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No incentive scheme will attract the best students from high school toward teaching

By **Edgardo Zablotzky**

Pay should be linked to performance to make the option attractive again

Mauricio Macri, in his opening speech at the Congress, said that “to insert Argentina in the 21st century all starts with education. Therefore, Education Minister (Esteban) Bullrich, together with all the education ministers of the provinces, designed an agreement called the Purmamarca Declaration which states the guidelines for the educational revolution we want to strengthen.”

One of these guides proposes to “encourage via various incentives that the best high school students are attracted towards the teaching profession).”

This column argues that this is not feasible. Beyond their vocation, no system of incentives will attract the best high school students to choose a profession in which their pay is not linked to their performance.

Let us begin by assessing the importance of the role of the teachers. Teachers' salaries can be understood as the payment for one of the most important activities in today's society of knowledge, providing basic education for our children, which will have lasting effects throughout their lifetime. The problem is that these effects will be seen many years later, so it is very difficult to assess the contribution of teachers to the future of their students.

In September 2014 The American Economic Review published a paper by R. Chetty and J. Friedman from Harvard University, and J. Rockoff from Columbia, which estimates the contribution. In order to do that, it follows the lives of 2.5 million students over 20 years.

The results are striking. Often we sense that a teacher can influence the future of a child, but what the study shows is that the effect is much more important than thought. To be lucky enough to be instructed by a very good teacher instead of an unqualified one generates significant differences for life.

Fortunately, perhaps the most important result that the authors report is that the long-term difference between students who have average teachers and those of poor performance is also substantial.

Therefore, this is not about demanding an élite level — in no profession do the majority of participants qualify under that criterion — but only to avoid that our children be educated by teachers who lack the necessary qualifications.

For example, the study suggests that in USA replacing a teacher of poor performance by one of average performance during one school year may represent an income difference of U\$266,000 throughout their entire working life for the group of students of his class. If we multiply this by the years in which he practises his profession, the cost of a non-qualified teacher is potentially huge.

How to get the best high school students to choose a teaching career? Steve Jobs gives us the right answer.

In 1995 the Smithsonian Institution conducted an interview in which Jobs illustrated the problem with a simple example: “I wish the people who teach my children to be good enough to qualify for a position in our company, earning a yearly salary of U\$100,000. Why should they work in a school for U\$35,000 if they can get a job in our company for U\$ 100,000?”

When a high school graduate chooses his career, he takes into account, in addition to his vocation, the possibilities of professional growth that the career will offer in the future. Let us imagine a career where performance has no chance of being reflected in the salary. Who is expected to be attracted? Those young people who have obtained the best averages in high school or those only interested in meeting a schedule and guaranteeing a secure salary? The answer is straightforward.

Let's see evidence in this regard from a study conducted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, published in the Wall Street Journal on October 24, 2014: The Equity Project Charter School.

A charter school receives public funding but operates independently. The charter of the school is a contract which details mission, programmes, goals, etc. Equity Project Charter School began operating in New York in 2009 with the aim of implementing the conclusion of a large number of studies: the quality of the teachers is the most important intramural factor for the students' success.

In order to attract high-quality teachers they offered yearly salaries of U\$125,000, almost twice the salaries of the public schools in the city. The project had to make concessions in order not to resort to any other source of funding, despite paying higher salaries, by including larger classes and even paying the director less than the teachers.

The result? The WSJ reports that the study to evaluate the programme shows that after four years, compared to students in a nearby public school of similar ethnicity, socio-economic status and similar results on standardized exams at the beginning of the experience, the differences were overwhelming — children enrolled in the eighth grade of the charter school showed in math tests a difference of an average year of knowledge regarding the control group, over half a year in science and almost another half a year in language.

Teachers matter a lot, and the salaries, as in any other profession, are an important factor to attract the

best candidates towards the career.

Beyond vocation, why would the best high school graduates choose a career in which their salary is not linked to their performance? Do you think that the best high school graduates would be attracted to it? It seems to me reasonable to state that they would not, and a system of scholarships or incentives would change nothing.

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