

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Forty years ago Asia and Latin America were at similar levels of economic development. This is no longer true, however, for reforming East and Southeast Asian countries, periodic problems notwithstanding, have made long strides toward the developed world. Meanwhile, most of Latin America, after the reform euphoria of the 1990s, is passing through yet another of its periodic crises. Serious economic development in much of Asia has reduced poverty and inequality; in Latin America sustained economic growth and effective institution building have rarely occurred, and the region is falling ever farther behind the rest of the developing world. One critical factor in Asia's success has been its universal, increasingly high-quality education systems, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, that have enabled most people to promote their own well-being and contribute to national development. The high quality of Asian education is evident in international testing that finds reforming Asian countries at the head of the class. Latin Americans, in contrast, when they even dare to participate in such testing, come out at or near the bottom. Why the difference? Because although both regions began with rigid, elitist traditional ideas and institutions, Latin Americans have been much less willing or able or both to adapt and transform their past in order to participate more productively in the modern world. Latin American leaders have not chosen to undertake deep and lasting reform, and the Latin American people, to the degree that they have any voice in the matter, have not demanded such changes. It is in U.S. interests to support education reform in Latin America because doing so will promote development and stability there and thus more productive relations between north and south. But we should do so only when the region's leaders demonstrate the will to undertake substantive change and commit the resources to make it happen.