

Bridging Research and Policy

Self Managed Public Schools in San Luis, Argentina: Case Study

Self-managed schools in San Luis case can be considered a successful example of "policy transfer". They reveal the extent to which a think tank can contribute to improve the State's intervention in designing and implementing social policies. The research carried out by CIPPEC was fundamental to convince the Ministry of Education of the convenience of implementing self managed public schools. CIPPEC first introduced the idea of self management to the Ministry through papers and comparative research, studied the feasibility and diagnosis of its implementation, and provided technical assistance. How did CIPPEC do this? Through lobbying and advocacy, based on the presentation of the findings of its research on self management.

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Research and Public Policy: Self-Managed Public Schools in San Luis, Argentina

This case looks at how research developed by Civil Society Organizations can contribute to better intervention of the State in the design and implementation of public policies

1. Background, Educational Context and Extent of Self-Management.

The Province of San Luis is geographically located in the center of Argentina. It has approximately 367,104 inhabitants, and constitutes one of the country's smallest educational districts. In 1991, after transferring schools from the National Ministry of Education to provincial jurisdictions, the Provincial Ministry of Education became responsible for the management of 409 schools. In the year 2001, 101,913 students were registered at public schools, as a result of a significant increase from 1996 onwards. In the year 2002, 27.03% of the total provincial budget was invested in education.

At the turn of the 90's and after a period of instability in the Ministry of Education, the governor of San Luis decided to make a fundamental change in the educational system of the province. In order to do this, he did not hesitate to break a provincial tradition according to which the Minister of Education had to be an academic or someone with experience and connections with the field of Education. The appointment of a politician with significant influence over the Governor and ample expertise in management as Minister of Education made possible the implementation of the Federal Law of Education ("Ley Federal de Educaci3n"), which represented the first step towards a deep transformation of the provincial educational system.

Today, after five years of undertaking reforms towards modernization, nine self-managed public schools have been created in San Luis. Altogether, in 2001 they received 2,62% of the total provincial educational budget. Besides, 4,42% of the provincial roll was incorporated to the self-managed school modality (equivalent to 4,509 students).

2. Policy Change

Towards the end of 1998, after a whole year of research on the North American experience, of participation in conferences and seminars, and of constant exchange with experts in the field, our professionals produced important theoretical and empirical evidence about the opportunities and challenges, that is, about the viability and convenience of the implementation of self-managed schools in the Argentine educational context. Therefore, after becoming acquainted with the particular economic and political characteristics of the province and with the innovating educational reforms that had been taking place for the previous 3 years, our team decided to contact the Minister of Education, Hector O. Torino. After several meetings that revolved around the possibility of improving on the transformation process that had already taken place, the province of San Luis hired the team led by Antonio Cicioni as external consultants for the Ministry. They also had to carry out the previously mentioned studies, which would enable the implementation of the first complete experience of self-management in the country.

In February 1999, a team of 5 people was already working in site in San Luis. After a few months, all the necessary studies had been made. It was therefore possible to put together a proposal for self management in the province, which was finally entitled "2001 School Law". After testing this new Law with the main political figures of the province, in April 1999, the Executive Power presented the proposal to the provincial legislators. Even though the original intention of the foundation was to apply the experience of self management to schools that were specifically created for this model, the conversations with the governor lead to a project that considered not only the creation of new schools under this system, but also the conversion of some functioning public schools. In spite of previous discussions with the main provincial authorities on the subject, this Law project was publicly questioned by the educational community, led by the teachers' syndicate of San Luis, which was strategically allied to certain sectors opposed to the government.

Finally, as a result of strong political tension brought about by the intention to proceed with this proposal, the Provincial Government turned towards the consulting team's original proposal, i.e., the idea of implementing this project in public schools specifically intended to be run under the autonomous regime. The 4914 Act of 1991 that allowed the government to create, without giving major details, "Experimental Schools" gave room to a new regulatory decree (Nº 2562/99) pertaining to this same Act, for the implementation of self-managed State schools.

3. Critical Factors Influencing the Linkage Research-policy

3.1. "Content Findings" and their Influence on Political Decisions

The "content findings" were the letter of introduction of the foundation's representatives to the Province's Minister of Education. The conclusions reached by their study were in accordance with the perceptions of the Minister, who had come to the same understanding of the situation without any scientific or technical support. In this respect, the Minister saw a timely chance to back up his reform policies with the prestigious reputation of the FGYS. He also saw the possibility of extending these reforms beyond his own expectations. All of these factors granted this research a decisive influence in stating the timeliness and the convenience of implementing self-managed schools. It is important to highlight that in the context of developing countries -such as Argentina- policy makers direct most of their resources, energy and time to address "urgent" matters, which leads them to overlook important issues, namely, the definition of long term public policies. In this regard, the fact that policy makers may at some point embrace a certain policy orientation does not guarantee its effective implementation, especially in a field as sensible as Education. In this context, the advice provided by civil society organizations (in this case, CIPPEC) through research, advocacy coalitions and implementation is key in order to support and guide governments who possess both political strength and will to undertake reforms. As from this moment, the State would be considered capable of conducting an educational policy that supports an accountable school oriented towards an acknowledged and agreed goal.

3.2. "Findings of implementation" and their Influence on the Practice of Self-management

The foundation -though always supervised by the Minister- was responsible for research, advocacy and implementation activities. Accordingly, it was the presence of an experienced non-governmental organization that allowed, throughout the process, to deal with some of the issues that appeared during the investigation. Specifically, the foundation's presence guaranteed a good legal framework, the prevalence of merit as a requirement for school management, and the creation of a system of support and assessment by the Provincial State. Thus, we can see up to what extent the foundation's presence and previous findings contributed to moderate the Province's institutional weaknesses.

A special thought should be given to the political difficulties in applying the self-management model in already existing public schools. In this sense, the experience derived from implementing this method - i.e., the strong debate that the proposal generated in the Province- finally convinced the government of concentrating only in a reduced number of schools, all of them new. Consequently, and in spite of the initial false move, the foundation's original advice was followed, and self-managed schools were developed as initially planned.

However, studies also warn us on the little relevance of state policies as compared to governmental policies in developing countries. Negative economic factors could also call into question the expected results of self-management policies. Nevertheless, San Luis' unique political and economical features have made possible to diminish such effects. Thus, it should be considered that it was not by accident that we first approached the province of San Luis with this proposal. Somehow, it is possible to assert that the province's political stability and continuity have compensated for the weakness of state policies in developing country contexts. Likewise, a previous excellent fiscal and productive management helped the governor to launch an autonomous educational system in 1999. Finally, we should bear in mind the province's need to

implement complementary policies to strengthen the social capital in an attempt to iron out negative cultural factors regarding self-managed schools.

4. Bibliography

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