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# School Choice in Italy: recent trends and current perspectives

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# Introduction

- Over the last three decades, market-oriented education reforms have introduced **choice** and **competition** into public school systems worldwide [Musset, 2012]. Moreover, it is quite easy to see a growing freedom of educational choice worldwide. [Glenn & De Groof, 2012].
- The development of **public school choice** varies across different countries, but many reforms have focused on developing new, independent schools of choice, creating quasi-markets in education where parents and students are able to choose among diverse educational options [Wilson, 2018]. Many reforms share a few common features and among them:
  - ✓ the devolution of authority (and often funding) to schools;
  - ✓ some independence from central government regulation;
  - ✓ the development of diverse school providers;
  - ✓ the promotion of parental choice among schools.



# Introduction

- Despite some timid opening, in Italy there is still no full recognition of the public function carried out by non-state schools and Italy remains one of the few European countries where it is **not** yet guaranteed full School Choice and freedom of education [OECD, 2017], although from the '80s it has been noticed that:
  - «the State, which manages public assets as a monopolist with regard to education, is fated to provide a bad service, avoiding any principle of efficiency or functionality and being ruled by union policies made by those who work in the school instead. A school for teachers rather than for the young generations and for the society will be the ineluctable ending point of State monopoly on managing public assets with regard to education, which asks for such a great amount of public money. In this field, only a healthy competition principle could resuscitate State schools and save them from the decay to which Italy seems to be doomed» [Scoppola, 1985, 176-177].
- But *why* did this happen? The history of School Choice in Italy is a long and controversial, where many factors intertwine, among which the political and religious one above all. But before we have to answer to this question: what do we mean for School Choice from an Italian perspective?



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# School Choice and Freedom of Education

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), solemnly states that «parents have a **prior right to choose the kind of education** that shall be given to their children» (article 26, 3).
- With “freedom of education” and “School Choice” we mean the freedom of choosing the school, the teachers, the educators, the experiences, the pedagogical approach and the educational pathways that one supposes to be the best for his children, **without undergoing legal and economic disadvantage**.



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# Role of the government

- It also means accepting that on one hand **the government may regulate the educational system** (both of state and non-state schools, i.e. it sets forth the rules and main goals in terms of learnings and educational constitutive values with which each and any teaching institution should comply with its activity).
- On the other hand, it means that the government, according to the subsidiarity principle, may not ordinarily manage the organization and functioning of state schools and – more evidently – of non-state schools through a centralized governmental administration. These activities should be left to the **individual responsibility of schools, families, companies, private investors, social bodies**, etc.
- Last but not least, it means that the government bears the very relevant **responsibility of checking** both the compliance with the established rules and the results achieved by the students in terms of education and values, making the outcomes of its activities transparent and available for the public.

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## Brief [recent] history

- During the last years, the Italian educational system has undergone various processes of reform, but any of them has had a full and lasting implementation. The most significant example is the **law n. 107/2015** which was conceived in **2013**, approved in **2015** (but with the legislative decrees published only in **2017!**) and progressively blocked and dismantled in **2018** with the political change of the government. And now we are almost at the same starting point where we were in 2013, 6 years ago...
- The Italian delay and immobility in the matter of **educational pluralism** and School Choice becomes more serious every day: with the ideological barriers of the XX century have fallen, also within the educational policies, we expected a decisive move towards an innovative direction, capable of rethinking the education system, starting from its very aims, relaunching a country that appears increasingly tired, old and in trouble. Instead time seems to pass in vain, as evidenced by this brief and necessarily partial review of eminent declaration taken during the Italian history of XIX and XX centuries.



# Brief history

- **1855 - Camillo Benso Conte di Cavour**, first Italian Prime Minister

«I think that if we want that the education system is good and efficient in our country, it is necessary that there exist and lay colleges and religious colleges, and why? Because a healthy emulation will be established among them, and both will compete to obtain the trust of the fathers, both by giving greater development to the study of science and literature, and by seeking to to make our children more moral and better».

- **1891 – Pasquale Villari**, Minister of Education

«I do not tell anyone to send their children to a particular school, but I tell everyone to send them to the schools that they consider best. As Minister of Education I make an effort to have excellent schools, without block the emergence of non-state schools, because there is only one way to prevent bad schools: to have excellent ones, whatever their pedagogical approach».

- **1952 – Aldo Moro**, Prime Minister

«A true implementation of the principle of school choice, requires that this recognition is given to all schools that deserve it, whatever the initiative, public or private».

- **1991 – Sabino Cassese**, Judge emeritus of the Constitutional Court

«The state is no longer responsible for the school. The schools themselves are responsible for the school».



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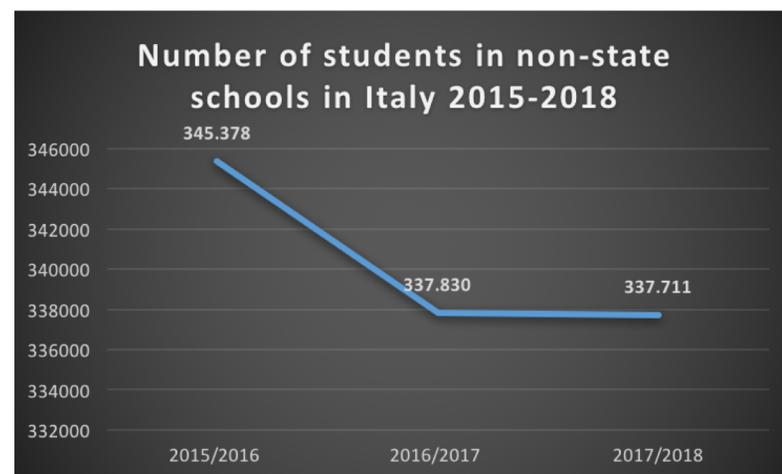
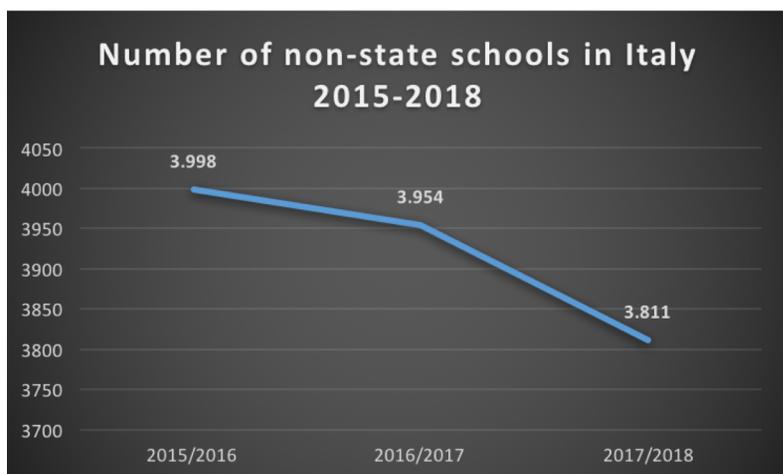
## The non-state schools in Italy [numbers]

- In Italy there are about **13.000 non-state schools** (10% of the total, but 9.000 are kindergartens). Their **students** are around **800.000** (11% of the total, 530.000 are in kindergartens).
- The average state expenditure for each student in non state-schools is about € 490-500 per year on average: ranging from € 600 for kindergartens to € 50 spent for high school student (the state spent € 7.000 per year for student in state high schools).
- For 11% of students attending non-state schools, it is invested **only 1.2%** of the total money spent by the state on education (approximately 500 million out of a total of 45 billion).
- Homeschooling in Italy involves just 1,500 students.
- In recent years, also due for the economic crisis, the situation has worsened, forcing many non-state schools to close down. Consequently, there has been a drastic decline both in the number of schools and in the number of students.

# Numbers of the crisis

School year	Non-state schools*	Students*
2012--2015	- 2,6%, - 115 schools	(-7,4%, in secondary schools -17%)
2015/16	3.998 (11% of total)	345.378 (4,9% of 7 million students)
2016/17	3.954 (-1,1%)	337.830 (-3,7%).
2017/18	3.811	337.711

\*Kindergartens excluded  
9.066 schools  
541.447 children  
during school year 2017/18



## Recent reform [Law no. 107/2015]

- These data therefore seem to report that the measures recently introduced by the Law No. 107/2015 to support non-state schools were not able to relaunch the sector, but neither to stop the bleeding of annual closures that has been happening uninterrupted since 1946 [Magni 2016]. Such measures were:
  - a partial tax credit for the expenses incurred for children school attendance (19%, up to a maximum € 400 per year).
  - a “school bonus” (an education tax credit – equal to 65% in 2015 and 2016 and 50% from 2017 – to encourage donations in favor of non-state schools) for the realization of new school structures, the maintenance and strengthening of existing ones and for interventions to improve the employability of the students.
- These two small support measures, however, have not achieved the desired results and have been little used by families for the bureaucracy and the small economic return.



## Recent reform [Law no. 107/2015]

- At the same time, other “negative” measures were introduced to increase controls and restrictions for non-state schools.
  - Further government controls to verify the “parity” status of the non-state schools.
  - The irrational exclusion of non-state schools teachers from the € 500 bonus for expenses related to their professional training (attendance of courses and university masters, purchase of books, etc ...): do not these teachers also have to do professional development activities? Are they or not also members of the *only* Italian public education system?
  - A system of initial teacher education that in fact forgets the non-state schools: in the new system, it is possible to gain the qualified teacher status (called “*abilitazione*”, a mandatory requirement to teach into a non-state schools), only after passing a national state competition valid for teaching in state schools! But which teacher, after having achieved a similar job security and a higher salary than that of non-state schools, would refuse a state post to return to the increasingly uncertain world of non-state schools?



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## Recent reform [latest news]

- Recently, in the last weeks, the suspension and closure by the new government of the ministerial commission launched to study the possibilities of reform linked to the “**standard cost**” system for students.
- Furthermore, only during the 2018, the Italian Ministry of Education and the EU Commission allowed the eligibility to apply also for non-state schools to **3 billion European funding** for *2014-2020 National Operational Programme on Education*, to finance projects to reduce early school leaving, the development of teachers' professionalism, the strengthening of adult skills and the development of school buildings, increasing in this way the quality of education and fostering safety, quality and energy-efficiency in school infrastructure.
- Finally, in the next months the Italian government will have to decide whether or not to grant some regions (such as **Lombardy** and Veneto that have already tested school vouchers and other measures to support school choice) more power and autonomy, also in the fields of education policies.

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## Concluding remarks

In comparison to the variety of different types of schools in school choice countries, the Italian set-up is characterized by a uniform centralism-statist that marked the historical evolution of the whole education system, barely affected by the introduction of the schools' autonomy during the last twenty years [Bertagna, 2008].

This despite «the era of “school” in the singular», unique and uniform for everyone, seems to be «moribund, if not dead» [Bertagna 2017], due to complex epochal phenomena (globalization, new information and communications technologies, the loss of traditional national identities, the demographic decline of the western states, immigration crisis, the emergence and consolidation of ever more numerous forms of supranational government etc...).

All elements that force, with ever greater urgency, to proceed towards a «creative and current re-engagement of the pre-modern practice of confronting with “schools”, in the plural, valorizing theories and practices of personalization of the training paths; a greater flexibility at the institutional, regulatory and organizational level; an amalgamation between diversities in the same school but also a social coexistence between different “schools”, even with opposite inspirations and characteristics» [Bertagna, 2017].



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## Concluding remarks

In this perspective, appears impossible or very difficult to be able to realize and make effectively a real freedom of educational choice **without a cultural and institutional pluralism** [Berner, 2017]: “the possibility to choose” the schools is not enough if the options are limited and predetermined from above or are conditioned by economic and legal elements to such an extent that this freedom become merely theoretical.

Ensuring the freedom of education and the principle of School Choice, however, means creating the conditions for an educational system in which «everyone could reasonably choose everything: the family and the students could “select” the school, the teachers, the head teachers, the class group, the curriculum and anything else you can imagine; the teachers and the head teachers could also “choose” the colleagues to work with, the families to cooperate with, the students to teach, the curricula to be developed and so on. And in which always respond to the others and to the institutions of the choices made. And in which the authority is, for all, nothing else that the safe execution of the responsibilities assumed» [Bertagna 2015].



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## Concluding remarks

This perspective does not provide for a freedom of absolute choice, up to the limits of anarchy, because, as it has been recently pointed out, the School Choice «alone is insufficient, and that without guardrails choice can undermine excellence and equity» [Berner 2017]. Even when Milton Friedman first proposed the idea of school vouchers in the 1955 «he did not argue against state regulation or even, in certain circumstances, state provision of education» [Berner 2017].

It is therefore necessary to **safeguard the freedom** and at the same time the **accountability** of all the individual actors involved (students, teachers, parents, families, schools) and of the regulatory bodies, which are required to control the compliance with the legal system and the fundamental principles of living together enshrined in the Constitutions of the various democratic States.



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## Concluding remarks

Only in this way, within a system which declares and practices a true and real freedom and accountability, both at personal and at institutional levels, it will be possible to pursue an effective School Choice and, at the same time, increase the awareness that every school, by anyone established, is always an opportunity for social, moral and cultural cohesion and innovation.

Because, as [J.S. Mill](#) recalled in his famous essay *On Liberty* [1859], «liberty, as a principle, has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion».



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# Thank you for your attention!

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