

No Child Left Behind—Anywhere

By Nancy Birdsall*
March 2005

“No Child Left Behind” could move from a national program to a global mission if several current policies and initiatives converge: the Education for All Fast Track Initiative, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Account, and the renewed declarations of the Bush Administration, supported by U.S. public opinion.

At the 2000 Millennium Summit, the U.S. and countries around the world endorsed the Millennium Development Goals, a set of ambitious development targets that included ensuring a primary school education for every girl and boy by 2015. But how and where can this mission get off the ground? For two years, officials from the U.S. and other rich countries have been working with a group of poor countries to develop plans. The donors have agreed to support the plans of a select group of poor countries, including them in the Education for All Fast Track Initiative, because the plans make sense and the governments are honest and competent enough to implement them. The program has now reached the stage where the donor countries need to act by pledging and disbursing money.

Some of that money should come from the United States, especially since four countries in the Education Fast Track Initiative—Ghana, Honduras, Mozambique, and Nicaragua—are also eligible for U.S. support from the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA).

The MCA is the Bush Administration’s landmark foreign aid initiative that aims to vastly increase U.S. aid while adding a new benefit: By targeting aid to

countries with governments that are competent, honest, and democratic, this program brings a new discipline to aid and a welcome insistence that it make a measurable difference in the lives of poor people.

Ghana, Honduras, Mozambique, and Nicaragua could ask for education funding through their MCA funds. This would not be an earmark; the countries themselves would make the decision whether or not to apply. But it would be hard to find a better way to invest the MCA resources.

Education is in fact the cornerstone of the other U.N. Millennium Development Goals to further global health and well-being. Poor people, especially women, usually own little more than their labor. With education, that labor becomes a productive asset, making it possible for poor people to take responsibility for their own and their society’s well-being. Continued poverty fuels frustration, anger, fanaticism and violence – and in the case of girls, a high risk of sexual abuse and AIDS.

The outlay for the programs in the four MCA-eligible Fast Track countries would total perhaps \$1 billion over three years. If the United States commits to supplying a significant chunk of this funding through MCA, the other donors in the U.N. program would be encouraged to follow suit, and the Fast Track could pick up speed.

Americans support this initiative. According to a recent national opinion poll, Americans said the most important goal of U.S. support for international

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development programs is to provide basic education. Americans recognize education as the path to freedom in the world's poorest countries and to a more secure global system for all.

The Administration has yet to endorse the broad recommendations of the U.N. Millennium Project, which is urging more rich country resources to support the Millennium Development Goals. Yet our country can still take the lead in this limited but crucial area by putting money that we have already allocated to development more obviously on the table. Financing is ready in the special MCA account, and that account is already targeted to specific countries, including that group of four whose education plans are already prepared.

The program for global schooling can now begin in earnest. With the MCA and the Millennium Project donor group, we have the means. We also have the motivation: to free a coming generation from poverty and disease, and their attendant social and political ills. We have only to seize the opportunity.