

Educating All Children: A Global Agenda

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FOREWORD

The Way Forward for Universal Education

GENE SPERLING

The second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) set by the United Nations—that all children should receive a primary education by 2015—is simultaneously perhaps the world’s most important, ambitious, and pathetic global goal.

It is important because, as this book documents, education is a critical foundation for virtually all of the world’s major humanitarian and development goals. While education has long been considered essential to raising lifetime earnings in both developed and developing nations, one of the most significant insights over the last two decades has been the power of education to improve health outcomes. In particular, improved education for girls tends to result in smaller and healthier families, as well as in lower infant and maternal mortality rates. Growing evidence also shows that girls who are still in school in their teens are less likely to be infected with HIV and that a curriculum that includes HIV/AIDS education can affect beliefs and behavior that reduce the occurrence of AIDS.

Education, health, and development certainly interact. As this volume details, not only can education improve health outcomes, but sound health and nutrition practices in school can increase attendance and learning at school. Yet the benefits of education do not end here. The ability to read, write, and do elementary math is essential if more women are to benefit from micro-enterprise opportunities, engage effectively in the democratic process, develop their full individual potential, and model for their children the importance of knowledge and learning. The same can be said for boys and men, particularly those who are poor and living in remote rural areas.

This goal is ambitious, because today there are approximately 115 million children who are not in school and some 150 million more who are likely to drop out before they complete primary school. About 50 percent of girls in Africa will not complete a primary education, and sixty-six poor nations are off track to provide primary education for all by the year 2015. School fees remain a critical obstacle to putting all children in school. While the recent experiences of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania provide overwhelming evidence that eliminating school fees can dramatically increase the demand for education, UNESCO's latest data show that as many as 86 of 100 nations they were able to survey still charge either formal or informal fees. While such fees raise the costs of attending school for all children, it seems to be a particular deterrent for girls, those living in extreme poverty, and children who have been orphaned or otherwise negatively impacted by the spread of HIV/AIDS. To realize the goal of universal basic education, these and other vulnerable children—such as those with disabilities or those in living in refugee situations, conflict zones, or fragile states—will need additional assistance to help them overcome the barriers needed to realize the full benefits of a quality education.

Yet, this goal is in some ways pathetic. If anyone has, like me, ever addressed a group of children on the issue of education in poor nations, two questions they ask are: Why we are aiming for *only* primary education, and why we are aiming *only* for 2015? Not only children find this puzzling. Many who were involved in creating this goal in Dakar at the World Education Forum—months before it was incorporated as an MDG—agreed to use the term “primary education” because they thought it was a proxy for basic education—usually defined as eight years of schooling. Thus, many were disappointed when they learned that multinational institutions consistently defined primary education as consisting of only five to six years of schooling—an amount well below what most experts believe is needed to achieve a true basic education in developing nations.

One point missed too frequently, but not in this book, is that even if one aims only for universal primary education, the achievement of that goal would create significant new costs for secondary education. A 100 percent attendance rate in sixth grade would dramatically drive up the demand for, and therefore the costs of, education in the seventh and eighth grades. One of this book's most significant contributions is that, rather than shying away from the important issue of secondary education,

it confronts it head on and boldly. Equally important, this book does not fall prey to the problem of thinking of secondary education in a zero-sum context. The book stresses a greater focus on secondary education not at the expense of seeking universal primary education, but as an addition to it.

As the global community further understands the potential for education to act as a social vaccine for HIV/AIDS, it should indeed become clear that an education that ends at the beginning of a youth's teenage years is increasingly unsatisfactory. The costs and practicality of reaching universal secondary education—ten to twelve years of education—may be unachievable in the near future, but hopefully this volume will help move those who aspire to universal education at least to agree that achieving universal primary education will not suffice. Eight years of education should be considered a minimum target, and universal secondary education should be understood as a longer-term goal.

THE WAY FORWARD

If important, ambitious, and pathetic are the three words that define the Millennium Development Goal for education, the three words that should define the way forward—and I believe characterize this volume—are *rigor, realism, and heart*.

We need rigor in the analyses and recommendations of advocates and experts. This careful attention will ensure that much-needed expansions of enrollment and resources result in educational achievement. Those who are serious about achieving the Millennium Development Goal for education understand that the problem is not just access to school, but actual learning through the completion of a quality basic educational curriculum. While a child may gain important social benefits from simply attending school, universal basic education is dramatically diminished and its aims are frustrated when young people find themselves in classrooms with no textbooks, huge class sizes (sometimes as large as 100 students), and inadequately trained, underpaid teachers (who too often rely on rote learning). Efforts to increase enrollment and ensure that learning is taking place in the classroom must go hand-in-hand. Poor and rich nations must make significant advancements to ensure accountability for learning, not just enrollment.

While greater steps must be taken to expand the things we know work—eliminating fees, making schools girl-friendly and close-by, and

establishing well-designed school lunch programs, for instance—we must also expand our knowledge of other areas: What are the best ways to quickly scale up the numbers of teachers without sacrificing professionalism? What are the most effective curriculums for different ages to discourage behavior that leads to HIV infection? How can education officials introduce widespread evaluations and testing without overburdening the system's resources or detracting from real learning by encouraging teachers to teach to the test? How can countries and the international community take concrete steps to garner the additional resources that will be required to pay the recurrent costs for the teachers who are needed to reach universal enrollment while improving learning outcomes? This volume is a very positive step forward for applying rigor to this enterprise.

We need realism about the circumstances and incentives both parents and governments face if we want to reach the goal of universal basic education. Realism starts with understanding that in poor nations, which lack legally enforced compulsory education, parents are the ultimate decision-makers as to whether children attend school. We must recognize that, although it is almost always best for a child to receive an education, parents who deal with extreme poverty and who often face direct costs (e.g., fees) and opportunity costs (lost income and lost help with chores, such as gathering water and firewood) of sending their children to school, that decision may not be clear-cut. We do know, however, that when we look at policies that align the interests of parents with those of their children—such as eliminating fees, keeping schools close-by, and lowering opportunity costs by providing financial assistance tied to school attendance—parents will choose to send their children to school even when cultural norms may push the other way.

We must be equally realistic about the role of politics and government. It is easy for academics to make recommendations that assume complete flexibility as to the timing of major education reforms or that political leaders can easily push aside pressing political constraints in favor of more rational long-term investments in education. Contributors to this volume have sought to deal with these political constraints and to incorporate them in their findings.

Realism means recognizing the following political truths. First, massive investment in the learning and skills of very young children will likely help the economy and political fortunes of a head of state's successor's successor. When a leader takes such a bold step it is rare and often driven

by a desire to leave a noble legacy. Second, while careful planners might prefer cautious expansion of education and methodical reform, strategic advances only take place at critical moments of political opportunity, such as the first year of a new presidential administration. When such moments arrive, those seeking to slow down this process can easily create a slow train to nowhere. Scholars, policy experts, and advocates alike must recognize the importance of devising policy responses and financing mechanisms that allow donors and national governments to seize and capitalize on these rare windows of opportunity. This may mean a greater focus on devising quick-response mechanisms that, while not the best choice compared to careful long-term planning, would allow large expansions in coverage with as few growing pains as possible. For example, when a head of state makes a bold commitment to eliminate fees—as recently occurred in Kenya—leading to more than a million new enrollees in a single year, the international community must be willing to work quickly with national officials to help recruit, train, and fund new teachers on an accelerated basis to ensure that dramatic expansion in enrollment does not lead to exploding class sizes and declining quality.

Realism also should compel us to understand how long-term uncertainty about financial assistance is a major deterrent to the more sweeping expansions needed to reach universal education. Perhaps the greatest challenge going forward will be strengthening the global compact on education that encourages poor nations to take bold action to eliminate school fees, bring more children into schools, and all the while improve school quality, by expanding the pools of qualified teachers, improving school infrastructure and curricula, and making other changes.

Nations need reliable funding streams to be able to commit to large increases in recurrent costs like teachers' salaries, but international aid is generally distributed in cycles of only a few years. Finance ministers of developing nations—wary of “aid shock” when aid funding is suddenly cut—are reluctant to significantly expand the numbers of teachers if they cannot guarantee that they will be able to pay them down the line. Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, and Department for International Development head, Hillary Benn, therefore made a historic step forward when they not only committed \$15 billion dollars to support universal education, but also stressed that it would be available to be disbursed in ten-year cycles to avoid this problem. Expanding on such efforts will require a strengthening of our global compact on education.

Donor nations need confidence that there will be high levels of monitoring and financial accountability, and developing governments must have the confidence that if they take on significant recurrent costs associated with increasing quality and expanding their teacher corps, they will not be hung out to dry after only a few years. The Education for All-Fast Track Initiative (FTI) has created a critical foundation for such a global compact between developing nations and donors, with twenty developing nations meeting the criteria to qualify as partners in the initiative, but there is a need to strengthen—not replace—FTI with dramatically more long-term funding.

Finally, we cannot address this issue without heart. Listening to our hearts does not mean that we soften the call for rigor, but rather that we remember that this issue is about the lives of children, not commodities or consumer products. Moving slowly with universal education comes at the cost of losing more and more childhoods and futures each year. We may never see a child dying from lack of education on television, but the evidence is clear that children die from the ramifications of no or inferior education all the time. Rigor therefore must be a call for high standards and evidence, not an excuse for passivity and timidity. When President Clinton once chose to attempt to secure a Middle East peace agreement that he knew had a high probability of failure, he told his staff that the issue was so important that there could only be two outcomes, “either we will succeed or get caught trying.” With the hopes, health, and futures of the world’s poorest children on the line, this is not a bad motto for the goal of universal education as well.