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Education Starts In School

By David S. Broder

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The turnout was terrific, especially given that the title of the program -- "Missing the Mark: Girls' Education and the Way Forward" -- could have been a turnoff. Every seat in the ballroom was filled, and people were standing in the rear. They were there out of a belief that an issue with almost no public visibility in the United States could affect our future -- and the world's -- as much as any single challenge or opportunity we face.

In a sense it was a global extension of the discussion about the shortcomings in American high schools that had occupied the nation's governors meeting in Washington the previous weekend. While the U.S. dropout rate worries American educators and business leaders, who know its damaging effect on our growth rate, it is the "lockout rate" that is the international problem.

Estimates are that at least 100 million youngsters -- a majority of them, and perhaps two-thirds, females -- are not attending school at any point in their lives. That denial blights their individual prospects but also, as I learned from Geeta Rao Gupta and her colleagues, damages their countries.

Gupta is the president of the International Center for Research on Women, a Washington-based institution that combines her passion for gender equality with her scholarly insistence on hard data.

In preparation for the meeting, which her group sponsored along with the Center for Global Development, Gupta and her colleagues released a series of studies measuring the side effects of educating young women in developing countries. They show that schooling is an effective tool for reducing the incidence of HIV-AIDS, because students are less sexually active and practice safe sex more than their non-student contemporaries. Being in school delays the date of marriage and reduces the size of families. It gives young women a sense of confidence and assertiveness that drastically reduces abuse by husbands and boyfriends. It makes them less vulnerable to "inter-generational, non-consensual sex." And it greatly enhances their earning power and ability to contribute to the economy.

Gupta particularly emphasizes the importance of secondary education -- beyond the sixth grade -- in accomplishing these changes, but she and other speakers say the first step must be achieving access to basic education for the millions now locked out.

The first deadline agreed to when the world's leaders signed on to the Millennium Development Goals project in 2000 was to achieve parity in school enrollment for women with men by this year. Gupta reported that 87 countries are not going to make that goal. But there has been progress in narrowing the gap between male and female enrollment almost everywhere and -- as she said -- "We know what needs to be done."

The first step is ridiculously easy -- and relatively inexpensive: Eliminate fees for enrollment in school. Those fees are small, perhaps \$25 a year, but in countries where \$1 a week is the average wage, an impossible barrier. Gene Sperling, the former Clinton White House economic adviser who has made Third World education his new cause, said that when leaders of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania decided to eliminate the school fees, new students enrolled literally by the millions.

That is all to the good, but it left some teachers Sperling visited struggling with classrooms jammed with 140 or 175 pupils -- hardly a situation conducive to learning. What is needed, he and others said, is for the advanced countries, starting with the United States, to set aside funds that would assure countries that open up their education system to all youngsters that they will have help in building the classrooms and paying the teachers they'll need -- what Sperling called "a preemption policy for winning hearts and minds."

Gupta's meeting heard promises of support for such an effort from Democratic Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska. Both made the point that, in addition to the humanitarian arguments for such an investment, it constitutes a direct contribution to our own security. Islamic radicals are happy to fill the vacuum with religious exhortation when other education is not available, so the question is whether we want the next generation to be indoctrinated with anti-American propaganda or given tools for learning to think for themselves. The answer, as Hagel put it, is that "armies and military divisions will not produce democracy; education will."

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