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Education in Africa—The Story Isn’t Over

REBECCA WINTHROP

If you are a child in Africa today, you stand a much greater chance of attending primary school than you would have 10 or 20 years ago. According to the World Bank, the 1990 primary enrollment rate across sub-Saharan Africa was 53 percent. Since then the rate has increased considerably—in 2008 it surpassed 75 percent. Indeed, the proportion of enrolled children has increased at a faster rate in Africa than in any other region of the world.

This progress is largely credited to African governments, with support from the international community. In the past decade, since the 2000 launch of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), countries in the region have focused on enrolling more children in primary school, and on enrolling boys and girls in equal numbers.

Underlying this promising progress is a fundamental shift in social norms. Fifty years ago, with little exception, schooling in sub-Saharan Africa was for the sons of tribal chiefs. Schools prepared local elites for running state bureaucracies. The long tail of colonialism helped entrench views among the general public that education was a good to be rationed and apportioned for a select few.

In Africa today, this view no longer holds. Increasingly, schooling is expected to be for everyone. Parents and community leaders across the region advocate for the right to an education for their children. National leaders proclaim universal schooling to be one of the mechanisms for ushering their countries into the modern, globalized era. Rarely is the merit of educating all children questioned anymore; instead, debates focus on how to accomplish the goal. This attitudinal transformation is clearly worth celebrating.

Less clear is whether the actual progress to date in education in Africa warrants celebration. While large numbers of children have entered primary schools, many are still left out, and the rate of enrollment progress is waning. In sub-Saharan Africa today, an estimated 28.9 million children of appropriate age for primary education remain out of school.

Equally worrisome are recent data showing that, even if children in the region manage to enroll in school, they may end up learning nothing. A report by the Research Triangle Institute estimates, for example, that half the children in Uganda and 90 percent in Mali cannot read a single word after completing second grade. That is hardly cause for celebration.

THE LEARNING CRISIS

Advocates for schooling in Africa have lately been bemoaning the fact that less international attention is being paid to educational needs. Donor governments are reducing foreign assistance dollars targeted for education. These governments are in part reacting to domestic fiscal pressures, but they also are changing priorities. Many donors have turned to other pressing issues, such as maternal and child health, citing the progress to date toward the education-related MDGs and the need to focus on other goals toward which hardly any progress has been made over the past decade. Some education advocates, sighing wistfully, suggest that “what education needs is a good crisis” to raise it higher again on the global policy agenda.

But in fact, education in Africa today remains in crisis. The crisis is hard to discern if you look at schooling only through the lens of access to primary education and gender parity, the main thrusts of the two education-related MDGs. Different metrics, however, reveal massive educational deficits in sub-Saharan Africa—and in particular

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an ongoing learning crisis, which affects those in and out of school alike.

At the Center for Universal Education, we have concluded that this learning crisis has three dimensions. First, a number of children and youth still lack access to learning opportunities. In Africa as in the rest of the developing world, it is the poor—but especially poor girls in rural areas, as well as children and youth living in conflict-affected zones—who are the most educationally marginalized. For example, according to the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, poor, rural Hausa girls in Nigeria stay in school an average of 0.3 years; affluent rural boys in the same region average 10.3 years of schooling.

Second, those who are in school often do not master the foundational skills, including literacy and numeracy, that would enable them to successfully continue in school. Only 24 percent of young people in Africa today continue to secondary levels of education.

Third, among those who are able to stay in school and transition to secondary levels of education, many do not learn the skills they need for their future lives and livelihoods.

What is needed now in sub-Saharan Africa is a shift from focusing almost solely on the problems of educational access to focusing on improving both access and quality simultaneously. Learning for all, or equitable learning, should be the new floor which the education community, both nationally and internationally, aspires to establish. Strategies to promote access to schooling are necessary but not sufficient for achieving successful learning for all of the region's children and young people.

FALSE DICHOTOMY

A myth pervades the educational development discourse—that focusing on quality will undercut the ability to expand access. This is a false dichotomy. The only way to ensure that all young people not only enter but most importantly stay in school is to make certain that while there they learn and progress. If they do not, they drop out.

No country, in fact, has achieved universal primary education without also paying attention to quality. Currently, far too many Africans who enroll in primary school leave after a few years. Cross-country data show a positive correlation

between education coverage and average learning levels—suggesting that countries that improve the quality of their education systems will see an increase in enrollment. When parents and communities see that what happens in schools is of high quality and can make a positive impact on their children's future, they are more likely to send their children to school.

Quality in education is something that parents and communities in sub-Saharan countries want. Civil society movements have organized to demand quality education from their countries' governments. Nongovernmental organizations like Uwezo in East Africa have formed to expose the often poor and varied quality of schools and to hold their governments accountable for improving education outcomes.

Each year, these groups conduct literacy and numeracy assessments in national samples of households to provide governments, communities, and schools with information about student achievement in an effort to measure the quality of education.

A Uwezo assessment last year found, for example, that one in four Kenyan children could not read a basic paragraph in English or Kiswahili or solve simple subtraction problems.

African governments also have a stake in educational quality—as a spur to economic development. Learning gains as measured by international test scores have been shown to correlate closely with economic growth. A recent study by two educational economists, Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, found that the economies of nations whose students perform well on international math and science assessments grow at a faster rate over time than those whose students perform less well on the tests.

Notably, Hanushek and Woessmann found that extending children's schooling by one year had little effect on their later earnings if that year did not result in learning, as measured by increased test scores.

The knowledge, skills, and capacities that young people develop in part through formal education play a key role in developing the human capital that nations need to take advantage of changing global economic trends. A young African who spends eight years in school but acquires only marginal literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking

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skills will likely fare worse in the economy than a peer who has six years of schooling but emerges with an ability to read with comprehension, perform basic math calculations, and problem-solve.

Thus, investing in educational quality—and particularly ensuring learning outcomes—produces a higher return on investment than simply focusing on increased enrollment; it produces a direct and demonstrable impact on individual earnings, income distribution, and overall economic growth.

Quality education also results in better national health outcomes, particularly for women and their families. To be sure, quite a few studies show a positive correlation between female primary school enrollment and health indicators like decreased infant and maternal mortality. But studies also show a relationship between the quality of education and the rates at which infant mortality declines. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, countries whose children score better on international assessments show a faster reduction in infant deaths than countries whose students score less well. Other indicators of quality, such as levels of teacher compensation, have also been shown to have an effect on long-term health.

EDUCATION FOR ALL

A number of international education initiatives do recognize the importance of pursuing access and quality jointly. The Education for All (EFA) movement, which started in 1990, has set out six goals that many countries, along with large international organizations, have pledged to support. At a world education forum in 2000, the international community committed to assuring that all children “have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.” The declaration also called for educational improvements “so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills.”

The original EFA framework focused on both quantity and quality. But the MDGs—which are much better known than the EFA goals and have received far more traction—have subverted the spirit of EFA, though not by design. It was never the intent of the MDGs themselves to increase the number of children enrolled while retaining inequity among schools, nor for impoverished rural children to learn little while rich urban children learn quite a bit more. Rather, the spirit of the MDGs was always to ensure that education, along with other key services, played its

part in reducing global poverty. For this, learning is crucial.

Still, the question remains: What should be done to ensure learning for all in sub-Saharan Africa? Myriad solutions present themselves for myriad problems, of course. However, three measures stand out as addressing crucial bottlenecks that today impede learning for all: first, preparing children to do well in school; second, ensuring that children master literacy and numeracy skills in the early grades; and third, enabling young people to transition to—and complete—relevant postprimary education.

These three measures should not be seen as separate, but as parts of an integrated set of initiatives that would reinforce each other to enable the equitable, successful delivery of education to all of Africa's youth.

START EARLY

The early years of a child's life are critical for developing the cognitive, social, and emotional skills that are necessary for well-being and academic success. Early childhood development research notes that vital brain development occurs before the age of seven and is influenced by nutrition and health factors as well as the quality of the child's living environment and social interactions.

A focus on early years is particularly important in Africa, where children face a multitude of disadvantages before they even enter the schoolyard. More than a third of the deaths worldwide of children under five years old occur in Africa. Nearly all of the continent's children lack access to early childhood education.

Early education programs have been shown to increase levels of cognitive development and overall school readiness and to decrease repetition and dropout rates in the early grades, leading to higher primary completion rates. These outcomes are immensely important in African nations, where equity and student learning in the later grades lag far behind the developed world.

Even for the poorest African countries, research suggests that investing in early childhood education programs would be highly cost-effective. In addition to improving the physical, emotional, and cognitive health of children, such programs could help reduce poverty and promote gender equality by freeing older girls, who normally would be required to take care of their younger siblings, to attend school.

A range of strategies has proved successful in preparing children to do well in school. In sub-

Saharan Africa, efforts should be made to greatly expand early childhood care opportunities, particularly for impoverished and marginalized communities; to involve parents in preparing children for learning; and to ensure that girls and boys begin schooling at an appropriate age.

Early childhood initiatives can provide families and children in the region with desperately needed health services as well. In Kenya, de-worming programs were found to increase the number of children enrolled in school and were much more cost-effective than other efforts at increasing access.

Involving parents is important. One of the most significant indicators of academic success in later grades is the number of books available in the home. Research has shown that parents who actively engage in learning activities with their children—reading books, playing with alphabet toys, and so forth—can help increase their children's literacy scores dramatically compared to those of children in households that do not engage in such activities.

Meanwhile, ensuring that girls and boys begin schooling at the same age addresses risks that girls face from being in classes with older boys; decreases teacher workload by lowering the need for instructional differentiation; and helps prevent gender inequities in cognitive development later on.

LETTERS AND NUMBERS

It is also necessary to ensure that children acquire, in the early grades, the literacy and numeracy skills that contribute to cognitive development later in life. Experts note that early development of these skills is a good predictor of future academic performance.

Research has shown, for example, that reading progress at the end of first grade can predict student success in later primary and secondary grades. Students who master these foundational skills are also less likely to become discouraged in the upper grades when the content becomes more complex. This leads to higher student retention and graduation rates.

Emphasizing the value of early literacy and numeracy skills acquisition is a key step in solving the learning crisis in sub-Saharan nations. In several countries, pilot projects in teacher training have already achieved improvements in children's

reading scores by adapting teaching approaches to address identifiable reading deficiencies.

In Kenya, the Aga Khan Foundation and the ministry of education provided training for second-grade teachers that included highly specific lesson plans designed to aid their reading instruction. Following the intervention, second-grade students were able to read twice as fluently as in a baseline assessment.

Giving greater priority to early-grade literacy and numeracy can involve a number of strategies, including recruiting or reassigning effective teachers to the early grades rather than later grades, as well as teacher training initiatives that focus on improving students' acquisition of reading and mathematics skills. Research has shown that such training can help increase literacy and fluency skills by over 50 percent.

Simply spending more time on reading and math is important in Africa, where studies have shown that overall instructional time in many countries is surprisingly low. In Ethiopia, instructional time accounts for 34 percent of the total time students are supposed to be in school. Focused initiatives, such as one in South Africa that devotes 30 minutes a day to reading for pleasure, are needed to help maximize benefits gained from literacy and numeracy instruction.

Providing mother-tongue multilingual education in the early grades has also been shown to improve learning later on, particularly when such initiatives involve a gradual rather than abrupt transition to national language instruction. A bilingual program in Mali, for instance, has reduced dropping out and grade-repeating and resulted in higher academic achievement compared with French-only instruction.

Availability of appropriate reading materials is a critical factor as well. An initiative by the philanthropic organization Save the Children to create village book banks found that, at the end of one year, students in Malawi demonstrated progress in letter identification, oral reading fluency, and connected text comprehension, as compared with students in other villages who began with similar scores in each area.

MOVING ON

Completion of postprimary school and higher-level skills acquisition are becoming increasingly

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significant for developing human capital and driving economic growth in the developing world, including in Africa, where the demand for secondary schooling is growing.

More sophisticated competencies are required of workers in a global labor market; new and emerging industries like information technology, finance, tourism, renewable energies, and sustainable agriculture require that employees possess very specific skills. Secondary schools play a crucial role in teaching these skills, and also in developing cadres of trained health care workers and teachers, who help to ensure the health and education of current and future generations, indirectly contributing to economic development.

Another factor contributing to the growing need for postprimary education in Africa is what demographers call the youth bulge. Across most of the region, fertility rates have been slow to decline compared with the rest of the world, and countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda are struggling to deal with large numbers of young people as a proportion of the total population.

Investing in young people is critical for Africa's future, and there are dangers associated with not investing. Research has shown that adolescents without viable schooling or employment opportunities are more likely to be involved in crime and illicit activities or to engage in conflict. Postprimary education programs provide a positive conduit for transitioning large numbers of youth into employment opportunities. Such programs have the potential to provide young people with additional skills that make them more marketable to future employers.

To promote the transition to and completion of postprimary education programs, African educational systems and international donors need to pursue strategies that strengthen the link between schooling and labor market opportunities, that offer a diverse and flexible menu of learning options, and that facilitate school-to-work transitions.

The vast majority of students completing school in sub-Saharan countries need jobs to help

support themselves and their families. Linking school curricula with the skills required in the labor market is a good way to increase the odds of formal employment. In addition, studies have shown that students are more likely to remain in school and complete their education when they see a tangible connection between class work and job acquisition.

Flexible learning opportunities are especially important for African children whose education may be interrupted for long periods of time, either because they are working or because they live in regions affected by conflict. "Second chance," catch-up, and other such informal programs can help provide access to learning for students who otherwise would be left out of the education process.

An initiative in Ethiopia called the TEACH project, for example, provides education for the country's pastoralist children, who represent over 20 percent of the general population and whose out-of-school population is nearly 90 percent. The program has benefited nearly 500,000 students who have little chance to participate in the formal school system.

LEADERSHIP, PLEASE

While education in sub-Saharan Africa remains in crisis, a number of demonstrably successful strategies are available to address it. What needs to be done is difficult but not impossible. The region's learning crisis is a solvable problem that festers in many cases for lack of leadership.

Leadership from the highest levels in African countries is required both to make sufficient resources available for school-system improvements and to ensure that key transition points in the educational process are addressed—early childhood education; foundational skill development in primary school; and employment-relevant schooling thereafter. Leadership is needed as well from external partners, including in the aid community, to shift attention to learning, and not just enrollment, for all. ■