

# Democracy in Action

*School choice is very popular with Swedish voters, and most politicians support it.*

**By Claudia Hepburn**

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As Swedish socialism gained momentum in the first half of this century, the Social Democrat Party's heavy taxation policies made it virtually impossible for families to afford anything but municipal schools. A decade ago, Swedish independent schools served less than 1% of school-age students, a smaller fraction than any other country in Western Europe.

Municipal education was heavily regulated by central government but not held accountable for its outputs. Swedish government schools became known for their drab character and indifference to parental concerns.

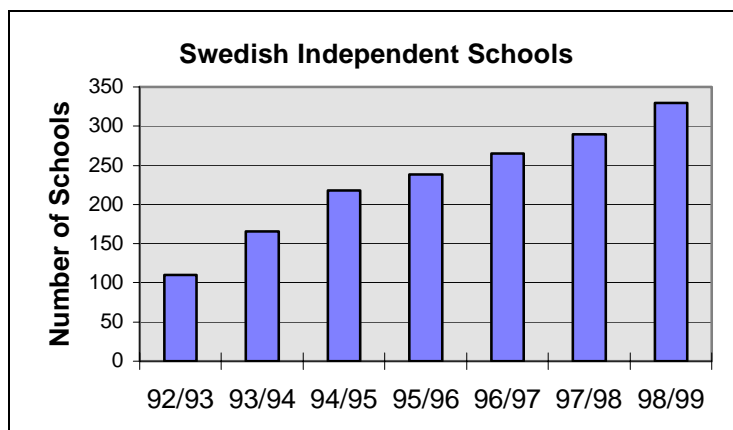
Dissatisfaction with educational policy grew for a generation until fundamental organizational reforms were implemented almost overnight in 1991. That year, a new government came into power promising to end central planning in education and to replace it with decentralization and school choice.

The 1991 legislation devolved power from the central government onto parents, municipalities, and independent schools. Education objectives were nationally legislated, but their implementation became for the first time the role of the municipalities.

The reforms also gave parents educational choice. For the first time, parents were free to send their children to any government school within their municipality or to an independent school, with public funding following the child to the school chosen. Independent schools would receive 85% of the cost of educating a child in the municipal school system.

The opposition party vehemently opposed the legislation, but in its first year the number of independent

schools doubled and quickly filled with students. One of the first independent schools was started by an ex-communist in a low-income, immigrant suburb of Stockholm. With an emphasis on individual student responsibility, familial involvement, and efficient use of technology, it now has over 2000 students waiting for one of its 240 places and a continuous stream of educators interested in imitating its success.



As early as 1993, a poll conducted by the National Agency of Education found that "85 per cent of Swedes value their new school choice rights" and "59 per cent of Swedish parents think that teachers work harder when there is school choice." This was true even though only 2% of Swedes had exercised those rights.

When the Social Democrats returned to power in 1994, the benefits and popularity of school choice were already becoming evident. They were felt both by the children attending new independent schools and by those who remained in the government-run system, which was starting to respond to parental concerns.

Swedish governments have changed the voucher amount twice since 1991, first reducing it from 85% to 75%, and then in 1997 raising it (in theory at least) to 100% of municipal schools' funding per student.

Though they began as a tiny minority of the education supply, independent schools are a growing and diversifying sector whose long-term influence on Swedish education belies the current proportion of the student population that it serves.

The supply of these schools is growing by .5% to 1% per year, educating approximately 3500 more students every year at a time when the school-aged population in Sweden is declining. It is expected that independent schools will be educating 10%-15% of students within a decade.

Opponents of school choice often claim that few parents will give sober consideration to the selection of schools. In Sweden, even advocates of school choice were surprised at how quickly and broadly parents claimed choice as a right.

One shrewd politician (who had himself opposed choice) predicted privately, shortly after it was implemented, that the government monopoly of education had been overthrown forever. Even in those early days of choice, he recognized that once people have been given the right to change schools, no democratic government can take it away from them.

Indeed, today about one-half of Social Democrat politicians, one-quarter of the Communist, and all of the Environmentalist and Liberal-Conservative politicians support choice of school, a sea change from five years ago when nearly all the Social Democrats and Communists supported the central government's monopoly of schools.

*(Adapted from The Case for School Choice: Models from the US, New Zealand, Denmark and Sweden, published by the Fraser Institute, © 1999 — see our review on page 3)*