

COMMENTARY

This man quit his job to educate kids in Guatemala



Byron McCauley
Columnist
USA TODAY NETWORK

Cincinnati's Joe Berringer is never far from Guatemala.

One of the colorful paintings in his Westwood office overlooking a hilly, green canopy of trees below is a painting of Lake Atitlan.

The volcanic lake, formed 10 million years ago, is stunning. It is an ever-present reminder of the place where he has worked for more than half of his life to help children born into a dire existence go school and pour back into their own communities.

Berringer is the founder of the Cooperative for Education, or CoEd, a nonprofit whose mission is to break the cycle of poverty in Guatemala through education. It was founded in 1997.

For Berringer, the journey started the early 1990s, when he and his brother visited the Central American country (six hours as the crow flies from Cincinnati) first on vacation. Their aunt and uncle had been involved in missionary work there since the 1960s. His brother returned to teach in a local missionary school and

discovered there were no books anywhere.

The instruction came from teachers writing on chalkboards. More boys received an education than girls. Today, as back then, the indigenous Guatemalan population suffers from poverty, racism and historically low rates of illiteracy. Researchers estimate that for every 100 children in Guatemala, fewer than 40 will continue on to seventh grade, and only 18 will complete high school. The average indigenous Guatemalan adult has only five years of education.

A country without a public education tradition needed everything, starting with textbooks. So they CoEd began by providing donated textbooks that schools agreed to rent to students at \$1 per book, per year. In 1997, Berringer, who was working for IBM at the time, got involved full time.

"The nonprofit got started on that principle of let's put books in every school in Guatemala in a way that's sustainable," Berringer said. "So now fast forward 22 years, that's still our largest program. The schools that we put books into back then still have books today, the descendants of those same books on that self-financing program."

Not only does CoEd help provide books, but it also helps provide com-

puters using the same self-sustaining rental approach. Most important, institutionalized an evidence-based reading approach aimed at getting kids reading by the end of second grade, which is leading to better long-term outcomes. Seven out of 10, second graders now pass the international benchmark for reading fluency. Failure rates have dropped by a third, according to CoEd.

It's Rise Youth Development Program focuses more specifically on educating girls, who often face discrimination in their own families. Only 58% of women are literate in Guatemala, compared to 80% of men.

"We can change a kid's life completely for a thousand dollars in Guatemala and when you're here, that's such a drop in the bucket," Berringer said. "Here, people are poor for a lot of complex reasons. There, a lot of people are poor just because for a lack of resources."

Over the past two decades, more than 208,000 children have benefited from CoEd programs, including more than 55,000 this year. That's huge and for many reasons. It's proximity to the United States benefits trade. U.S. goods and services trade with Guatemala totaled an estimated \$13.7 billion in 2017, according to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representa-

tive. Think fuel, coffee (40% of its agricultural output), fruits and apparel. A more educated populous is has long-term benefits.

We are blessed with a tax base that funds education tradition that fuels our free-enterprise system. Third World countries like Guatemala, with a population about the size of Ohio, the same principles can apply.

Next, let's talk about how a better, more educated Guatemala is good for illegal immigration. More than 60,000 people illegally immigrated to the United States from Central America this year. President Trump has ramped up border protection, including plans for a southern border wall.

I'm a firm believer in the adage of teaching a man to fish. CoEd is a heart-driven organization, to be sure, but it has inadvertently united liberals and conservatives.

At the end of the day, educating a kid is simply the right thing to do.

If you go

The Cooperative for Education will hold its annual Fall Fiesta fundraiser Saturday from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. at Music Hall.

General admission tickets are \$150 each, \$1,600 for a table of eight, and \$800 for a half-table.