

The
Economist

Education in Chile

We want the world

A trial of strength between students and the government

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IT
BEGAN
on August
4th with
the
metallic
clink of a
few pots
and pans.
By
nightfall,



They're the ones with the kryptonite

thousands of people were on the streets of Santiago banging kitchenware, a form of protest last heard under the dictatorship of General Pinochet. This time the *cacerolazos*, as they are called, are being staged in the name of educational Utopia—and in response to a cack-handed government ban on marches.

Chile's school system is the least bad in Latin America, according to the OECD's PISA tests, which compare educational attainment across countries. But that does not make it good. And

the overall performance hides huge disparities. Analysis done in Chile of the test results in the 65 countries that took part finds that it ranked 64th in terms of the variance of the results according to social class. Rich pupils get good private education; poor ones are condemned to underfunded, dilapidated state-funded schools.

This “educational apartheid” as Mario Waissbluth, a campaigner, puts it, is widely blamed for the fact that Chile remains a highly unequal society, despite its dramatic progress over the past quarter of a century in reducing poverty. “The kids from the posh suburbs study in those suburbs, go to university in those suburbs, get jobs as company executives in those suburbs and employ friends from the schools they went to themselves,” says Mr Waissbluth.

The centre-right government of President Sebastián Piñera agrees. Chile inherited from the dictatorship a voucher system under which the government pays money to the school of the parents' choice. In November the government unveiled a plan to increase the value of the voucher, especially for the poorest children. As well as trying to attract better teachers to state schools, the government will set up 60 lycée-style “schools of excellence” aimed at bright children from poor families.

Students and teachers responded by demanding the abolition of all for-profit education. After they staged big marches along the Alameda, Santiago's main thoroughfare, Mr Piñera last month sacked his unpopular education minister. The government also said it would draw some \$4 billion from its reserve fund of windfall copper revenue to pay for better schools.

On August 1st the new minister, Felipe Bulnes, published new proposals. He proposes to put the national government, rather than municipalities, in charge of state schools. Any chance that this would settle the dispute was scotched when the government decided to ban protests in the Alameda. The students have since twice marched anyway. On August 4th breakaway groups of masked youths, with little apparent interest in learning, set up barricades, fought police and looted. Five days later the pattern was repeated.

But many of the student leaders appear articulate and reasonable. For now they seem to have public opinion on their side. A recent opinion poll gave Mr Piñera an approval rating of just 26%, the lowest of any president since Chile returned to democracy in 1990. The students are unlikely to win their demand in full. But they have damaged Mr Piñera, perhaps permanently.

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