

Administrator Rajiv Shah
International Literacy Day Speech
Thursday, September 8, 2011
Ronald Reagan Building, Pavillion Room

Thank you and good morning, and welcome to USAID for world literacy day. I would like to thank Richard and the entire education team here at USAID for your great leadership and commitment to children around the world.

We have a special thank you for representative Lowey that I will save for the conclusion of my remarks because we have with us with today, Washington, probably this country's top single advocate for education around the world, and we're honored to have you with us.

I certainly would like to welcome and thank the visiting dignitaries as Richard has mentioned: Minister Ato Faud Ibrahim, Abed Fernandes de Assis, Mator Kpangbai, and Guillermo Lopez. We really appreciate your participation today, the experiences of your countries and your leadership, and we are really looking to learn from some of your specific examples as I'll mention in a few moments.

And then a special welcome to our colleagues from Brookings, the World Bank, our co-sponsors for the Education for All Fast Track Initiative.

The fact that everyone has worked together for nearly a decade now to dramatically expand access to education gives us the opportunity to focus on literacy outcomes, which will be our focus going forward.

Since the launch of the millennium development goals, the world has seen significant strides in education through the efforts of education ministries and their partners around the world. Developing countries have moved nearly 28 million more children into classrooms over the last decade by abolishing school fees, building new facilities, and being relentlessly focused on making sure that every child born anywhere has access to an education.

In fact today, more than 90% of children in developing countries are enrolled in some form in primary school.

But our job as development professionals and government leaders is to always ask the question: to what end?

Our responsibility does not end when a girl first steps through the doors of a classroom. We have to make sure that she actually has the tools to learn something in that setting.

Unfortunately, a focus on universal access has come to some extent at the expense of children receiving a high quality education everywhere around the world. Even as we have seen these record numbers of children enter classrooms, we have seen the quality of learning sharply drop.

Today, over 60% of all school children around the world—nearly 200 million girls and boys—are learning so little that they are struggling to read basic words. In some countries, the situation is much worse. In Mali, 80 percent of schoolchildren couldn't read a single word at the end of second grade. By the end of sixth grade, after spending half their lives in school, nearly half of them still couldn't read a single word.

Packing children into classrooms without helping them learn is not an education... it's daycare.

Without a motivated teacher, without quality learning materials, without clear targets and effective monitoring, children will have little hope of gaining the promise of walking through those school doors.

At USAID, we fundamentally transformed our approach to education to help address this crisis in quality.

We're not going to measure our success by the number of children in school; we're going to measure it by the number of children who can read and add by the time they leave. We are not going to measure our success by the number of teachers we train in hotel ballrooms or in international conferences. We're going to measure it by the effectiveness they demonstrate in the classroom as measured by child outcomes. And we're not going to measure our success based on the anecdotes we're told by our consultants and contractors; we're going to use sophisticated and modern monitoring and evaluation techniques to ensure what we're doing generates results.

As part of our broader USAID reform, USAID Forward reform effort, we are shifting our emphasis away from outputs like kids in school or teachers trained and towards real results like literacy.

This was the vision behind our new education strategy which we launched in February.

And it's also part of a widespread effort across our Agency to ensure that every tax dollar we spend is getting real results for the American people and the people around the world we hope to support and serve.

As part of our new education strategy, we developed early grade reading and math assessments designed to help teachers understand the specific needs of their students and their classrooms.

These tools are already making a difference on the ground, changing the way entire nations approach education.

With our support, the Liberian ministry of education—we hope to hear more about this later— has researched baseline childhood literacy, then set up a randomized control trial to test the effectiveness of early grade reading assessments. That trial showed conclusively that continued one-on-one assessments of student performance led to a two-to-three time increase in childhood literacy.

As a result, they are now scaling up these interventions to reach most of the country.

In Honduras, studies revealed that weekly curriculum calendars were the most effective intervention in supporting actual learning gains—keeping teachers and students on track and on schedule.

Today, these calendars have been adopted by the education ministry and expanded nationwide. In fact, each of the education ministries represented here today has a specific operational innovation that has significantly improved actual results for children.

Mozambique is planning to conduct a reading assessment. Ethiopia—like Liberia—has conducted one, and is now committed to developing national reading programs. And Nicaragua has already taken their evidence based program to scale.

By focusing on literacy and measuring impact, our new strategy will help improve the reading skills of 100 million children by 2015.

That goal is an ambitious one. It's also one that's operated now under new constraints in a much more austere budget environment. But it's important that we remember that helping a girl learn not only brightens her future, it brightens ours as Americans.

It energizes our economy, by strengthening global economic growth and developing markets for our exports.

In fact, a 10% increase in basic literacy translates into a 0.3 increase in GDP.

It helps protect our own shores by reducing the pull of conflict and violent extremism around the world. And we know this is true based on actual studies done by Brookings and others. In Afghanistan, we've helped provide an education to nearly 8 million children today, 35 percent of whom are girls who otherwise would not be in school.

And what Congresswoman Lowey perhaps best articulates is that our investment in global education is a core expression of American values, of dignity, of opportunity, of the freedom that that education provides.

I was reminded of that just this Tuesday, the first day of school for my two young children. I was able to personally take the kids to school, to meet their teachers and to see their classrooms. And I left knowing that each day my children would come home from school and have stories to tell not just about going to school, but about what they learned there – about the curriculum, about the content, and the enthusiasm that comes with actual learning.

I suspect that many of us in this room share that experience, and many of us in this room, that for millions of families around the world, they don't get that experience.

Because ensuring a quality education in childhood is so important to global prosperity and security, it has brought together a bipartisan community of supporters and leaders.

Former First Lady Laura Bush described education as the bedrock of a successful nation, working hard to expand educational opportunities to children around the world.

In fact, just five years ago, she hosted the first-ever White House Conference on Global Literacy. On the other side of the aisle, we have Congresswomen Lowe, who throughout her career has maintained a steady fight for increased funding for children with disabilities, teacher development and literacy programs here and around the world.

Under her leadership, federal funding for after-school programs has increased from \$1 million in 1996 to more than a \$1 billion dollars.

She has co-sponsored legislation to reduce class sizes and wrote the first bill to provide federal funding for school modernization so children can learn with the benefits of technology.

And now we are trying to bring that technology around the world. Congresswoman Lowey's commitment extends beyond our borders, to every child everywhere. And that's why it is an absolute honor to have her here, and a pleasure to present her with the first ever 2011 Literacy Champion Award.

And I'm going to show you this award. The award reads: In recognition of your relentless dedication and leadership in education to champion global literacy and education, your vision, tenacity and leadership has successfully transformed the lives of millions of young girls and boys, and contributed to U.S. National Security. Thank you. I'll let now Congressman Lowey share her remarks with us.

But I thought it would be helpful to put an achievement like that in some context. If you look at this slide that's up there ...that was taken from a recent trip where I visited South Sudan.

And the kids in that picture are in second grade, second standard. They range in age from 6-13 because many of them have not had a chance to be in school before. They are the beneficiaries of a program that has been studied vigorously that uses radio technology to have a structured curriculum in the classroom and we know that it has resulted in improved outcomes.

But I want to point out that for every girl you see in that photograph, statistically, today, in southern Sudan they are more likely to die in childbirth than to complete a secondary education.

I would just make the commitment or observation that no country is going to be stable and secure, and our world is not going to be stable secure so long as those statistics remain true.

With that, Congressman Lowey.