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Chile's Longtime Voucher Plan Provides No Pat Answers

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The father of the world's most ambitious school **voucher** program doesn't get a lot of mention from proponents of such arrangements.

He's Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, the Army general who hijacked Chilean democracy in 1973 and may yet stand trial for political crimes. The Pinochet regime adopted free-market principles for public services, notably privatizing much of the nation's education system.

By the same token, the status of that shift doesn't get much play from opponents of **vouchers**. While many of **Chile's** 15 million people would like to bring to a close the bitter chapter of their history associated with Gen. Pinochet, the system that subsidizes private schools through **vouchers** has become a settled aspect of Chilean life.

"It is part of the landscape," says Cristián D. Cox, a highly respected civil servant who heads the curriculum and assessment division of the Chilean Ministry of Education. "We have accepted that the pressures of competition can be put to good use, and the focus of attention now is not the funding system, but the quality of our learning results."

For many U.S. policymakers and scholars, for whom school choice is a hotly contested issue, the Chilean experience with **vouchers** remains a fascinating model. **Voucher** proponents' hopes were raised this year by President Bush, whose wide-ranging education plan includes a proposal for publicly financed **vouchers** for children in persistently failing schools.

Going Private

In 1980, the Pinochet government--inspired by the work of the American free-market economist Milton Friedman--began sending public money to private schools nationwide based on enrollment. In a companion measure, the entire system was decentralized, with **Chile's** more than 300 municipalities assuming control of public schools from the national government. The new municipal schools, too, were subsidized based on the number of students enrolled. Both the public and private schools basically get the same amount of money per pupil, though there are some exceptions.

At the same time, the military regime also undid most of the job protections afforded teachers under the old, more centralized system, including a uniform pay

scale and tenure.

The economic idea behind the changes was to free up competitive forces that would make for the best education at the lowest price in subsidized schools throughout the country, which snakes its way along 2,650 miles on the Pacific coast of South America.

The political idea was to give parents more choice over the schools their children would attend, while putting decisions about public schools more directly into local hands.

One striking effect of the changes was the exodus of about 20 percent of **Chile's** students from the public to the private sector, where for-profit schools mushroomed as public money became available to run them. Today, more than 40 percent of **Chile's** primary students attend private schools. About 8 percent of that group go to elite private institutions that are not government-subsidized, a proportion that has changed little over the years even before **vouchers** were first offered. The rest attend private **voucher** schools, some of them Roman Catholic, but many of them independently owned.

Families can theoretically choose not only between private and public schools, but also among the public schools, because municipalities do not limit attendance by residence. There are, however, practical and other limits to school choice.

Most private schools of either type, for instance, are in cities, so in more sparsely populated areas, municipal schools are often the only option.

Further, since 1993, private voucher schools--as well as municipal high schools--have been allowed to charge parents fees on top of the per-pupil grants from the government. And any school with a good reputation is tempted to do its own choosing among students, taking those who are easier to educate and limiting the choices open to parents of children who represent greater challenges.

Those matters concern education officials, who have put in place policies--such as mandatory scholarships --that try to mitigate the tendency for schools to segregate along economic and social lines.

"It's an attempt to have it both ways," Mr. Cox said, "to have the market incentives but not the [social] segmentation" that often goes with them.

And yet, schools do largely sort out by class. Poor children are much more likely, for instance, to attend municipal schools than are middle-class children. Some of the stratification seems to result from parents' preferences.

American economists Martin Carnoy and Patrick McEwan, working together, and Varun Gauri, working independently of that pair, found that Chilean parents are not particularly informed about the quality of schools. Nor are they necessarily impressed by such features as small classes or high test scores, though better-off better-educated parents pay some attention to the latter.

"Parents don't think in terms of value added by a school," said Mr. Carnoy, a professor of education and economics at Stanford University. "Many just want to send their kids to a school with a slightly higher socioeconomic background than

their own."

As for student achievement, **Chile's** national tests indicate that students in private schools do better than those in public schools. The picture grows more complicated, though, when students' family backgrounds are taken into consideration, as several researchers have done.

Catholic **voucher** schools--but not private **voucher** schools as a whole--produced slightly better results for students than municipal schools did. On the other hand, municipal schools did slightly better for poor children than the private subsidized schools, Catholic ones included.

Whether competition has helped all schools improve as places of learning is a matter of debate among researchers. But many would agree with Mr. Gauri of the World Bank that a choice system did not fundamentally transform Chilean education, as its partisans had hoped. "Education is so much more complicated than that," he observed.

[Key to Growth](#)

Other experts, including many Chileans, say that a focus on choice misses a more fundamental point--the nation's willingness to pay for education.

During the 1980s, the last of the Pinochet years, education spending went down 30 percent. But in the following decade, the dictator's elected successors defined education as the key to continued prosperity and forged a consensus in favor of schools. Spending more than doubled.

"Between the municipal and the private [subsidized] schools, there was a very marked difference during the '80s, but not now," Mr. Cox said. "The material differences don't exist, because of the investments we have made."

In the 1990s, the government launched programs aimed at rural and poor urban schools, especially the 10 percent with the worst student performance. New money has also been channeled into a curriculum overhaul, teacher training, school libraries, and a nationwide educational computer network.

Most costly of all has been the abolition of double shifts for schools. Officials believe that lengthening the day will yield dividends not only in more learning time, but also in better teaching, as "taxi teachers" stay put at one school. Teachers typically worked two shifts--in the morning at one school and in the afternoon at another--in order to earn more money. The change is being phased in, with more than half the nation's 3.2 million elementary and secondary students now enrolled in whole-day programs.

David T. Conley, a professor of education at the University of Oregon who has worked with leaders of teacher-preparation programs in **Chile**, says in his view the **voucher** system has helped make possible an impressive national commitment to universal education of high quality.

"I see all this government effort on a scale that doesn't come close to what we are doing" in the United States, Mr. Conley said. In **Chile**, even with half the students in private schools, "there is broad-based support for the public school reforms," he

said.

Sense of Urgency

Chilean officials see signs of progress, but also feel a sense of urgency. Scores on national achievement tests rose some 20 percent from 1990 to 1996. But they have since leveled off, sparking a national debate about the effectiveness of the 1990s reforms. Meanwhile, the gap between the best-and the worst-performing government-subsidized schools has narrowed.

Mr. Cox points out, however, that in a 1999 international comparison of mathematics and science achievement, **Chile** ranked 35th out of 38 nations. Never mind that it was the only South American country to participate, or that it has long ranked high for the continent in literacy and school-completion rates.

"We are acutely aware," Mr. Cox said, "that either we improve those results or education will not be making its strategic contribution to the development prospects of the country."

PHOTO (COLOR): Both public and private schools in **Chile** receive public financing. In the past decade, the central government also has increased education spending, especially for poor urban and rural schools.

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By Bess Keller

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