

**Improving education in Latin America: an alternative view**  
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In their solution paper, Damon and Glewwe present a sound characterization of the educational challenges facing the region, as well as a useful summary of options that might be used to address them. This note presents three comments.

**Educational quantity:** The literature makes an arbitrary but often useful distinction between educational *quantity* and *quality*, where the former captures the extent of contact children have with the school system (through measures like enrollment rates) and the latter the skills they gain from this contact (through measures like test scores). While the authors' discussion correctly emphasizes the need to improve quality, some challenges regarding quantity remain. Specifically, in some countries delayed entry and dropping out continue to be an issue. Further, repetition means that many school systems do not efficiently turn children's contact with the school system into years of schooling. For instance, in the absence of repetition, children in Nicaragua would leave the school system with (on average) about four more years of schooling than they currently do.

**Restrictive focus:** The *Consulta de San José* calls for cost-benefit comparisons of interventions across sectors. The authors note that this requires knowledge of interventions' *causal* impact, and therefore reasonably restrict their attention to "interventions that have been rigorously evaluated." This comes at the cost of omitting interventions that might have high returns. For example, conditional cash transfers (CCTs) are proposed as a solution, which might reflect that few other social policies have been as rigorously evaluated. However, in some countries tackling repetition might deliver greater results: for instance, eliminating repetition—admittedly a tall order—could have three to four times the impact that CCTs seem to have had in Mexico. Despite this, the paper does not consider interventions to reduce repetition, presumably because they have not been clearly evaluated. Noting this also serves to underline that the authors' call to expand the knowledge base of educational interventions in the region is correct—populating the list of options will require aggressive long term research.

**School choice:** The gains from choice are expected to originate in two sources: i) if private schools are more effective, there will be gains from transferring students to the private sector, and ii) competition may force all schools, particularly public ones, to improve. On the first of these, the international evidence is quite mixed. Further, the experience of Chile, which has undertaken perhaps the largest expansion of school choice in the world, leaves open the possibility that there are few gains from the second. Additionally, choice seems to have produced stratification in Chile—in simple terms, the poor going to school with the poor, and the rich with the rich. In short, the literature reveals mixed evidence and suggests that the specifics of these programs matter. One might therefore be wary of giving school choice a blanket "most promising" classification.