

Opinion: Why a year of private school in Panama can cost as much as a whole degree

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Summary

A La Prensa opinion piece explains why private school fees in Panama are so high, pointing to the lack of a public alternative in secondary education, the prestige and networks that schools sell, and deep distrust of public schools.

Details (summary of the article)

La Prensa carried an opinion column by an industrial engineer, lawyer and internationalist on the cost of private schooling in Panama. For 2027 the consumer agency Acodeco reports primary annual fees ranging from \$450 to \$7,225, while a full degree at a private university costs roughly \$8,000–\$9,000; one international school in the capital charges \$18,948 a year for high school plus a \$1,900 annual registration and a one-off \$12,000 admission payment. The author argues universities face a price ceiling because five state universities – including the Autonomous University of Chiriquí – enrol almost 78% of students and charge a fraction of private prices, whereas in secondary education many families no longer see the public system as an option, so nothing holds fees down. High-end schools also sell small classes, English, facilities and social networks; a 2024 analysis found a 76-point maths gap between private and public schools, though how much of the fee buys learning rather than contacts is unclear. Distrust of public education is backed by data: the 2025 teachers' strike lasted 80 days affecting some 700,000 students, adding to over 500 school days lost since the pandemic, and Panama scored 357 in PISA 2022 maths with only 16% reaching level 2. A survey of 72 schools found 40% did not start classes on 10 March 2025 because of structural problems and 44% had deteriorated bathrooms; of 1,089 schools in the 2025 maintenance programme only 173 had finished works. The author concludes that parents pay whatever is asked rather than risk another lost year, and that blaming families or simply capping fees solves nothing.

Original (es)

¿Por qué en Panamá un año de colegio puede costar lo que una carrera universitaria entera?

El alto costo de los colegios particulares refleja la desconfianza en la educación pública, marcada por deficiencias, interrupciones y desigualdades en el aprendizaje.