

How to Create a Private Education-Friendly Environment in Turkey?

Aiming at a Comprehensive Legislation

The new legislation and the subsequent implementation require a holistic approach rather than scattered efforts undertaken by various private education NGOs or groups. My major diagnosis is the lack of a coherent and thorough reform initiative. Below are the major findings and suggestions.

1. FRAMING THE TASK

A. Ideologically and politically

One reason why private education has difficulty to proceed in Turkey is that public opinion strongly favors free access to education. Another concern is the fear of strengthening of the faith-based foundations' schools since they allegedly educate the next generation of youngsters in their way in order to take over the Republic and radically change the direction of the State.

- Central message vis-à-vis ideological opposers: Private schools of Turkish Private Schools Association (TPSA) have been educating the citizens of the Republic for the last half a century.
- Supplemental message for the Ministry: Private schools' existence offers choice and efficiency. They do *not*, however, exclude the reality of public education.

B. Economically

- Messages for unionist opposition: Unionist opposition conveys a false message that private schools will get financial benefits with the new regulation. The reform anticipates no budgetary contribution from the government; on the contrary, it targets more private school students, which means less public spending. The new regulation will not cost a *single* Turkish Lira of Turkish taxpayers.
- Message for the Ministry of Finance: Private schools have no intention for a financial privilege contradicting with the IMF-supported economic program. Conversely, an increase in private school students mean higher employment of private school teachers, and less public spending of teacher salaries.

C. Educationally

- Messages for educational community: Private schools are educational institutions, *not* profit-centers. Here emerges the public diplomacy, and the best attempt is to provide professional education, with private schools' sponsorship, for *public* school educators. Moreover, private schools can help reduce the load of overly crowded public schools.
 - Within one year: To create a new publication unit, comprised of retired private school administrators who would share their experiences with the coming generation of administrators (*no* institutional memory at present).
 - Long-term: To allocate fund to train a new generation of school managers and send them abroad for their graduate study. It is hoped that this move would act for “winning the future” even if current attempts fail.

2. COALITION BUILDING

A. “For”

- Minister of National Education: He is pro-private schooling. *Caution:* Too close relationship with the Minister who has a desire to increase the weight of faith-based groups’ schools would damage the image of TPSA and reduce its cogency in the eyes of the President who wants to make sure that secularist educational practices are preserved.
- TÜSİAD: Backs a liberal understanding in services sector in general; however, its elitist structure is negatively perceived by the great majority of Turkish people and policy-makers.
- TOBB (Union of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Maritime Trade and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey): Traditionally has strong connections with the governments and the current Chairman has a personal relationship with the Prime Minister. It is a representing body of roughly 1.2 million businesses; therefore, has a voting leverage.

B. “Neutral”

The President is neutral and can be winnable with a strong commitment of TPSA to secular and republican values.

C. “Against”

- Eğitim-Sen (Union of Education and Science Workers): Profoundly against private education in and of itself. It poses a challenge and spending much energy on them would be waste of time.
- CHP (Republican People’s Party): The main opposition party gives priority to public education and stands still against the rise of faith-based private schools in order to preserve the

secular format of the State. Their traditional pro-unionist stance plays an impeding role for a support; nevertheless, as in the case of the President, TPSA's powerful emphasis on secular education can lead to a rapprochement. Even if they are not winnable, with such an emphasis, at least they can remain as a low-profile opposition.

- Future Ministers: At the stage of implementation, future Ministers can drag their feet; therefore, every next Minister should be made enthusiastic about the continuity of the reform since *ownership of a reform matters*. It must be announced that the reform is accomplished thanks to his/her leadership.

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