

In Education it's Time to Learn**Edgardo Zablotzky, Member of the National Academy of Education and Vice-Chancellor of the Universidad del CEMA
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Last December I wrote a column in this newspaper about an unexpected event that has created the conditions for Argentina, in the face of the tremendous educational reality inherited by the government of Mauricio Macri, to start seriously discussing the advantages and disadvantages of school choice. This event was the unforeseen triumph of Donald Trump, who has proposed school choice as a policy since the beginning of the US presidential campaign.

At that time, I stated that his selection of Betsy DeVos - a big advocate for school choice issues such as charter schools and vouchers - as secretary of Education, a position equivalent to our minister of Education, offered strong credibility to the likelihood that we are facing a significant change in the education system in the United States.

Today, more than two months on, it is clear that this is the case. The position of Betsy DeVos on such issues is in no doubt, thanks to an interview she gave in 2013. At that time, when thinking about a Trump presidency was not in anyone's imagination, she said that her dream was "that all parents, regardless of their zip code, have had the opportunity to choose the best educational setting for their children. And that all students have had the opportunity to fulfill their God-given potential".

For his part, Jeb Bush, the former Republican presidential candidate and former governor of Florida, expressed through his account on Facebook: "Betsy DeVos has a long and distinguished history defending the right of all parents to choose better schools that guarantee the success of their children. Her loyalty is to the families, especially to those very poor who struggle to subsist, not to an obsolete model of public education that has failed them from one generation to the next".

Of all Trump's Cabinet choices, none generated progressive opposition as strongly as his Education secretary nominee. The Democrats of the Senate voted in block against her and managed to convince two Republicans and two independents of their case. This made it necessary, for the first time in history, for the vice-president to vote in order to break the tie for confirming a nominee to the cabinet.

Actually, the Democrats in the US are terrified by the prospect that she will succeed. Usually, secretary of Education is a banal assignment within an administration. But, at this time, if DeVos demonstrates the benefits in allowing parents to choose how their children are educated, it would be a strong defeat for the teachers unions, and for all the bureaucratic structure that profits from the monopoly power of the public school, generally at the expense of the education of those who have less.

It is no secret why Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers, called DeVos the "most anti-public education nominee in the history of the department". If students are given the freedom to be educated outside the system that the teachers' unions have helped to create, there will be less public school teachers, their level of union dues will fall and, is even more important, much less money will be pumped into the campaigns helping to elect Democratic candidates.

Indeed, the educational reform that is on the verge of being carried out by the new US government, an administration that has announced absolutely incorrect policies in other areas but whose education policy is worthy of consideration, finds similarities with the educational revolution carried out in Sweden during the last 20 years.

In this regard, Mario Vargas Llosa asked himself years ago in an interesting article: “How many of the readers of this article know that in Sweden there is a system of school vouchers that has been working for years, stimulating competition between schools and allowing parents greater freedom in the choice of the schools where they want to educate their children? I myself, at least, did not know. Before, in Sweden, you belonged to the school of your neighborhood. Now, the parents decide where they want to educate their children, whether in public or private institutions, and the State simply provides them with a voucher to pay for those services”.

Why not evaluate an educational system that privileges freedom as one of course appropriate to our reality? No one could ever be worse off for having the possibility to choose.

Is it not time, if our government wants to carry out a true revolution of the education system, to leave behind the fear of freedom that has contaminated Argentine society in the past, and consider it as a possibility? I really think so.