Chilean Students Launch Massive Education-Reform Movement

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Five years after the famed revolución de los pingüinos (penguin revolution) erupted along the streets of Santiago, Chile’s students are once again experiencing a winter of serious discontent, leading a series of massive demonstrations that many observers describe as the largest since the end of the Gen. Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990).

The 2006 student uprising (Notisur, June 23, 2006) came as an early blow for the center-left administration of President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), which eventually agreed to demands that it scrap Chile’s much maligned Ley Orgánica Constitucional de Enseñanza (LOCE), an educational framework law passed by decree just days before Pinochet stepped down.

Symbolically, at least, the decision marked a huge victory for Chile’s striking primary and secondary students, nicknamed penguins for their black and white uniforms. In 2009, the Bachelet administration officially replaced the LOCE with the congressionally approved Ley General de Educación (LGE). Critics now say, however, that, although the LGE may have more legal legitimacy than its Pinochet-era predecessor, it’s done little to fix the underlying quality and cost problems that plague the country’s education system.

Decentralized during the Pinochet regime, Chile’s public schools are now run at the municipal level. Not surprisingly, wealthy communities with more resources at their disposal are able to offer better-quality education than are poor communities, where classroom conditions are downright dismal in some cases.

"In many technical schools, it still rains inside [through leaks]. There are schools where they put a lock on the toilet so it can only be flushed twice a day—to save water. Those kinds of examples are everywhere," Francisco Figueroa, vice president of the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Chile (FECH), said in a recent interview with the leftist.

The differences are reflected clearly in high school graduation rates and in the results of Chile’s standardized university entrance exam, the Prueba de Selección Universitaria (PSU). Students from wealthier municipalities tend to score higher. Private-school students score higher still. Of the 520 students with the best results on last year’s PSU, 351 came from private schools. Results of the math portion of the test revealed, furthermore, that public-school students from the lowest-income bracket tend to score more than 100 points lower (448 points versus 542 points) than equally poor students who managed, because of scholarships, to study in private schools.

"The PSU is a thermometer that may very well be showing us that we have a fever," Juan Manuel Zolezzi, president of the Consorsio de Universidades del Estado de Chile, explained this past January.

The situation is more or less reversed at the university level. Chile’s top university, the Universidad de Chile, is public—yet it receives just 14% of its budget from the state. Like the country’s other
"public" universities, it relies heavily on tuition fees. Needless to say, the many private universities that began proliferating during the Pinochet dictatorship are tuition-based as well.

Backers of the system say the booming private-school industry has greatly expanded access to higher education. Private institutions now award some 80% of Chile’s university diplomas. Quality, however, varies greatly among the for-profit schools, which are also criticized for leaving students in many cases with unmanageable debt burdens.

"A lot of universities, to do business, end up accepting students who don’t understand [the contracts] they read," Mario Waissbluth of the organization Fundación Educación 2020 told BBC Mundo. "Half of them end up dropping out or in debt. This was a bomb just waiting to explode at some moment."

Protests of historic proportions

That moment arrived in late May, when students first began occupying schools and leading marches through Santiago and other Chilean cities. By June the protests had developed into a full-blown national movement. Students have occupied well over 100 schools and participated—alongside teachers and other labor-union workers—in huge street demonstrations.

An estimated 80,000 demonstrated in Santiago on June 17. Students led an even larger demonstration two weeks later, on June 30, when an estimated 200,000 people marched to Santiago’s downtown La Moneda presidential palace. Organizers said an additional 200,000 people participated in demonstrations in other Chilean cities. Media reports said the demonstrations were the largest since Chile’s return to democracy in 1990.

"The march demonstrates that this movement for public education is real. It needs to be taken into account, because if not, we are going to keep reproducing education based on inequality; we do not want more market education," Jaime Gajardo, president of the Colegio de Profesores, told reporters.

Topping the protestors’ list of demands is that the government increase overall education spending and re-establish state control of the municipal-run public-school system. Chile invests roughly 4% of its GDP in public education, according to 2008 statistics available from the CIA World Factbook. The US and United Kingdom invest roughly 5.5% of GDP. In Latin America, Chile is outpaced in its education spending not only by neighboring Argentina (4.5% of GDP) but also by Costa Rica and Bolivia, which each shell out roughly 6.3% of GDP.

In addition, the student protestors demand more university scholarships for middle- and lower-class students, an extension of their reduced-fare bus passes—to cover the entire calendar year, not just the academic year—and changes to the university entrance process, which is based solely on PSU performance.

They are also making it clear they want President Sebastián Piñera to sack Education Minister Joaquín Lavín of the far-right Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI). Many observers view Lavín as a potential candidate to succeed Piñera as president in the 2014 election.

Unlike many of his Cabinet colleagues, whom Piñera plucked directly from the boardrooms of Chile’s leading corporations (Notisur, Feb. 19, 2010), Lavín has a long political trajectory that dates back to the Pinochet dictatorship. He later served as mayor of Santiago and twice ran for president, narrowly losing to President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006) in the 2000 election (Notisur, Jan. 21, 2000).
Like his fellow ministers, however, Lavín—an economics graduate from the University of Chicago—has also enjoyed success in the private sector. Together with fellow "Chicago Boy" Cristián Larroulet, also a member of Piñera’s Cabinet, he help found the Universidad del Desarrollo (UDD), one of Chile’s most prestigious and successful private universities.

Lavín claims he sold off his shares in the private school before assuming the role of education minister. The student protestors suspect that may not be entirely true. And even if it is, they say, Lavín’s UDD background still presents a major conflict of interest. At the behest of the student demonstrators, Chile’s Controlaría has opened an investigation into Minister Lavín’s financial records vis-à-vis the university.

"So far, Joaquín Lavín has simply evaded questions about potential ethical and moral problems associated with his position as minister," said the FECH’s Figueroa. "He’s from a party [the UDI] that considers itself the moral authority in this country. But when we Chileans want to know the truth about his ties to for-profit education, we receive nothing but evasions."

Protestors Say "No Deal"

Recent poll numbers suggest the ongoing protests are taking a real toll on Lavín’s level of approval—down 24 percentage points in just one month, according to results published last week by the polling firm Adimark.

Yet as bad as the Adimark results were for the education minister, whose approval rating now stands at 46%, they were worse still for President Piñera, whose level of support fell to a paltry 31%, down from 36% in May. Eight months ago, 63% of Chileans backed Piñera, who slipped into a protracted sophomore slump long before the current education-reform movement erupted (NotiSur, June 10, 2011).

A historic low in the post-Pinochet political era, the conservative leader’s dismal approval rating is not completely without precedent. His predecessor, President Bachelet, also got off to a rough start, pummeled in the polls by the penguin revolution and by the disastrous implementation in early 2007 of Transantiago, an awkward overhaul of Santiago’s city bus system (NotiSur, April 13, 2007). By September of that year, Bachelet saw her approval rating dip below 40%. Two and a half years later, she left office to a virtual standing ovation, with a record-high approval mark of over 80%.

Whether Piñera is able to pull off a similar comeback remains to be seen. First and foremost, he will have to figure out a way to get Chile’s students out of the streets and back into classrooms. His strategies so far seem to be having little effect.

In mid-June his government offered a US$75 million package to help offset university costs. The FECH and the Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile (CONFECH), the two principal student organizations leading the reform movement, scoffed at the offer and returned to the streets.

Lavin tried, on June 28, to defuse the student uprising by pushing forward the winter vacation by two weeks, meaning that, if the students continue to protest, they will do so on their own time. Classes are set to resume July 23. To make up for the lost weeks of school, he also decided to extend the school year—which normally ends before Christmas—to mid-January. That strategy, too, did little to tone down student frustrations.

Finally, on July 5, President Piñera took to the airwaves, broaching the education issue in a nationally televised address in which he promised to create a US$4 billion national education fund.
and increase the number of annual scholarships for technical-professional training from 70,000 to 120,000. He also promised to bring interest rates on student loans down to 4%.

"In recent weeks, we have seen marches and demonstrations by many high school and university students, demanding a better education. We have listened to them with great attention. And they are right," said Piñera. "But together with their rights, the students also have obligations: students must attend classes, and, when they demonstrate, do so in a peaceful way without violence or vandalism, respecting the rights of others. It is time to put bring the takeovers and protests to an end and begin again down the road of dialogue and agreements."

Even with the promise of US$4 billion in additional public spending, Chile’s students say they are not yet willing to give up the struggle. Calling Piñera’s promises "more of the same," CONFECHE noted with frustration that the president refuses their demand that he return control of the public-school system to the central government.

"[The president’s proposals] follow along the same lines of what’s been pushed through for the past 30 years," CONFECHE head Camila Vallejo told reporters. "What’s more, it’s a step back when it comes to the issues of for-profit education and ending municipal control of the system, things he clearly didn’t touch on."

On July 14, students again took to the streets. Organizers estimated the crowd in Santiago at 100,000, though police claimed there were just 30,000 protestors. Later in the day President Piñera admitted his government "has made mistakes," but again called on the students to end the demonstrations. CONFECHE says it will not back down until Chile has a "democratic, pluralistic, and quality public-education system."

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