

We Don't Need No Education? Why the United States Should Take the Lead on Global Education

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There is a tremendous opportunity for the U.S. to demonstrate global political leadership to provide a decent education to all children and young people.

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In the midst of the talk of billion-dollar bank bailouts and trillion-dollar stimulus packages, it is easy to lose sight of the human face of ordinary people who have become unwitting victims of the financial crisis across the globe. It is also easy to neglect the long-term investments that are needed now to help people to survive the downturn and give them the skills they will need to rebuild the global and local economy. In his [address to Congress](#) last week, President Obama stressed the importance of education in the recovery effort:

In a global economy, where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity—it is a pre-requisite.¹

This is just as true in the poorest countries of the world as it is here in the United States. And yet millions of children do not have the chance even for a decent primary education—UNESCO [estimates](#) that 75 million primary-aged children are out of school.² More than 60 million girls at all levels are denied the right to education.³ And hundreds of millions of adults do not have the basic literacy skills they need to thrive in the modern age. We all know that investment in education is money well spent. Intel CEO Craig Barrett [has argued](#) that companies should invest now in education and training to give their people the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed after the recession.⁴ This is true

for countries as well as companies—and it is as true for poor countries as it is for the rich. Developing countries' most valuable asset is their people, yet this asset is being wasted.

The United States has a tremendous opportunity to take the lead on education. President Barack Obama has made a commitment to support the establishment of a Global Fund for Education (GFE) with a down payment of \$2 billion as a contribution to filling the \$11 billion global education deficit.⁵ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who as a senator was a co-sponsor of the bipartisan Education for All bill, recently restated her belief in the value of global education in her [confirmation testimony](#) to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

And we can generate even more goodwill . . . by working effectively with international organizations and NGO partners to build schools and train teachers, and by ensuring that children are free from hunger and exploitation so that they can attend those schools and pursue their dreams for the future. This is why the President-Elect supports a Global Education Fund to bolster secular education around the world.⁶

There is a tremendous opportunity for the United States to demonstrate global political leadership in the international movement to provide a decent education for all children and all young people. Gene Sperling sets out the case in his excellent paper, "[A Global](#)

¹Remarks of President Barack Obama—Address to Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-of-President-Barack-Obama-Address-to-Joint-Session-of-Congress/

²UNESCO, *Overcoming Inequality: Why Governance Matters*, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009 (UNESCO Publishing and Oxford University Press, 2009), <http://www.unesco.org/en/education/efareport/>

³Maureen Lewis and Marlaime Lockheed, *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't In School and What to do About It* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development, 2008), <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/11898>

⁴UNESCO, "High Level Group Panellists Make Case for Education Investment" (2008), http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=58437&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁵A key unresolved issue is whether the Global Fund for Education will be a multi-donor pooled fund which seeks to attract contributions from other governments and private foundations or whether the Global Fund for Education will be primarily a bilateral US initiative.

⁶Statement of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Nominee for Secretary of State to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 13, 2009, <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2009/ClintonTestimony090113a.pdf>

Education Fund: Toward a True Global Compact on Universal Education.”⁷

The good news is that the United States would not be alone in this effort. The Education for All–Fast Track Initiative (commonly called FTI) has put in place a global coordination mechanism that includes all the major bilateral and multilateral players working in the education sector. The UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has supported the FTI and argued passionately for the importance of investing in global education. His government has **committed** to providing 8.5 billion pounds (around \$12 billion) over the next 10 years to support education in developing countries.⁸ The Netherlands, Spain, and many other countries have also significantly increased their investment in education over the past few years. President Obama should work closely with like-minded countries to build on the success of the FTI to create a Global Fund for Education.

U.S. finance will achieve an even greater impact by leveraging the education investment of other donors and local governments. The FTI has brought governments and donors together around the table at the country level to support a single education-sector plan. Typically, 80 percent or more of the total cost of these plans is paid by the local government. Donors then help the country move ahead faster with a more ambitious plan by funding the balance. This ‘virtual fund’ is a central part of the FTI and it has proved to be a very effective way for donors to scale up their support for education. Aid for basic education in first-phase FTI countries doubled between 2000 and 2006. The Global Fund for Education should join this mechanism wherever it is working well. The Global Fund for Education can then look for gaps that are currently not covered by mainstream

FTI support. The lack of support for basic education in countries affected by conflict is one big gap. The lack of support for non-formal education, including adult literacy programs, is another.

The Global Fund for Education should also learn the lessons from what has not worked in the FTI. (Here again [Sperling’s paper](#) gives an excellent analysis.) As the co-chairs of its steering committee have **acknowledged**, the FTI continues to struggle with slow disbursement from the Catalytic Fund managed by the World Bank.⁹ In some cases, this has led to delays of 18 months or more for countries which desperately need funds to build schools and pay teachers. The GFE must find innovative ways to deliver finance more rapidly and more effectively to schools and local communities where it will make a difference. The GFE could also learn a lot from the experience of other global programs such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria which works with non-governmental as well government agencies and uses private-sector agencies to strengthen auditing and monitoring at the local level.

A Global Fund for Education with greater leadership, more funding, and an expanded scope can change the way aid is provided in the education sector. But the devil will be in the details. Let me offer my thoughts on a few principles to guide the next stage of the process. I would welcome comments on any of these points.

1. The Global Fund for Education should insist on **a relentless focus on results** across the whole education sector. How many more children are attending school? What are they learning? How many more adults can read? How many more girls are being given the chance of a

⁷ Gene Sperling, “A Global Education Fund: Toward a True Global Compact on Universal Education” (Washington, D.C.: Center for Foreign Relations, 2008), <http://www.cfr.org/publication/18051>

⁸ Department for International Development (DFID), “Millennium Development Goal 2: DFID’s Aid to Education,” <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/mdg/education.asp>

⁹ Education for All–Fast Track Initiative, “The Road to 2015: Reaching the Education Goals,” Annual Report 2008 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2008), http://www.education-fast-track.org/library/Annual_Report_2008_EFA_FTII.pdf

The Global Fund for Education should focus on results, encourage innovation, promote inclusion, openness, and transparency, and harmonize across financing channels.

secondary education? What opportunities are being provided to children with disabilities? The Global Fund for Education should require regular independent evaluations so that they can assess real progress.

2. The Global Fund for Education should encourage **innovative approaches to delivering finance** to achieve the maximum impact. These could include funds that pay school districts a ‘bonus’ for achieving better results or send money directly to schools to pay for books and equipment.¹⁰ The GFE could also support cash transfers or social funds to support adult literacy programs.¹¹ The guiding principles should be innovation, flexibility, and effectiveness. The GFE should also ensure that countries can rely on predictable flows of finance so that they are better able to plan ahead
3. Working with the FTI partnership, the Global Fund for Education should **promote a more inclusive, open, and transparent way of working** that brings together government and non-governmental organizations, bilateral and multilateral donors, and public and private partners as equals. At the local level, it should support initiatives to improve accountability to parents through simple measures such as publishing school budgets. At the global level, it should push for greater accountability of multilateral organizations such as the World Bank by insisting that they publish up-to-date figures on disbursement and results.
4. Finally, the Global Fund for Education should promote **harmonization across all channels of financing** for education. The U.S. government—

like many donor countries—provides assistance to education through many different channels. This is confusing for the recipient country and results in duplication at the country level. The Global Fund for Education should promote greater consistency across all donor support for education—bilateral and multilateral—by focusing on the results that are being achieved at the country level.

And what will success look like? The Global Fund for Education, working with the other members of the international development partnership, could help to provide a quality basic education to some **75 million children** and help to give over **700 million adults the basic literacy skills** they need to survive in a modern, knowledge-based society. This will create a generation of young people who are able to take control of their lives, contribute to a growing economy, and build stronger democracies to improve global security. A young woman able to apply for her microfinance loan; a boy able to read news about local council politics to his mother; and a generation of children able to earn a decent wage and stop the cycle of poverty that has dogged their families for generations—what better legacy could there be?

President Obama has committed to support this cause by calling for a Global Fund for Education to get every child a free high-quality education. He recognizes that doing so is in the interest of the United States as well as the rest of the world:

there is nothing more disappointing than a child denied the hope that comes with going to school and there is nothing more dangerous than a child who is taught to distrust and destroy.¹²

The world’s children will welcome his lead.

The Global Fund for Education could give a generation of young people the basic education they need to survive in a modern, knowledge-based society—what better legacy could there be?

¹⁰ For CGD proposal on Cash on Delivery Aid see also http://www.cgdev.org/section/initiatives/_active/codaid

¹¹ See Samuel Morley and David Coady, *From Social Assistance to Social Development: Targeted Education Subsidies in Developing Countries* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development and International Food Policy Research Institute, 2003), <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/2913/>

¹² Speech by then-Senator Barack Obama at Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting, September 25, 2008, <http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?pid=2983&srcid=2827>

Further Reading

Gene Sperling (2008). "A Global Education Fund: Toward a True Global Compact on Universal Education." A CUE Working Paper. Washington, D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations Press. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/18051>.

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