

**Every Child can Learn, if the Government Does not Prevent it**  
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“If we fight for education we will overcome poverty”. Although I'd like to be the author of this phrase, it is from Domingo F. Sarmiento. Without education it is not possible to generate human capital and without it sustained growth is not feasible and much less the social mobility essential to improve the distribution of income.

During the long electoral process that we are leaving behind, many candidates have made emotional speeches asking for a better education but, how many of those who may be elected will do something about it?

After all, it would probably be more appropriate to face the educational crisis in the Congress than in the classrooms, where the teachers put at risk even their physical integrity in order to educate our children.

For example, how many of them would support a law, like the effective one in Uruguay, which facilitates the management of private schools that are financed by contributions of firms and individuals. These institutions do not receive any subsidy from the State and offer high school education to teenagers who live below the line of poverty, reaching similar academic results as the best schools in the country.

Let us consider the facts. On February 23, *El País*, the main newspaper of Montevideo, published a note describing how in the *Liceo Impulso* (a private, free and secular high school) located in Casavalle, one of the poorest districts of the city, only 2.5% of the students repeated in 2014. In another high school of the same neighborhood, *Liceo Jubilar*, private, free and religious, the repetition rate reached 6%. By way of comparison, in a public high school in Casavalle 42.58% of the students failed.

The *Liceo Jubilar* obtained notoriety on March 2013 when Pope Francisco, four days after being elected, recognized its work and praised its founder, the Jesuit priest Gonzalo Aemilius. “I want to thank you for your work”, said Francisco embracing the priest in front of the altar of the packed *Iglesia de Santa Ana* and he added: “I want you to know a priest (...) who has been working for a long time with the children of the street. He has made a school for them, he has done so much in order to make Jesus known. Today all these children work, they have studies, and they have the human capital to work”.

The school finances itself by donations from firms and people who support the project. *El País* mentions that “one of its first contributors was the Pope Francisco, when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires”.

In his message last Christmas, the Archbishop of Montevideo Daniel Sturla highlighted that the experiences of free private high schools “demonstrate that if you want to it is possible”, and he added: “If we multiply the *Jubilares* in Montevideo and in Uruguay it will provide a serious and responsible educational answer that would help young people to receive proper education”.

The high school *Impulso* began to operate in 2013. Its first 100 students were chosen by a drawing between 377 applicants. Most of them had problems in reading and writing, and they did not know many mathematical operations. For instance, 85% of the students were unable to apply the tables.

At the end of the first semester 92 children passed the English exams, even though at the beginning of the year only 9 of them had some knowledge of the language. By the same token, only 3 failed the math's exam, when at the beginning of the year 38 had failed. By the end of the year the desertion had been null.

The class schedule is demanding, Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. It is clear that the exigencies are high. Nevertheless 530 children, from a potential population of 1,215, applied to the second promotion that began in March 2014. In words of its principal: “530 kids who want to study 10 hours from Monday to Friday and 6 hours on Saturdays, 530 kids who know that they cannot be absent (except because of an illness), 530 kids who want to get out of the street”.

The Uruguayan legislation (Art. 78, Law 18,083/2006 and its modification, Art. 269, Law 18.834/2011) facilitates the operation of “private elemental or high school institutions whose object is the education of the poorest population”. As it is highlighted in the web page of *Impulso*: “As an illustration, the companies donate 100 \$ and the real cost for them is 18.75 \$, because 75% of what they donate can be applied directly to pay income taxes and the other 25% is a deductible cost for the tax.”.

Thanks to this legislation, in 2014 *Jubilar* received 575,000 U\$S and *Impulso* received 2.849.000 U\$S, 17% from the companies that made the donations and the rest from the State.

Last April, Cardinal Sturla answered the complaints of the Teachers Union against this type of schools. He said that “if we put the kids in the center we have to support them. If a school is public or private it does not matter. What matters is to save the kids, because if we do not they fall into what we already know, school desertion and therefore what that brings: the drugs, the street corner, the beer”.

In our country, we speak a lot about education but very little is done to change an educational system that has failed. As from December 10 the new legislators will have the opportunity to propose a legislation like the one described in this note. If they do not do so, it would be another illustration of this sad fact.

“If we fight for education we will overcome poverty”. The intention of this short note is to be part of this fight.