

**Submitted Testimony to the United States House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs**

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**March 5, 2019**

Chairwoman Lowey and Ranking Member Rogers, I am pleased to testify on behalf of the Basic Education Coalition, a group of leading U.S.-based organizations and academic institutions working together to promote expanded, equitable access to quality education so that all children have the chance to learn. My name is Candace Debnam, and I am the Co-Chair of the Coalition's Executive Board of Directors as well as the Executive Director of School-to-School International.

We are extremely grateful for the Subcommittee's steadfast commitment to fighting extreme poverty and supporting education for children around the world. Sustained funding for international basic education has enabled USAID and implementing partner organizations to work in collaboration in some of the most challenging contexts to improve educational opportunities for local communities. U.S. bilateral basic education programs focus on increasing equitable access to education, providing early learners with foundational skills, and preparing youth for successful careers. Thanks to the support of this Subcommittee, USAID's programs reached over 109 million learners in more than 50 countries from 2011-2017, including 22.6 million children living in conflict or crisis settings.

In addition to providing children with literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills, basic education lays the foundation for sustainable economic growth, poverty alleviation, social stability, and participatory democracy. Greater educational attainment reduces the long-term need for foreign aid and bolsters emerging markets for international trade. To enhance U.S. foreign assistance efforts and improve educational opportunities for children in need, **we urge Congress to provide \$925 million for Basic Education in the Fiscal Year 2020 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs bill, with at least \$800 million provided as bilateral development assistance.**

Throughout my career, I have had the privilege to work with driven, passionate innovators from around the world on improving educational outcomes for children. This work, supported by the U.S. Government, has the power to dramatically shift the trajectory of individual lives, as well as communities and countries more broadly.

The world has made remarkable progress toward the goal of education for all. Since 2000, the total number of out-of-school children and youth has dropped by over 115 million and global primary school enrollment has grown to 91 percent. However, the need to continue and renew our commitment to this important work is paramount. 262 million children and youth are out of school globally and nearly 40 percent of primary school age children are not acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills. In conflicts and crises, these numbers are even higher. Nearly one in four children living in areas affected by conflict are missing out on their education. Far too often, hardships such as poverty, displacement, disability, and discrimination inhibit children's ability to access a quality education.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 90% of girls are failing to meet minimum proficiency standards in reading. When compared to high-income countries where 88% of children are on track to meet the minimum proficiency standards for reading and math, it is clear that more needs to be done to ensure that access to quality education is equitable at all levels. All children, regardless of gender or place of birth, deserve the opportunity to learn and make a life for themselves.

A dollar invested in an additional year of schooling for these children generates up to ten dollars in benefits to low-income countries and provides young people the opportunity to lift themselves and their families out of the intergenerational cycle of poverty.<sup>1</sup> With education, these children will be more financially self-sufficient and will also be exposed to democratic norms. According to a study of 18 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, people of voting age with a primary education were 1.5 times more likely to support democracy than those with no education, and twice as likely to do so if they had completed secondary education.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, there has been strong bipartisan recognition that improving global education is vital to our American values and interests. Basic education attainment slows the rate of population growth, stems the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, and promotes equality between men and women.<sup>3</sup> In countries wracked by crisis and conflict, introduction of fair and inclusive education provides stability and imparts skills and attitudes supportive of conflict prevention and peace building. Higher levels of education are also correlated with lower maternal and child mortality rates and girls with secondary schooling are up to six times less likely to marry as children.

With strong support from this Committee, we can build on the tremendous progress that has been made to date. Gains in access to education and reading skills need to be expanded to reach the children who have been left behind, especially those affected by crisis and conflict. We also need to ensure that children receive support to develop the skills needed for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce, including numeracy, resilience, and critical thinking. Great strides have been made to improve gender equality, but we cannot rest until all girls receive an equitable quality education. Finally, our programs must start earlier, so children enter primary school ready to learn. To achieve these ambitious and vital goals, it is imperative that Congress fully resource the U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education and equip staff at USAID with the needed tools to achieve success.

USAID has played a critical role in shining the light on the global learning crisis, and we now know that the impact of education cannot be measured in the number of students enrolled or the number of hours in a classroom. Rather, education's effectiveness is revealed when learning outcomes improve. USAID-funded Early Grade Reading Assessments have helped focus the global community on what works and what does not regarding learning outcomes. Other bilateral, multilateral, and private sector donors have followed the U.S. Government's lead and are now prioritizing measuring and achieving positive learning outcomes. Furthermore, we know children learn both inside and outside of the classroom and we applaud USAID's recognition of the power of community engagement to improve learning. In places such as Pakistan, Ethiopia, Peru, and Guatemala, USAID programs are helping community members engage in children's learning opportunities.

Successful cross-sector efforts, such as the McGovern-Dole program, have proven that integrated health, nutrition, and education interventions enable children to reach their full potential. Stronger coordination across sectors as well as evidenced-based programming that promotes early childhood development will ensure that we approach development challenges and opportunities holistically and empower local communities to thrive. These programs are proven to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of subsequent interventions by ensuring that all children are developmentally on track. As work begins under the new U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education, cross-sector interventions should be prioritized to ensure that all needs are met and children arrive at school safe, healthy, and ready to learn.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, 2016

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Murray, 2015; Mondal & Shitan, 2013; Sperling & Winthrop, 201

Another great challenge we face is reaching children living in conflict-torn and fragile states. With protracted conflicts lasting years and internally displaced people and refugees displaced for over a decade on average, generations of young people are at risk of missing out on an education and the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Increased resources for education and learning opportunities in conflict and crises will ensure that at-risk children and adolescents have access to a quality education. Through formal and non-formal education programs, we can provide children and youth in conflict areas with a sense of hope and normalcy when their lives have been disrupted while simultaneously promoting their psychosocial well-being and cognitive development.

U.S. programs must also reach poor, marginalized, and often forgotten children. Over the years, we've identified new ways to reach these groups with meaningful, effective education interventions. Through innovative, low-cost technologies, such as interactive and long-distance radio instruction, cell phones, computers, and the internet, we can now reach more children who would have otherwise been left behind. With relatively modest additional investments in innovative, low-cost measures, we will greatly expand our reach.

Ensuring that children are enrolled in school and learning will require continued interventions and a strong commitment by the United States. Support for basic education is essential to help USAID reach its goals and to ensure that countries receiving assistance move along the path to sustainability and economic prosperity. With the U.S. Government's continued leadership in this area, the global community will be in a much stronger position to help children, strengthen communities, and improve countries' development outcomes.

In addition to the benefits that children themselves receive from access to a quality education, strong national education sectors and programs are also essential for global economic growth. As populations around the world continue to grow, education programs will help ensure stability and expand access to global markets in the developing world. Today, the fastest-growing markets for America's goods are in developing countries, representing 40% of U.S. exports and one out of every five American jobs. For every 10% increase in U.S. exports, there is a 7% boost in U.S. employment. Research shows that if all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills, 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty – a 12% drop in global poverty. Therefore, it is clear that educating the world's children is essential to building the stable trading partners that growing U.S. export markets require.

BEC member programs are helping to improve student learning and reading skills so that one day these children can enter the workforce and be productive members of society. In Yemen, children have faced high drop-out rates and low primary school enrollment. Through BEC programs, learning has improved for over 1.5 million Yemeni children and oral reading fluency has increased by 500%. In Egypt, where youth face continued instability, programs have dramatically improved literacy - up to 194% in some cases. The Early Grade Reading Assessment was so successful in Egypt that the Ministry of Education requested support from USAID to expand the program to all 27 governorates.

U.S. assistance is recognized and valued by the people with whom we work and helps to build relationships with partner countries. Programs increase local capacity and opportunity while building long-term trust and understanding with communities and individuals. U.S. assistance is notable for its ability to work hand in hand with local governments and communities to find solutions to critical problems. In Senegal, BEC members have worked to develop a middle school system for rural youth. In partnership with parents and communities, we've established village schools and implemented programs that provide opportunities to young people, particularly girls, to continue their education. In many countries, the school functions as the center of community life and a focal point for other development

efforts, thereby continuously serving as a community-based development hub that can provide cross-sectoral support to those in need.

In conclusion, Congressional support for international education is vital if we want to succeed and truly achieve sustainable development in the countries where we work. Thanks to the leadership of Congress and passage of the READ Act, we are positioned take our education development work to the next level. The U.S. Government must seize this unique moment and provide resources to meet the ambition that was laid out in the READ Act and the global need for international education support. A quality education for all is the bedrock for societal progress, and the benefits of our investments now will be reaped by generations to come. A fully resourced USAID will develop innovative solutions to global challenges and will have the capacity to directly address country needs. Now is the time to make a deeper, more sustainable impact on the lives and hopes of the world's impoverished children. The Basic Education Coalition looks forward to working with Congress to ensure that quality basic education remains a pillar of our foreign assistance and that the U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education is a success. Together, we can help alleviate poverty, strengthen societies, foster stability and security, and spur economic growth, both abroad and here at home.

Thank you for your continued support and for your consideration of our request.