

Joel E. Cohen: The *Wall Street Journal* of Tuesday, October 2, 2001, carried a front-page story by Peter Fritsch, entitled “Lesson Plan: Religious Schools in Pakistan Fill Void—and Spawn Warriors,” with the subtitle “An American Effort to Boost Secular Studies Failed; Now, a Militant Syllabus.” Fritsch noted that the United States’s substantial financial support of Afghanistan in the 1980s, which had included funding for education, dwindled after the Soviet occupation ended. In the years that followed, Muslim extremists filled the educational void, and many of their young male students became part of the Taliban movement that fought its way to power in Afghanistan.

From 1986 to 1994, according to Fritsch, the US Agency for International Development paid the University of Nebraska \$50 million to produce texts for Afghan primary- and secondary-school students. These texts taught basic math skills by



Speakers at the Orientation Session: Robert C. Post (UC Berkeley), John Steinbruner (University of Maryland), President Patricia Meyer Spacks (University of Virginia), Matthew Meselson (Harvard University), and Joel E. Cohen (Rockefeller University).

prompting students to do arithmetic concerning dead Russians and Kalashnikov rifles.

In 1995 the United States branch of Save the Children replaced the Pakistani government as the source of primary education in Afghan refugee camps in Baluchistan. That program, with a million-dollar annual budget partly funded by the US Department of State, now educates 16,000 Afghan refugees with new texts from Germany. According to Fritsch, educators and aid workers maintain that such programs, if broadened, could be a powerful weapon against militant Muslims. The current million-dollar budget works out to only \$62.50 per child per year. For comparison, the cost of the first night of bombing Afghanistan has been estimated at upwards of \$2 million.

Andrew Wilder, director of Save the Children for Pakistan and Afghanistan, observed that relatively uneducated hard-line groups recognized the importance of education as a means of influencing the future much better than did the West. On CNN at the end of September, Fritsch reported, Pakistan's military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, said that his country's 7,000 or 8,000 madrasahs comprise the biggest welfare organization anywhere in the world. They provide free education and living arrangements for up to 700,000 children, most of them poor.

What does all this have to do with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences? Since 1997 the

Academy has been quietly developing a task force to examine the rationale, means, and consequences of providing an education of high quality to all the world's children for 11 years, perhaps from the age of 6 to 16. For lack of a better title, we call this the UBASE project, using UBASE as an abbreviation for Universal Basic and Secondary Education.

With the encouragement, guidance, and support of the Academy's Executive Officer, Leslie Berlowitz, the project received start-up funding from the Academy, an anonymous donor, William T. Golden, John Reed, and Paul Zuckerman. In August 2001 the Hewlett Foundation in California awarded a grant sufficient to sustain the project for three years. The project is headed by David E. Bloom, professor of economics and demography at Harvard, and by me, with the support of Martin Malin and other colleagues on the Academy staff and the continuing help and guidance of Leslie Berlowitz. I'd like to summarize what we are doing and what we hope to do, and to invite your questions here and your help later.

We are looking forward a generation—perhaps 20 or 30 years from now—to a world in which all children receive 11 years of high-quality education. We are trying to figure out what that means precisely: what it would take to realize that world; what the tradeoffs and complementarities might be with other values; what the technological, financial, political, and cultural prerequisites might be; what the consequences might be; and how we would know if we had achieved our goal. We hope that an ambitious program of action-oriented research, pursued under the sponsorship of the Academy, will lead to the development of a global plan of action for UBASE and its subsequent implementation. The developers of a global plan will have to be scholars, program officers, educators, public servants, and business leaders from around the world.

The first phase of the Academy's initiative aims to generate the factual basis on which a realistic plan could rest. We aim to produce reports that could be widely published, followed by work directed

toward action, if these studies indicate that action is warranted. Our research plan concentrates on seven areas:

Basic facts and data. What is known about the state of education around the world? What new data and data systems are needed?

Intellectual and programmatic history. How did ideas of universal education originate? What lessons does the past offer us today?

Consequences of achieving UBASE. What would be the demographic, social, political, cultural, economic, and environmental effects of educating every child well?

Goals and assessment of UBASE. Where do we want to go, and how will we know if we are there?

Means. Delivery, implementation, and technology: how are we going to get there?

Politics of educational reform and obstacles to UBASE implementation. Why isn't high-quality universal basic and secondary education available now?

Cost and finance of UBASE. What will it cost, under various alternative models of education? Who will pay?

Study teams have been or will be formed to work in each area of focus. Workshops are being conducted to support the lead authors in each of the seven areas. In addition to our own planned efforts to publicize the results of our research, we hope and anticipate that others will use our results in their own efforts to advocate grass-roots support and high-level political will for universal basic and secondary education. We look forward to collaborating with others who can make a difference.

We face an enormous challenge. In 1999 the World Bank estimated that among people aged 15 to 24 years in the low-income countries, 23 percent of men and 41 percent of women were illiterate. If we are to do better in the next generation, we must reach today's children today. As of 1995 about 1.25 billion children in the world—more than one-fifth

of Earth's population—were 6 to 16 years old. Six in seven children of this “school-age population,” roughly a billion, lived in the less-developed regions, where the annual per capita income is about \$1,300 a year. The less-developed regions include all of Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and Asia, excluding Japan.

According to the 1998 medium projection of the United Nations Population Division, in the next 30 years the school-age population will drop by more than 20 percent in the more-developed countries but will increase by 71 percent in the 48 least-developed countries. The school-age population is a 10-year leading indicator of the population of military age.

The task facing the Academy's project is urgent. We welcome your thoughts on our efforts and your suggestions of how you might contribute.