agrarian reform

initiative, and how much land the government still has to reclaim from private owners. Students are asked to figure out how much shoppers save at government-subsidized appliance stores created by Chavez.

Learning English? Answer the question, "Where was Hugo Chavez born?"

"They are brainwashing our kids, erasing our nation's history, and replacing it with their own version," said information technology worker Hector Cuevas, who was appalled when his son brought home the books as a sixth-grader.

For defenders, the "Bolivarian" textbooks introduced in 2011 include history traditionally left out of grade school education, and tie lessons to real-life examples in socialist [Venezuela](#).

Minister of Education Hector Rodriguez defended the books this fall, and also urged critics to work with the government to improve the collection.

"Certainly they can be improved, like any human endeavor," he said, according to Venezuelan news website Noticias24. "Those who want to criticize should read the books, and when they find an error they should let us know to correct it."

But for opponents, the problem is not errors so much as what

they see as attacks on government foes and propaganda for controversial programs.

An early edition of the government's social studies book shows a photo of an elderly person writing, "Thanks, Chavez" and instructs students to explain why.

One book interrupts an explanation of fractions to praise a food program "developed by the Bolivarian government to ensure that the poor can eat."

While all students receive the books, they are in widest use in poor areas, where they are often the only option for teachers. At Consuelo Navas Tovar high school at the fringes of one of Caracas' sprawling slums, students in navy blue uniforms study their English textbooks at grimy desks crammed into a bare-walled classroom.

The book has students discuss a study hall sponsored by a government agency known by an arcane acronym.

"It's a project of FUNDABIT!" one student is told to say.

"That is excellent!" the partner replies.

Geometry professor Tomas Guardia of Central University of Venezuela has spent months documenting what he and his colleagues call basic errors in math books. One defines a square

as a shape with four sides, when that could be a rectangle or a rhombus.

"I'm not a historian, but if the math textbook is so problematic, there's a good chance this book is also full of errors and propaganda" he said, gesturing to a photo of Chavez embracing a child in social studies book captioned, "The future of the land of Bolivar is her children."

Cuevas, meanwhile, often pulls out his father's old math textbook to use as a reference for his son. He fantasizes about a collection of textbooks that would reflect his less-sunny vision of modern Venezuela.

"They always use examples like, 'If your mother goes to a government-subsidized supermarket and buys two pounds of sugar and three pounds of meat, how many pounds does she have?'" he said. "Why don't they use an example like, 'If you mother spends two hours in lines waiting to buy sugar, and later waits three hours to buy meat, how many hours has she waited?'"