The New Horizon in Education: From Access to Quality

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Education is one of the surest means we have to end extreme poverty in our time. At the turn of the millennium, the obvious first goal to set was to get all children into school. Developing countries have made a heroic effort in this direction since then, supported by many partners in this room.

As the world’s largest financier of education, the World Bank Group has invested $40 billion in this sector over the past 15 years since our commitment in Dakar that no country with a credible plan for universal primary education would go unfunded. Soon after, we helped launch the Education for All – Fast Track Initiative—now the Global Partnership for Education—and have supported 42 countries through it.

Yet the world’s children—our children—have a right to much more support. We cannot claim success until every last child is in school and learning foundational skills. Finishing the job on access to education will not be easy, because the 121 million children who remain out of primary and lower secondary school are the hardest to reach—due to poverty, gender barriers, remoteness, and disability. With greater determination, we will reach them. But the tougher problem ahead of us is how to ensure learning as all children complete school.

The truth is, most education systems are not serving the poorest children well. If 250 million children cannot read or write in 2015 though many have attended school for years, this is a tragic breach of a solemn promise. Weak learning outcomes have serious consequences. Nearly a billion people remain trapped in extreme poverty today, partly for want of the literacy, numeracy, and non-cognitive skills needed to unlock human potential in the 21st century.
In my view, there are three reasons why equity and learning in education should be part of the very DNA of development, and integral to our final push to end extreme poverty by 2030.

First, education helps people escape poverty at very high rates. Globally, earnings increase an average of 10 percent for every year of education for employed workers. The average returns to schooling for women in Sub-Saharan African countries are often even higher. Education also raises productivity in the informal sector and is associated with better health and resilience. In short, education can transform societies.

Second, educated women and girls can be particularly effective agents of socio-economic change. Educated mothers tend to begin childbearing later, have fewer children, invest more in their health and education, and earn a better living. In Pakistan, for example, children whose mothers have even a single year of education spend an extra hour studying at home and report higher test scores. At the national level, educating girls can be the making of an entire generation.

Third, the quality of learning outcomes—measured by how much workers actually learned while at school—is a strong predictor of economic growth rates. For example, recent empirical analysis indicates that if Latin American students had kept up with their East Asian peers in learning achievement, Latin America could match East Asia’s much higher rate of economic growth. Also, we know that prosperity that is founded on human capital is also more likely to be shared prosperity—far more inclusive than growth achieved through exploiting natural resources, for example.

To end poverty, boost shared prosperity, and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we must use development financing and technical expertise to effect radical change. We have to deliver results for the poorest families using smarter, more evidence-based solutions. The good news is that we know much more about what works today than we did 15 years ago.

We at the World Bank Group are working with governments as they strengthen education systems to deliver quality learning for all. This focus on systems means we will be supporting teachers more effectively and using technology to complement their efforts, as well as setting clear learning standards and assessing student learning frequently.
We know what works to get disadvantaged children, including girls, into school. In 2001, only 2 million students were in school in Afghanistan, of whom less than 1 percent were girls. Now, enrollment has quadrupled to 8 million students, of whom 39 percent are girls. It takes holistic, cross-sectoral solutions to do this—schools located close to communities, safe school environments, female teachers in higher grades, toilets for girls, cash or food incentives, and public information campaigns.

We are committed to helping countries translate data and evidence into action. Our Systems Approach for Better Education Results program collects and analyzes policy data on education systems around the world, using evidence-based frameworks to highlight the policies and institutions that matter most to promote learning for all. In Angola, which has very low human development indicators, this approach paved the way for large-scale assessment reforms and activities.

Technology can be used to leapfrog current practices, plugging isolated teachers and students into connected classrooms of the 21st century. It can help teachers create or access innovative multimedia teaching materials, such as free content from the Khan Academy. We are in fact exploring ways of using Khan Academy content in urban Nigeria and rural Guyana. Teachers still have a very big role to play even in an era of personalized digital learning. Yet many lack the training and support needed to do their jobs. Clearly, we must do more to resolve the challenges of using technology in low- and middle-income countries, to adapt content to different settings, and to evaluate the impact of technology.

Increasingly, our work with countries focuses more strongly on results. This means improving accountability for service delivery for the poor and aligning systems better with incentives. Where appropriate, it also means providing more financing for measurable, verifiable results. In Tanzania, our Big Results Now in Education program links financing with pre-agreed results such as deploying teachers more equitably and improving student achievement by the end of Grade 2.

A growing body of evidence shows that linking financing to results works. That's why over the past five years, results-based financing has grown to about $2.5 billion or 20 percent of our total investments in education. I am pleased to announce that the World Bank Group will double results-based financing to approximately $5 billion over the next five years. This will help accelerate progress toward the new global goal of access to education and learning for all.
By making this shift, both governments and development partners will be held accountable for real and sustainable improvements.

For many developing country governments, the only way to compete in the global economy is to rapidly improve the learning outcomes of your students. For all the education ministers here, if you doubt the competitiveness of the education sector in the global economy, just visit a Korean school. Korean parents constantly tell their children – Yeolsimhi gongbu hay – which literally means: Study with your hearts on fire.

To our development partners, I want to assure you that we will more effectively leverage resources from both the public and private sectors—enabling us to move from billions of dollars to the trillions needed to end extreme poverty by 2030.

We know that business as usual won’t be enough. Let’s be bold. The world of education must heed Martin Luther King Jr.’s words: “We are confronted,” he said, “with the fierce urgency of the now.” We must commit to coming together more frequently and with greater intensity to share experiences and innovations in education to accelerate quality learning for all. In every country, we must ensure that all children have access to quality education and learning opportunities throughout their lives, regardless of where they are born, their gender, or their family’s income. And we must do what it takes -- with our hearts on fire -- to achieve this truly inspiring vision of education: a public good and a fundamental right that is essential to end extreme poverty and boost shared prosperity.

Thank you.