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Chile's Lower House Approves Education Overhaul Bill

Overhaul is One of President Michelle Bachelet's Main Campaign Promises.

By Robert Kozak
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Chile's lower house of Congress late Tuesday approved a bill to overhaul the country's education system, one of President Michelle Bachelet's main campaign promises.

The bill seeks to end student copayments, ban for-profit schools from receiving funds from the state, and eliminate selective entrance policies.

Education Minister Nicolás Eyzaguirre said on Wednesday the bill allows parents more choices on where their children can study as the costs of studies will be more equal.

Thousands of students have marched in recent years in Chile to demand free and better education and more public universities. Police have often reacted with water cannons and tear gas to break up the protests.

"The nations that have the best results on a global level have public education systems that are free, without copays, are nonprofit and nonselective," said congresswoman Cristina Girardi, a member of the president's ruling alliance.

The bill still needs to be approved by Chile's Senate, where allies of President Bachelet in the New Majority coalition have a working majority.

Sen. Ignacio Walker, president of the Christian Democratic party, said that the Senate "will take all the time we need to move a good reform forward."

Left-leaning Ms. Bachelet took office in March and her administration recently engineered a [contested tax overhaul aimed at increasing revenue](#) to be used for improving education and health. She pledged to make big changes to the country's education system, aiming to boost Chile's competitiveness

Although Chile's education system fares well in comparison with other South American nations in quality exams, it falls short when compared with other nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The OECD says that Chile is below average in teaching mathematics, reading and science.

About 54% of Chilean students go to state-subsidized schools, about 40% go to public schools and the rest go to private schools. The number of students moving from public schools to subsidized schools has been steadily rising in the past decade.

“By eliminating the subsidy to privately run [subsidized] schools, the Bachelet administration is decimating private education in Chile, which is the bedrock of Latin America's best performing educational system,” said Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a political analyst with the Cato Institute's Center for Global Prosperity and Freedom.

Opposition members of Congress said the education bill will hurt the public education system by giving fewer choices to parents.

“This reform as it is doesn't show any concern about quality, ignores professors and looks at parents, caregivers and even schools with the same total lack of confidence,” said opposition congressman Jaime Bellolio.