

## Two sides of the coin

### A comparative look at education in South Korea and Argentina reveals much

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The March/April issue of the Cato Institute Policy Report published an article by Andrew Coulson, the former director of the Center for Educational Freedom, explaining what is behind the success of the education system of a leading country, such as South Korea, in PISA examinations. The article is of great interest in understanding what are the reasons for the educational tragedy today in Argentina, whose results in PISA examinations exempt us from any comment.

South Korea has traditionally given great social importance to education, to the point that in order to be admitted to university, its students must compete in an admission examination of eight hours duration with the highest requirements. On the contrary, Argentina is an exceptional case, since it lacks any system of evaluation for the level of knowledge secondary students need before entering the University.

As highlighted by Alieto Guadagni, a member of the National Academy of Education, there is no known legislation in the world like Law 27,204, sanctioned by the Senate in the last session of 2015, which prohibits any type of examination that would stimulate students to be well prepared in order to begin their university studies. The law stipulates that “all students who graduate from high school may enter university freely and unrestrictedly.”

It is obvious that this law does not encourage studying during the last years of high school, while in Korea what happens is exactly the opposite. Let’s look at the evidence.

For decades, Korean families looked for complementary alternatives to the school system, as they lacked confidence in public and private schools, the latter of which — as they were heavily regulated — did not differ substantially from public schools. Thus a demand was born for tutorials in private institutes, usually known as “hagwons,” where classes began in the afternoon, after regular school hours, and went on until late at night.

The hagwons became so popular that in the 1980s the government decided to ban them, with the argument that they generated inequality of opportunity. However, this was as effective as the Dry Law. The prohibition, instead of eradicating them, led the hagwons into clandestinity, even though the government offered to reward anyone who would denounce them.

Unsurprisingly, the industry of private institutes grew exponentially. When 20 years later the ban was repealed, numbers had increased from 5,000 to more than 67,000. The government decided to regulate them by putting a cap on the quotas they could collect, which was also declared unconstitutional. This led the government to establish a new regulation, in this case regarding their operating hours, which could not be extended beyond 10pm. Such regulation is formally in effect. At present, by the date that students complete high school, 95 percent have taken complementary classes in private academies.

I do not propose to replicate the experience of South Korea in Argentina. South Korea also heads the suicide rankings among young people because of the tremendous pressure young people are subjected to there. But there are very few countries in the world in which there is no evaluation at the end of high school or another one, in order to enter university. By way of illustration, in Mexico, Chile, Brazil and Colombia, as well as in Nicaragua, Honduras, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru and Venezuela, students go through this type of evaluation.

It is easy to enter our universities but, as they are entered by students who have undertaken little preparation, the desertion rate is very high. In the words of Guadagni: “Argentina is the Latin American country with the largest university population, 435 students per 10,000 inhabitants. In Brazil there are 380, in Chile 361, in Mexico 285 and in Colombia 273. However, the picture is reversed when evaluating the effectiveness of its graduation, since Argentina graduates annually only 28 students per 10,000 inhabitants, while Mexico and Chile 48, Brazil 50 and Colombia 59.”

The evaluations, far from being a barrier, provide an incentive for young people not to pass through high school knowing that when they turn 18 they will enter a university without any requirement. Most of them will lose valuable years and finally, they will not graduate.

Our representatives are responsible for this tragedy by not amending a legislation that scams our youngsters and, in many cases, literally ruins their lives. It is time to speak clearly, the future of our country is at stake.