



Interview with the Minister of Education and Higher Education ▶ Ester Vilarrubla explains the mai

## Ester Vilarrubla

Minister of Education and Higher Education

«Maybe covid was an opportunity to put education back as an essential good»



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Entering the end of the legislature and the year 2022, the Minister of Education and Higher Education, Ester Vilarrubla, reviews the most outstanding actions of recent years, emphasizing aspects such as the changes caused by the pandemic, the professional career of teachers and new technologies. At the same time, debate on the relationship between student, teacher, family, ministry and society, different circles that work together to define shared values from childhood.

**–How do you rate the actions that have been carried out by the ministry during the last four years?**

–From the first road map we had at the beginning of the legislature to what we had to do, no one can tell that it has been a big change. A few months after the start of the school year on September 1st, 2019, a pandemic arrived. Therefore, we had to pour all our efforts to manage it. And the balance I make is very positive. I appreciate the work that has been done by all the staff at the centers to keep the schools open. Maybe covid was an opportunity to put education back as an essential good. It is not so easy to educate and teach, and this work that is done in classrooms, suddenly had to move to homes. Thus, the families were able to observe the

ir value up close. A lot of people already had it, thankfully, but it was reinforced. Schools became a very safe space, which is also very important, spaces that were not only necessary for the children and young people of the country to go there, but at the same time, everyone was calm thanks to many protocols and human economic efforts. Fortunately, we have almost forgotten it, but I can still feel the fatigue that we all had to do in those moments. Even so, we have been able to take on all the challenges of this legislature.

**–Is there anything left to do in these last four years?**

–In some things we had to go later, or we had to postpone them, especially projects that involved a lot of attendance. But we have arrived to the end of the legislature, and I would say that the goals we had announced have mostly been achieved.

**–How has Education transformed after the pandemic?**

–In the sense of opportunity. Before, there might have been situations that we hadn't anticipated that we could respond to. For example, in the case of a student who cannot come to school for a long time due to an illness or a specific impediment, previously only the material could reach him. Now, we can connect more easily with him and have this virtual presence as very

normalized. Then, it has become an opportunity in terms of digital skills. Tablets were introduced in 2012, and the students already had to learn a little about the new technologies, but they had not been trained that much. With covid, however, we had to facilitate many digital tools and they were very successful. And also for the families, because they saw that they needed certain knowledge and to accompany them, especially the little ones. This digital transformation change that we had already committed to as a country became even more important, and those who had not joined had to do so.

**–You said that it is not easy to educate and teach. Where is the limit of teachers in this regard?**

–I think that educating, we all educate, even unconsciously. The media educates, the messages that can be there as a society educate... The proof is in the fact that many times, when we study reading habits, the students who read the most are the same ones they see at home someone reads. Therefore, perhaps when the father or mother picks up a newspaper or a book he is not aware that he is educating a reading habit, but we model a lot through example. We teachers are very aware that we have to be the model in the classroom, and for this reason, their skills go beyond discipline. And it doesn't just happen in a con-



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ference or to explain in a presentation, but also when setting examples so that they don't discriminate or treat all students equally. We must be very aware of what these system values are, and the teacher must be aware that he must respect them and transmit them.

**–How can we, from families and society, contribute to being a better model for these young people?**

–If we share these values, which I am convinced that in theory, if we were to put them up for debate now, we would certainly share them. The value of democracy, of equal opportunities for all, of gender, of inclusion, of responsibility, of effort; we all share these for sure, but then we have to practice them. We must know how to exemplify them with our work, the way we act and, therefore, I think that from each of the professions and actions, everyone must think about what is the message we transmit to young people. For example, when you go to any sports competition, the example that adults can set is how they address the players, even when their children are playing. This also educates, or miseducates. If you dedicate yourself to encouraging the team, you are educating, reinforcing, motivating. But if what you do is to insult the opposite, you are not educating in respect. I believe that families have the most important key in the education of chil-



practices afterwards. These are when there is no parental control, or when parents use the mobile phone during meals. Does this mean that eating on the phone has more negative consequences? No, it means that if you use it while eating, you are using it all day, and there is no control. In this sense, if the example given by the father when the boy or girl asks him something is wait a moment I have to answer on WhatsApp, we are conveying this need and importance in the devices. In addition, there are young people underage who are using the screen for the game, the pornography part, even to have contacts with strangers, which can be very worrying. We have to work closely with families, since the goal of the family and the school is the same, that their child does the best possible in life in every way. Therefore, we must be allies.

**–How can you work from the classroom to reduce the misuse of screens?**

–It's been done for a long time. The work of the devices in schools is not only as a work tool, but also educates about the risks involved. But we need to do more. Now we are working a lot with cyber security, with training for teachers as well as for the entire administration, but we are adding to the teachers the direction of how to transmit this knowledge to the students. We are now thinking of a more comprehensive plan to work with families, associations, the media, to see how we can all join together to make young people more aware of the risks of misuse of technology. Technology itself isn't bad, it's how you misuse it.

**–What is the biggest challenge facing the ministry in terms of teachers?**

–The biggest challenge with teachers, as always, is to keep accompanying them. They are the ones in the classrooms, in front of the students and in contact with the families. Therefore, they are the ones who do the direct work, and the responsibility of the ministry is to accompany them, to have the buildings ready, the connectivity as functional as possible, the best working conditions, that there is a good atmosphere in the center, good manager teams who lead... This is accompanying. It is a short word, but it has a connotation from the most material level. Like all, it is a living profession, more and more research is done and we know more about how to teach. The emotional component is increasingly present, or the different

intelligences, for example. Our challenge is also to recognize this work. And this recognition goes through the professional career.

**–The Government has announced a salary increase that also affects civil servants and, therefore, teachers. How do you rate it?**

–The salary increase is appropriate, and I agree that it has been done. We are talking, on the one hand, about the CPI that may exist and which, therefore, is linked to the improvement of the standard of living, even though civil servants will have the same purchasing power. On the other



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hand, it comes to answer a demand from a long time ago, which is that salary scales had remained stagnant for many years. We notice this because sometimes there are workers in the administration, not only in the ministry, who leave because we are not competitive enough in terms of wages. And it is a shame to lose talent in this sense, because the Government must also have a lot of it if we want to provide good service to the citizen.

**–For a long time, teachers have been asking to develop the horizontal professional career. How is progress in this aspect?**

–The professional career is very important. I am a great defender of it and, in the end, the Public Service Law also defines it in the Education Corps Law. Having said that, horizontal career is one thing and vertical career is another. The vertical career, so far, although it can certainly be improved, gives the opportunity for a worker who wants to change from being a teacher to being a head of studies, director or inspector, can do so. However, there are many people who do not want to change jobs, because they really like their work, whether it is being a teacher or head of studies. But within the same workplace, we all know that there are people who do well, people who do very well, and people who do excellently. There is a very wide progression. Therefore, if these teachers do not do their job well, the Administration has mechanisms such as improvement support, training plans or even disciplinary proceedings to correct it. But if a teacher does much better than his colleague, he must also be recognized. And this recognition, which we do verbally, is not enough, since it must go through a salary recognition. Along these lines, for now we have presented the professional career to teachers and explained to them how progress can be made and how they can go from the initial level to the consolidated level and to the expert level, which is through a skills assessment.

**–How should we fight against school dropouts?**

–One of the biggest challenges is that there are no school dropouts. Surely we all agree that to improve a country we must improve the training of its citizens. Raising the schooling age is a good bet, and we remain convinced of this, but if we only make a law to raise schooling to 18 and that's

enough, we're not doing anything for the student who is unmotivated, who has already given up on continuing to progress, which does not fit with the current education system, because you only prolong the agony of being in a place where he is not motivated, where he does not feel at ease... What we need to do is diversify the itineraries, which is what we are doing. For this reason, in this legislature we created the Initial Vocational Training, which is professionalizing but with a requirement of different skills. We have also changed the way these students are taught, offering them fewer theoretical classes in specific subjects, and focusing more on the profession they want to do, much closer to the company. So far, we have managed to enable 60 students who would have left to work or neither work nor study, to continue their training. In the future, when we have this certainty that everyone can follow an itinerary, we will fight for it to be compulsory.

**–Finally, according to a recent survey, one in four students claims to have been bullied at school. How are you working to prevent these situations from happening?**

–This is one of the most important challenges to work on. We have now created working groups in which there are representatives from all education systems and workplaces to review the anti-bullying decree and see what actions we need to take or which have not been implemented well enough. Then, we have to diversify the channels to make complaints. Until now, the protocol said that the school must alert, but we saw that sometimes parents wanted to reach us, so we created a direct phone. All in all, I would like to work hard on prevention and invest in training, resources, or whatever is needed to educate with respect, with these values of non-violence, non-mistreatment, accepting differences as an opportunity and not as a reason for conflict.

**–And this happens to work on mental health...**

–Yes, and we must also treat the bully, because if he bullies it is because there is something that does not work on an emotional level or because there is some deficiency that we must take into account. This does not justify bullying, but there must be some reason that needs to be worked on so that there is less and less need to bully. ≡

dren. I believe the most important values have been passed on to all of us from home. And the school must have this effect of opportunities for everyone, regardless of the family you come from, to get the same opportunities in life to be trained and to achieve your professional challenges.

**–What happens outside of school has a lot of influence...**

–In fact, not long ago we presented a study with Unicef and the ARI about the use of screens, and the direct relationship between the family's work and the good use they make of it was very high. At school, all students use digital tools, and in Secondary Education it is mandatory to have a tablet. But that doesn't mean they have bad

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(+376) 353 424 / (+376) 379 769

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