



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on February 25, 2020

Cuban Exile Schools Bernie Sanders on Castro's Literacy Program

Bernie Sanders, meet Fabiola Santiago.

The independent Vermont senator who wants to be the Democratic Party's presidential nominee [said](#) on *60 Minutes* Sunday, "When [the late Cuban communist dictator] Fidel Castro came into office, you know what he did? He had a massive literacy program. Is that a bad thing? Even though Fidel Castro did it?"

In other words, what are a few mass murders compared to the glories of public schooling?



Santiago, a columnist for the *Miami Herald*, begs to differ. Born in Cuba, Santiago experienced education in the island nation after the communist revolution. Her story, she [contends](#), "is the antidote to [Sanders'] cheap, propagandist talking points on Cuba's education system and Fidel Castro."

A registered Democrat who thinks as little of President Donald Trump as she does of Sanders, Santiago is the daughter of a flour merchant and a teacher. After the revolution, her father's small business was confiscated, and he was forced to work in the fields for refusing to continue to operate the business as a state employee. Her mother, whom Santiago describes as "a beloved and respected teacher," quit her job because she wouldn't teach communist propaganda.

At the age of eight, Santiago was the top student in her class, having "never scored below 96 on any test," she recalls. Unfortunately, her parents' recalcitrance also made her and her little brother enemies of the state, which by then was running the formerly private school the children attended.

The school required students to wear a red scarf signifying their membership in the communist youth organization, *los pioneros*. School days began with a chant of "Pioneers, for Communism! We will be like Che."

Santiago's parents forbade her to don the scarf. The principal called her mother in for a conference, and while the girl wasn't expelled (or worse), she was demoted to number two on the honor roll in favor of "a boy who [was] an eager and loyal *pionerito*," she writes.

Her brother, perhaps, fared even worse. Asked by his teacher to form a sentence including the phrase "agrarian reform," the class clown replied, "The agrarian reform is very sour!" — a sentence that, in Spanish, rhymes and was "a hit with classmates, but not with the teacher, an ardent revolutionary," notes Santiago. The teacher "is so mad she grabs him by the ear and pulls so hard and long that the boy bleeds all the way home."

The family fled Cuba for the United States in 1969. By that time, Santiago says, she knew that "the Cuban education system is dogmatic and abusive to innocent children who are ostracized for their parents' beliefs."



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She continues, speaking of herself in the third person:

Her parents' heart-wrenching decision to leave it all behind and start a new life in Miami, saves her from worse. After their 12th birthdays, her friends have to enroll in *la escuela al campo*. They have to leave their home and their parents to live in barracks in the countryside and work in agricultural fields.

Because the "free education" in Cuba isn't free, and the Castro literacy program the American left has bought into is rooted in indoctrination and devotion to the one-party political system.

Furthermore, she faults Sanders for buying into the notion that Castro's literacy program was something new. Her "mother worked in a literacy program in the countryside after graduation from a teacher's college in the early 1950s," she explains, adding that it was what "teachers had to do ... to earn their spot in a city classroom."

Nevertheless, if the official statistics are to be believed, Castro's efforts did result in a significant increase in literacy in a relatively short time span. However, as [PolitiFact](#) observed, "In Castro's own words, the goal wasn't simply to teach, but to instill political beliefs. That's important context to capture the nature of the literacy campaign."

Such details seem to be of little concern to Sanders, who has a long history of praising communist regimes. Besides, as Santiago addressed Sanders, "When you can't even verbalize on '60 Minutes' how you'll fund your signature healthcare project, pay for all that free college and child care you're offering, what else can be expected on Cuba?"

Michael Tennant is a freelance writer and a regular contributor to The New American.



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