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Secondary Schools' Primary Importance



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DHAKA – The world has made remarkable progress in providing primary education to children worldwide. In the 1960s, fewer than half of the developing world’s children were enrolled in primary school. Today, more than 90% are. In many regions, a higher proportion of girls than boys enroll in primary school. To be sure, too many children remain out of school in countries like Nigeria and Pakistan, but the real problem lies in what happens after the primary years are over.

Without opportunities for secondary education, children have little chance to improve their livelihoods, and the progress the world has made could be jeopardized. In September, speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative, former US Secretary of State **Hillary Rodham Clinton** recognized that “lack of secondary education holds back the aspirations of so many girls and their families. It undermines prosperity and stability around the world.”

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Clinton announced a major initiative in cooperation with more than 30 organizations, including the MasterCard Foundation, Intel, and Microsoft. This group has **pledged more than \$600 million** over five years to enable 14 million girls to “attend and complete primary and secondary school.” It is a wise investment. In addition to the obvious benefits that education can deliver, increased enrollment in secondary schools offers advantages to all levels of society.

For example, requiring girls to continue their education reduces child marriage. In the developing world, one girl in seven is married by the age of 15; nearly half become mothers by the age of 18. Girls attending secondary school, by contrast, are much less likely to marry and bear children before reaching adulthood.

Providing girls with secondary education also reduces family sizes, and, when they do become mothers, it improves their children’s health and chances of survival. One **study found** that in developing countries where one girl in five received a secondary education, women had, on average, more than five children. Where half of the girls received secondary education, the average was just three children, and child and infant mortality were much lower.

Access to secondary schools can also boost enrollment in primary schools, reducing the likelihood that parents will keep their children at home to work or, as is often the case with girls, to help with domestic chores. If children have no choice but to return from primary school to the farm, why send them to school at all?

Providing secondary education need not cost a fortune. Poor countries can move swiftly to expand opportunities for education

at a much lower cost than is commonly imagined. Most village primary schools are used for education only a small fraction of the time. Appropriate modifications could turn these into secondary schools for part of each day, bringing secondary education closer to children's homes.

For girls, secondary education closer to home would have the added benefit of reducing the risks of sexual abuse and violence. Every year, roughly **60 million girls are sexually assaulted** at or on their way to school. Using facilities that are more familiar and more conveniently located could reduce this barrier to attendance.

Likewise police stations, post offices, and other existing public facilities might, with modest adjustments, provide space for secondary schools for at least part of the day. Modular classrooms, which can be built quickly and inexpensively, could provide local employment and supplement existing school facilities.

Programs in the United States like "Teach for America" and "Teach for All" can serve as powerful new models for recruiting the teachers that will be needed for new secondary schools. Life expectancy is rising, but retirement ages often remain in the late 50s, implying that pensioners could be encouraged to become teachers.

Teachers will always remain essential for students' growth and maturity, but new digital technologies can enhance secondary education. Online resources, such as the Khan Academy, hold great promise for delivering broad, inexpensive results in education.

The world stands at a crossroads. American corporations **donate about \$7 billion annually** to global health, but only \$500 million to education in developing countries. Yet **young people are the fastest-growing segment** of the population in the developing world. Uneducated, they could become an unprecedented burden as their societies age. But if they are provided with secondary

education, they will be able to transform their future – and ours – for the better.



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