

Macri's Educational Policy will be better than his Predecessor's
Entrevista a Edgardo Zablotzky, Vice-chancellor, Universidad del CEMA
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Despite the recent change of government, Edgardo Zablotzky can't help but to be sensitive and defensive when explaining his pro-market proposals. As a Ph. D in Economics and Finance from the University of Chicago, he is aware that he is at odds with the prevailing Zeitgeist of Argentine education.

However, in this Herald interview in his vice-chancellor's office at Universidad del CEMA, Zablotzky criticizes President Mauricio Macri's lack of ambition, saying the proposals brought forward by the government are "barely an evolution" from the situation seen during the Kirchnerite administrations.

What's your take on Macri's state-of-the-nation address regarding education?

I agree with his diagnosis — today there is no equality of opportunities. The last 10 years were terrible: once and again, the PISA examinations proved that the country is faring poorly not only worldwide but also compared with the rest of the region. Lots of poor people are attending private schools — not the best ones, of course, but the ones they can afford. The president's proposals of compulsory education from age three, extended schooling and nationwide tests are all good, reasonable ideas. But that's not a "revolution in education" as he said in his speech. That's barely an evolution that won't solve the serious education problems in Argentina.

The government wants to create an assessment institute to evaluate teachers, what do you think about that?

Teacher evaluations are useful, but I also believe that the results of those assessments should be universally available, something that's now impossible — even in legal terms. A revolution in education should give a much more important role to parents. In 1995, Steve Jobs gave a rare interview for a Smithsonian oral history project in which he regretted that parents have lost all control over schools, and that's what's happening here. We should send a bill to Congress allowing parents to know the results and contents of those evaluations.

Don't you believe other social actors involved with the school, such as headmasters and other school leaders, should be assessed as well?

Of course, it all helps the parents decide where to send their children. But it's important to take into account the Uruguayan model.

What happens in Uruguay?

Uruguay has a law establishing that for each 100 pesos that the companies donate, 75 can be deducted from tax as long as the money goes to a number of schools in deprived areas. That led to the creation of private, free schools, such as the Liceo Jubilar

(religious) and the Liceo Impulso (non-religious). Academic results from those schools showed amazing outcomes, similar to the results of the best schools in the country. What's the lesson here? That if you put good teachers and invest money, you're able to radically change these children's lives. You just have to allow NGOs to play a complementary role to that of the government. What do I care if it's the government or a private entity that is teaching kids from the Villa 31 shantytown? What I want is to save them from poverty.

Why can't the government play that role? Isn't the state giving up its role in controlling what's being taught in the country's classrooms?

No. The state has a role in education — to decide minimum teaching contents — and nobody's questioning that part. Let it play it by allowing NGOs to invest in education. I want the government not to suffocate private initiative in a sector where the investor can add value, that's all.

Another proposal of yours is tied to the "German dual system" of vocational training. What's this model about?

The goal of this system is to provide solutions to three real problems: the sector of population who does not work nor study — commonly referred to as the "ni-ni" —, the situation of beneficiaries of social programmes and high secondary school dropout rates. I believe the dual education system is the best way to deal with that. Is it expensive? Sure. But the United States faced a similar problem by the end of the Second World War, when millions of veterans returned from the front without labour skills, and the solution they found was to implement a programme to ensure the returning veteran's rights to reemployment.

Why is it called a "dual system"?

The proposal is to have students not interested in, or qualified for, university to spend a significant amount of time in their workplace, even before they graduate from high school, while earning one third of a skilled worker's salary. It's a dual system because through the learning process, a student increases the training time in the company and reduces the time in the school. What would you say is better — to have 19-year-olds at work or to have thousands of 20-to-30-year-old youths vegetating at the university?

The previous administration boasted of having invested six percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in education...

This is not about the famous six percent. Poland, with a much smaller budget, has turned around its situation in education. I believe this government will do a better job than the previous one. But I insist: it should initiate a revolution in education, with brave measures.