

## **Educational Choice: Parents vs. Politicians**

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The educative reality of our country has many causes. A boy with hunger cannot study. A girl who never saw her father work, how can she understand the concept of effort? A teenager who listens to his mother insult the professors, what message can he receive? Moreover, if in any activity the generated good or service is systematically defective the first thing that I would analyze is if it is not necessary to correct the training of those in charge of their production.

In this note I will approach the problem from another perspective, I will propose a public policy that would improve both public and private education: educational choice. What's its meaning and why would it produce such an effect?

Milton Friedman, who proposed the policy 60 years ago, defines it clearly: "The best system would be a combination of public and private schools. The parents who decide to send their children to private schools would receive from the government a voucher for an amount equivalent to the cost of educating a child in a public school".

The government would continue subsidizing education, but the resources will be assigned to its demand, the students, instead of to its supply, the schools.

The difference is not minor. A system of vouchers would change the relation between parents and schools. The fact that the parents would be able to choose which school is better for their children would make them perceive the schools as providers of a service, education, and they would be in a better position to demand its excellence. This would necessarily improve the level of public and private schools.

Chile has used this type of educational system since 1980, but Michelle Bachelet has sent to the Parliament a project of educative reform which would radically modify the system. In April 2014, Claudio Sapelli, Director of the Institute of Economy of the Catholic University of Chile, published an interesting note on this subject, in which he states that "something has to be wrong in the analysis when Chile, a country that is winning terrain in education, tries to adopt the system of a country that is losing it, as Uruguay".

After all, who would have thought 30 years ago that today the Chilean educative system, with all its problems and defects, would become the best one of Latin America, as much in terms of quality, by its results in PISA examinations, as in quantity, due to having the highest rates of graduation of high school among the countries of the region. Apparently it is easy to forget that Chile has been one of the few countries in the region that in the last 20 years managed to reduce the educative gap between the richest 20% of the population and the poorest 20%.

Usually, the mere mention of the voucher is taboo, even though it would bring equality of opportunities, since all families would be able to choose what is better for their children independently of their economic restrictions.

The system would not harm public education, but all the opposite. No family would be obliged to stop sending their children to the public school where they are studying at present. If they choose another option it is because they think that the alternative provides better educative services, or a more suitable education for the necessities, tastes or aptitudes, of their children.

Of course, this type of proposal is based on the assumption that the parents are qualified to decide what is better for their kids. A questionable hypothesis when many of them have not finished their own education and are unemployed, surviving thanks to social plans. But it is easy to illustrate the erroneous of this prejudice.

In 2013 was established in Casavalle, one of the poorest districts of Montevideo, the high school Impulse, a private institution financed by donations. Its first 100 students were chosen between 377 applicants. The result? At the end of the year the desertion had been null, as well as the repetition. The class schedule is extensive, Monday through Friday 8,00 to 18,00 and Saturdays from 9,00 to 13.00, and there are classes during part of the summer. It is clear that the exigencies are high; nevertheless, the parents of 530 children, of a potential population of 1.215, postulated their children to be part of the second cohort that began in March 2014.

The poverty in Greater Buenos Aires provides another illustration. The drop in public elementary schools reached 11% in 2013. Why? Probably due to the decision by parents who search of a better future for their kids, making economic sacrifices to afford a private school or making the decision of sending them to public schools this side of General Paz Avenue. This fact is consistent with the migration towards public schools in Buenos Aires City which will receive on average 10% of their students from the Province of Buenos Aires, reaching 29% in Commune 12, that borders with Greater Buenos Aires.

The examples are clear, in each one of them very poor families take decisions looking for a better education for their children. Therefore, what excuses are there to leave in hands of bureaucrats a decision that should be taken only by the parents, without being constrained by their economic possibilities?

Nevertheless, the whole political class, regardless of whether they represent the government or the opposition, refuse even to consider this type of proposal. They strongly defend public education with emotional arguments, but send their kids to private schools. Don't you think that it is time to ask them why?