The Economist

For-profit education

The $1-a-week school

Private schools are booming in poor countries. Governments should either help them or get out of their way

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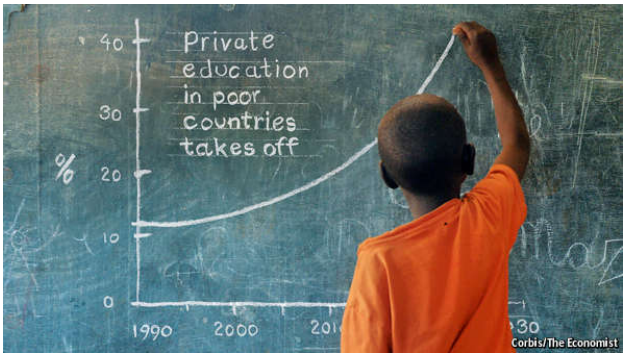

ACROSS the highway from the lawns of Nairobi's Muthaiga Country Club is Mathare, a slum that stretches as far as the eye can see. Although Mathare has virtually no services like paved streets or sanitation, it has a sizeable and growing number of classrooms. Not because of the state—the slum's half-million people have just four public schools—but because the private sector has moved in. Mathare boasts 120 private schools.

This pattern is repeated across Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. The failure of the state to provide children with a decent education is leading to a burgeoning of private places, which can cost as little as $1 a week (see article (http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21660063-where-governments-are-failing-provide-youngsters-decent-education-private-sector)).

The parents who send their children to these schools in their millions welcome this. But governments, teachers' unions and NGOs tend to take the view that private education should be discouraged or heavily regulated. That must change.

Chalk and fees

Education in most of the developing world is shocking. Half of children in South Asia and a third of those in Africa who complete four years of schooling cannot read properly. In India 60% of six- to 14-year-olds cannot read at the level of a child who has finished two years of schooling.

Most governments have promised to provide universal primary education and to promote secondary education. But even when public schools exist, they often fail. In a survey of rural Indian schools, a quarter of teachers were absent. In Africa the World Bank found teacher-absenteeism rates of 15-25%. Pakistan recently discovered that it had over 8,000 non-existent state schools, 17% of the total. Sierra Leone spotted 6,000 "ghost" teachers, nearly a fifth the number on the state payroll.

Powerful teachers' unions are part of the problem. They often see jobs as hereditary sinecures, the

state education budget as a revenue stream to be milked and any attempt to monitor the quality of education as an intrusion. The unions can be fearsome enemies, so governments leave them to run schools in the interests of teachers rather than pupils.

The failure of state education, combined with the shift in emerging economies from farming to jobs that need at least a modicum of education, has caused a private-school boom. According to the World Bank, across the developing world a fifth of primary-school pupils are enrolled in private schools, twice as many as 20 years ago. So many private schools are unregistered that the real figure is likely to be much higher. A census in Lagos found 12,000 private schools, four times as many as on government records. Across Nigeria 26% of primary-age children were in private schools in 2010, up from 18% in 2004. In India in 2013, 29% were, up from 19% in 2006. In Liberia and Sierra Leone around 60% and 50% respectively of secondary-school enrolments are private.

By and large, politicians and educationalists are unenthusiastic. Governments see education as the state's job. Teachers' unions dislike private schools because they pay less and are harder to organise in. NGOs tend to be ideologically opposed to the private sector. The UN special rapporteur on education, Kishore Singh, has said that "for-profit education should not be allowed in order to safeguard the noble cause of education".

This attitude harms those whom educationalists claim to serve: children. The boom in private education is excellent news for them and their countries, for three reasons.

First, it is bringing in money—not just from parents, but also from investors, some in search of a profit. Most private schools in the developing world are single operators that charge a few dollars a month, but chains are now emerging. Bridge International Academies, for instance, has 400 nursery and primary schools in Kenya and Uganda which teach in standardised classrooms that look rather like stacked shipping containers. It plans to expand into Nigeria and India. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder, Bill Gates and the International Finance Corporation, the World Bank's private-sector arm, are among its investors. Chains are a healthy development, because they have reputations to guard.

Second, private schools are often better value for money than state ones. Measuring this is hard, since the children who go to private schools tend to be better off, and therefore likely to perform better. But a rigorous four-year study of 6,000 pupils in Andhra Pradesh, in southern India, suggested that private pupils performed better in English and Hindi than public-school pupils, and at a similar level in maths and Telugu, the local language. The private schools achieved these results at a third of the cost of the public schools.

Lastly, private schools are innovative. Since technology has great (though as yet mostly unrealised) potential in education, this could be important. Bridge gives teachers tablets linked to a central system that provides teaching materials and monitors their work. Such robo-teaching may not be ideal, but it is better than lessons without either materials or monitoring.

Critics of the private sector are right that it has problems. Quality ranges from top-notch international standard to not much more than cheap child care. But the alternative is often a public school that is worse—or no school at all.

Those who can

Governments should therefore be asking not how to discourage private education, but how to boost it. Ideally, they would subsidise private schools, preferably through a voucher which parents could spend at the school of their choice and top up; they would regulate schools to ensure quality; they would run public exams to help parents make informed choices. But governments that cannot run decent public schools may not be able to do these things well; and doing them badly may be worse than not doing them at all. Such governments would do better to hand parents cash and leave schools alone. Where public exams are corrupt, donors and NGOs should consider offering reliable tests that will help parents make well-informed choices and thus drive up standards.

The growth of private schools is a manifestation of the healthiest of instincts: parents' desire to do the best for their children. Governments that are too disorganised or corrupt to foster this trend should get out of the way.

From the print edition: Leaders