



Low cost private schools for the poor: What public policy is appropriate?

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ABSTRACT

Recent attention has focused on the existence of non-government schools that cater to children from low-income families. These schools can now be found in the majority of developing countries, many of which have a prescribed public policy to provide free public education. This raises the question, why would a low-income family choose to send a child to a fee-paying school if a place in a free school were available? This paper will report on case studies of low-fee schools in Jamaica, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Indonesia and Pakistan and will assess the reasons for their increased demand. In the past, some have argued that development assistance agencies should limit assistance to public school sector. Others have argued that the public sector is inadequate and in many ways has failed in its ambitions to provide a minimum quality for every child.

This paper will consider what public policy should be toward low-cost private schools, including the policy of development assistance agencies which seek to assist low and middle income countries as well as the appropriate public policy for national and local governments. The paper will conclude with several recommendations. One recommendation is that although children from low-income families attend non-government schools, they continue to be citizens; hence they should not be excluded from poverty assistance strategies. A second recommendation is to expand government statistical functions so that non-government schools are regularly included in the calculations of enrollment rates. Lastly, the paper does not recommend voucher or other program of publically financed school choice on the grounds that the public sector should remain the main conduit for public schooling. It does, however, raise questions as to the limits of the public sector in delivering high quality schooling and whether these limits should be more candidly acknowledged.

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1. Non-government schools¹

1.1. History

At one time or another, non-government schools have played a role in nearly every country's educational history. Throughout the world, schools not controlled (or operated) by the government provided the first formal educational opportunities for children—whether begun by individuals, the private sector or religious organizations. However, these were often elite non-government schools, only accessible to the country's wealthiest citizens. The visible nature of elite non-government schools has given rise to the common misconception that all non-government schools are for the wealthy, thus making the mere possibility of low-fee non-government schools in developing countries seem paradoxical to

some. In the modern education age, however, when nearly all nations have accepted that education is a basic human right that should be made available to all, 'non-government schools for the poor' have become a distinct reality in nearly all developing countries.

1.1.1. Governmental support

In Bhutan, Cameroon, Chile, Colombia, Haiti, Swaziland, Aruba, and Trinidad and Tobago, among others, governments appear to have accepted that the non-government sector is necessary and that it can fulfill a role that the public system cannot (or will not). Perhaps best known is the large-scale Chilean voucher program in which the government provides per-pupil vouchers for students to attend private schools (both those owned by private franchises and those independently owned) (Arenas, 2004; Elacqua et al., 2009; Hsieh and Urquiola, 2006; McEwan and Carnoy, 2000; Somers et al., 2004). Several other countries have also implemented voucher reforms but these will be discussed in a later section on alternative models (2.3.2). In 2009, India adopted The Right To Education Law, which requires that 25 percent of the first grade places in non-government schools be offered to children from low-income families. The government promises to reimburse the cost

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¹ We have chosen to use the term "non-government schools" due to the connotation that "private" often has with regard to being elite and/or for-profit. However, the terms non-government, private, independent and preparatory (in the case of Jamaica) are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

of tuition for these low-income students. About 10 percent of India's children in lower primary and about 25 percent in upper primary attend non-government schools (Ahmed and Govinda, 2010, p. 372).

Taking a less direct approach, the government of Bhutan conducted extensive school-mapping in order to assess the public system's shortcomings and subsequently worked with communities to set up non-government schools to account for the under-supply of public school spaces (Bray, 2002; Kitaev, 2004). In the Philippines, as well as Trinidad and Tobago, the government has taken to purchasing seats in private schools in order to meet excess demand for education (Kitaev, 2004; Patrinos, 2006). In addition to an eight-year voucher program experiment, the Colombian government has recently turned to the idea of contracting out to private organizations to run schools designed for low-income students (Angrist et al., 2002; Bettinger, 2005; Cox and Jimenez, 1990; Uribe et al., 2006; Villa and Duarte, 2005).

At the other end of the spectrum are countries like Barbados, Mauritius, Nepal and Uzbekistan. All of these countries (in addition to several other transitional economies) have governments that strongly believe the delivery of education to their nation's children is the sole responsibility of the state. The most extreme of these is Nepal, where the non-government education system has faced extreme adversity from the Maoist movement, often in the form of demonstrations in Kathmandu (Caddell, 2007).

1.2. Expansion of non-government schools

The majority of developing countries in the world fall somewhere between these two categories—with government support and regulatory measures ranging from clearly delineated and strictly enforced to non-existent. While the relative size, support and impact of low-fee private schools vary by country, there are two seemingly ubiquitous reasons for the rise of the sector in developing countries. The first reason, alluded to in the previous section, is that inadequate or uneven distribution of government finance leads to demand for schooling that non-government schools can fill (Colclough, 1997). The second reason is low quality and/or inefficient public education. In other words, non-government schools have proliferated in developing countries in order to meet excess demand resulting from an insufficient supply of public school spaces and/or to provide alternatives to a failing public education system. While wealthy families have traditionally used private schools as alternatives to the public system, in the past few decades this same trend has been seen for low-income families as well.

Phillipson et al. (2008) provides additional reasons. He suggests that low-cost private education has increased in developing countries in recent years due, in part, to an oversupply of teachers, hidden costs in government schools, high private tuition (in high-fee schools), a preferable language of instruction, poor public performance (i.e., academic achievement) and religious preference. In addition, Tooley (2009) claims that low-cost private schools are likely to provide lower teacher absenteeism (due to increased accountability to parents and school owners), more engaged teachers (due to more local recruitment), smaller class sizes and more individualized attention. Although there is evidence in the literature and from our recent fieldwork in six case study countries to support the claims by both Phillipson and Tooley, low-cost non-government schools are not without their problems and controversies (discussed in the following section).

1.3. Debates and controversies

Several arguments have been used against the use of non-government schools to achieve universal basic education. The

first concerns the fact that basic education is a human right that only states can deliver. The argument holds that for-profit institutions have no essential interest in delivering education services to the poor and non-profit charities cannot deliver services on a national scale without relying on a public subsidy, essentially making them a public responsibility even if the state contracts for the service delivery. This argument holds that states have the moral and legal responsibility to protect minorities, promote equity and diminish exclusion (Lewin, 2007, p. 42).

Second, if non-subsidized providers in low-income communities depend on community revenue, including tuition, they are essentially drawing down the community's wealth. The availability of income to support non-government schools is much more limited in low-income countries than in high-income countries, among other things because of the differences in the age dependency ratios. Relative to GDP/capita, teacher salaries in low-income countries may be six times than those in high-income countries. Additionally, available domestic revenue is only 15 percent of GDP compared to 40 percent in wealthy countries. This suggests that the social cost of basic education is significantly higher in low-income countries, hence arguments for non-government schools in high-income countries cannot easily be applied in low-income countries (Lewin, 2007, p. 43). Ultimately, as Watkins (2004) puts it, "Should the world's poorest people really be expected to choose between health and the education of their children? And what is the market rationale to suggest that such choices make sense for the rest of society?" (p. 9).

Third, the claims of greater efficiency, lower cost, higher quality and higher relevance in the non-government sector can only be true under certain conditions. These include "informed choice, transparent accountability, adequate regulation and an effective legal framework," and these rarely, if ever pertain to the reality of the poorest households in developing countries (Lewin, 2007, p. 44). The lack of informed choice, in particular, is especially troubling. Opponents of non-government schooling claim that without sufficient information low-cost private schools will simply be taking advantage of poor parents (Probe, 1999; Watkins, 2004).

Fourth, it has been suggested that there is no OECD or rapidly developing country that has depended on non-government provision to achieve universal attendance in basic education. This is because basic education has a wide range of externalities, which are naturally provided through state involvement. (Lewin, 2007, p. 44)

The fifth argument is that relying on non-government schools can undermine the public education system. Parents may choose to enroll their children in non-government schools because of shortcomings in the public system. While this may prove to be an appropriate (short-term) fix for the students who move, it may 'skim' the public system of some of the most motivated students. Moreover, as Watkins points out: "failure to address the challenge through increased public investment and improvements in service delivery will inevitably undermine public education" (Watkins, 2004, p. 10).

Finally, some claim that even low-cost non-government schools will never be able to accommodate the poorest households (Probe, 1999; Rose and Adelabu, 2007; Srivastava and Walford, 2007; Watkins, 2004).

We have kept these important arguments in mind throughout our literature review and fieldwork in Jamaica, Kenya, Indonesia, Pakistan, Tanzania and Ghana. And though compelling, we have found evidence that sometimes belies these concerns. We comment on each point and offer suggestions as to appropriate public policy.

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