

What Works in Girls' Education

Evidence and Policies from the Developing World

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Foreword

Over the last several years, it has become increasingly clear that quality universal basic education in poor countries is not only critical to economic progress and global poverty reduction but also has important implications for broader foreign policy goals.

That is why in 2002 the Council on Foreign Relations started the Center for Universal Education with Senior Fellow Gene B. Sperling as its director.

While we continue to struggle to understand many foreign policy and development challenges, the issue of girls' education is unique: a striking body of empirical evidence demonstrates its strong benefits across a broad range of areas, from children's health and educational attainment, to social stability and economic growth. Even in countries where the social and cultural obstacles to educating or empowering girls may seem overwhelming, a strategic mix of proven policies and programs can ensure girls are in school and make a critical difference to their long-term success.

This report brings together the best scholarly analyses on this topic and organizes their findings into an easy-to-use guide for policymakers and their staffs. It was written by Barbara Herz, who brings more than twenty years of expertise in girls' education at the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury, and Gene B. Sperling, who represented the United States at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal.

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Richard N. Haass
President
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Acknowledgments

We began this project to bring together the vast literature on the benefits of girls' education into a single, user-friendly reference guide for policymakers and opinion leaders. We cast a wide net and tried to identify the best and most relevant studies and findings. Through this process, we have been extremely fortunate to have some of the top experts in the world review this report and offer suggestions, advice, and critiques. In our effort to be concise and accessible, we recognize that we cannot capture the complexity and depth of all the research, and all omissions and errors are the sole responsibility of the authors.

We thank the following people for reviewing the paper and sharing their comments throughout this process: Barbara Bruns and Carolyn Winter at the World Bank; Cream Wright, Education Chief at UNICEF; Christopher Colclough, coordinator of the 2003/4 EFA Global Monitoring Report at UNESCO; Nancy Bird-sall and Ruth Levine at the Center for Global Development; George Ingram at the Basic Education Coalition; Patrick Watt at ActionAid in the United Kingdom; Lawrence Chickering; Andrea Rugh; Oliver Buston; and Caren Grown at the International Center for Research on Women. For providing extensive materials, special thanks go to Elizabeth King of the World Bank. For their assistance with our discussion of HIV/AIDS, we also would like to thank Don Bundy, Brad Strickland, Alexandra Draxler, and Tania Boler. For their guidance on overall issues pertaining to Africa, we would like to thank Gayle Smith, Susan Rice, Catherine Byrne, and Princeton Lyman. We also would like to thank people whose work and advice in this area has inspired us and given us direction: Carol Bellamy at UNICEF; Ruth Kagia at the World Bank; Paul Schultz at Yale University; Steven Moseley at the Academy for Educational Development; D. Joseph Wood, Ann Hamilton, and Paul Isenman, formerly of the World Bank; Richard Samans at the World Economic Forum; Geeta Rao Gupta at the International Center for Research on Women; Amina Ibrahim, National Coordinator for Education for All at the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria; Ann-Therese Ndong-Jatta, Secretary of State for Education from the Gambia; and Ashfaq Mahmood, former Secretary, Planning, of Pakistan.

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Barbara Herz
Gene B. Sperling

Executive Summary

The persistent problem of the tens of millions of children across the developing world who grow up without receiving the most basic education has attracted increased public attention in recent years. This crisis is acute in rural and poor areas of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. More than 180 governments have committed to addressing this crisis by pledging that every boy and girl will receive a quality basic education by 2015. This target is now firmly established and endorsed as one of the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Yet to reach the overall goal of universal education for children, policymakers will need to make special efforts to address the economic, social, and cultural barriers that keep even larger proportions of girls in poor countries out of school. Indeed, extensive research confirms that investing in girls' education delivers high returns not only for female educational attainment, but also for maternal and children's health, more sustainable families, women's empowerment, democracy, income growth, and productivity.

This paper summarizes the extensive body of research on the state of girls' education in the developing world today; the impact of educating girls on families, economies, and nations; and the most promising approaches to increasing girls' enrollment and educational quality. The overall conclusions are straightforward: educating girls pays off *substantially*. While challenges still exist, existing research provides us guidance on how to make significant progress.

I. The State of Girls' Education

- **104 million children aged 6–11 are not in school each year—60 million are girls.** Nearly 40 percent of these out-of-school children live in sub-Saharan Africa; 35 percent live in South Asia (UNESCO 2003).
- **Studies find that 150 million children currently enrolled in school will drop out before completing primary school—at least 100 million are girls** (World Bank 2002).
 - ◆ Only 36 of the 155 developing countries have achieved 100 percent primary completion rates (World Bank 2002).
 - ◆ Across the developing world, the gender gap between boys and girls in primary school completion is greater than 10 percentage points. UNICEF emphasizes that “this yawning gender gap means that millions more girls than boys are dropping out each year” (UNICEF 2003).
- **In sub-Saharan Africa, more than half of girls—54 percent—do not complete even a primary school education** (Bruns et al. 2003).
 - ◆ In Chad, 90 percent of all 15- to 19-year-old girls had not completed even primary school and in Burkina Faso, 80 percent had not done so, according to a 1999 study (Filmer 1999).
- **In South Asia, more than 40 percent of girls aged 15–19 from poor households never completed first grade; only one in four completed fifth grade** (Filmer and Pritchett 1999).
- **After primary school, girls' participation plummets further—only 17 percent of girls in Africa are enrolled in secondary school** (UNESCO 2003).
 - ◆ In Cambodia, only 12 percent of girls enroll in secondary school and in Laos, fewer than one in four girls attends beyond the primary level (UNESCO 2003).
- **The difference between urban and rural areas is striking, especially for girls.**
 - ◆ In Niger, 83 percent of girls in the capital of Niamey are enrolled in primary school, compared to 12 percent in rural areas (World Bank 1996).
 - ◆ In Pakistan, the primary school completion rate for boys in rural areas is three times higher than for girls; in urban areas it is twice as high (Government of Pakistan 1997).
- **At least one in three girls completing primary school in Africa and South Asia cannot effectively read, write, or do simple arithmetic.**
 - ◆ In Egypt, reading and writing scores on national exams are about half of mastery level. In Pakistan, pass rates on national exams at the end of primary school have been set at 30 percent because few children are expected to do better (Fredriksen 2002b).

II. The Benefits of Girls' Education

A. Education and Income Growth: Girls' education leads to increased income, both for individuals and for nations as a whole. While educating both boys and girls increases productivity and supports the growth of national economies, the education of girls may lead to greater income gains.

1. Higher Wages

- **Providing girls one extra year of education beyond the average boosts eventual wages by 10–20 percent.** Studies have found returns to primary education on the order of 5 to 15 percent for boys and slightly higher for girls. A recent study concludes, “Overall, women receive higher returns to their schooling investments” (Psacharopoulos 2002).
- **A leading development economist has found that returns to female secondary education are in the 15–25 percent range.** Yale economist Paul Schultz has found that wage gains from additional education tend to be similar if not somewhat higher for women than for men, and that the returns to secondary education in particular are appreciably higher for women (Schultz 2002).

2. Faster Economic Growth

- **A 100-country study by the World Bank shows that increasing the share of women with a secondary education by 1 percent boosts annual per capita income growth by 0.3 percentage points.** This is a substantial amount considering that per capita income gains in developing countries seldom exceed 3 percent a year (Dollar and Gatti 1999).
- **More equal education levels between men and women could have led to nearly 1 percent higher annual per capita growth in gross domestic product (GDP) in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa during 1960–92** (Klasen 2002).

3. More Productive Farming

- **More productive farming due to increased female education accounts for 43 percent of the decline in malnutrition achieved between 1970 and 1995,** according to a 63-country study (Smith and Haddad 1999).
- **If women farmers in Kenya had the same education and inputs as men farmers, crop yields could rise 22 percent** (Quisumbing 1996).

B. Education and Smaller, Healthier, Better-Educated Families: A wealth of cross-country and individual country studies from Africa, Asia, and Latin America reveals a pattern: women with more education have smaller, healthier, and better-educated families. As education expands women's horizons, opens up better earning opportunities, and improves women's position in the family and society, couples tend to have fewer children and to invest more in the health and education of each child.

1. Educating Girls Leads to Smaller, More Sustainable Families

- **When women gain four years more education, fertility per woman drops by roughly one birth**, according to a 100-country World Bank study (Klasen 1999).
- **A 65-country analysis finds that doubling the proportion of women with a secondary education would reduce average fertility rates from 5.3 to 3.9 children per woman.** The authors conclude,
 - ◆ “The expansion of female secondary education may be the best single policy for achieving substantial reductions in fertility” (Subbarao and Raney 1995).
- **A study of Brazil finds that illiterate women have an average of 6 children each, while literate women have an average of 2.5 children each** (UNESCO 2000).

2. Educating Women Saves Children's Lives

- **An extra year of girls' education can reduce infant mortality by 5–10 percent.** This link “is especially striking in low income countries. The pattern has been widely replicated across comparative data bases . . . and through repeated censuses” (Schultz 1993).
- **In Africa, children of mothers who receive five years of primary education are 40 percent more likely to live beyond age five** (Summers 1994).
- **Multi-country data show educated mothers are 50 percent more likely to immunize their children than uneducated mothers are** (Gage et al. 1997).

3. Educating Women Promotes Educating Children

- **A recent cross-country study finds that women's education generally has more impact than men's education on children's schooling** (Filmer 2000).
- **An Indian study finds that children of educated women study 2 extra hours per day** (Behrman et al. 1999).

C. Education and HIV/AIDS: In the 1980s, early in the AIDS pandemic, HIV infection rates tended to be higher among more educated people, which researchers attribute to the timing of the epidemic and the increased mobility of better-educated people. In the 1990s, however, things changed. Now an increasing body of research shows that more educated people, especially youth, are less likely to engage in risky behavior and contract HIV.

1. Educated Girls Are Less Likely to Contract HIV

- A 72-country analysis finds that where the literacy gap between boys and girls exceeds 25 percent, HIV prevalence exceeds 5 percent—the cited outbreak level. Conversely, HIV prevalence falls below 3 percent where the literacy gap is below 5 percent (Over 1998).
- A study of Zambia finds that AIDS spreads twice as fast among uneducated girls (Vandemoortele and Delamonica 2000).
- Young rural Ugandans with secondary education are 3 times less likely than those with no education to be HIV-positive (De Walque 2004).
- A Kenyan study finds that girls who stay in school are four times more likely to be virgins than those who drop out (UNICEF 2002).

2. School-Based Education Programs Help Prevent HIV Infection

- A Ugandan program reduced by 75 percent the number of sexually active children in their last year of primary school (Shuey et al. 1999).
- A review of 113 studies indicates that school-based AIDS education programs are effective in reducing early sexual activity and high-risk behavior (Kirby et al. 1994).

D. Education and Empowered Women: Increased female education is one of the most powerful tools to empower women within the family and society. As that happens, women not only improve their own welfare but, through their “agency,” act to improve the well-being of their children and help transform society itself (A. Sen 1999). This empowerment of women comes from greater years of education—but it also comes as women catch up with men in education even when average levels of education remain quite low. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues that “the changing agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change. . . . Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women.”

1. Education Can Reduce Domestic Violence

- **Research on India finds less violence against women where women are more educated.** Women with no formal schooling are less likely to resist violence than women with some schooling (P. Sen 1999).

2. Education Can Decrease the Risk of Genital Mutilation

- **Several studies find that in Africa female genital mutilation is more prevalent among less-educated women.** The report concludes, “Those [women] with primary or no education are more likely to have been cut than those who have received secondary level instruction” (Population Reference Bureau 2001).
- **Educated women in Burkina Faso are 40 percent less likely to subject their daughters to the practice** (World Health Organization 1998).

3. Educated Women Spend a Greater Proportion of Their Resources on the Health and Education of Their Families

- **In Brazil, women’s resources have twenty times the impact on children’s health compared with men’s resources** (Thomas 1990).

4. Education Can Foster Democracy and Women’s Political Participation

- **A 100-country study finds educating girls and reducing the gender gap tends to promote democracy.** The study argues that these findings confirm the hypothesis that “expanded educational opportunities for females goes along with a social structure that is generally more participatory and, hence, more receptive to democracy” (Barro 1999).
- **Educated Bangladeshi women are three times as likely as illiterate women to participate in political meetings** (UNESCO 2000).

III. Understanding the Disconnect

The Benefits of Girls' Education versus the Low Levels of Girls' Enrollment and Attainment

If education benefits girls, their families, and society, why do we not see more girls being educated for longer periods of time?

- **Education is the quintessential public good.** If education is not made mandatory, the decision to educate children falls to the parents, who incur costs now and who cannot capture much of the benefits, since they accrue across a child's lifetime and to society as a whole. Therefore, a determination based solely on the cost-benefit calculation of parents may lead to a nation's underinvesting in education.
- **Governments in developing countries need to implement policies that align the cost-benefit calculations of parents with the costs and benefits to their nations as a whole.** The most effective way for governments to do so is to make universal education (primary as step one, but also secondary) free and mandatory, while undertaking reforms to improve the quality and benefits of education. Achieving quality universal education may require substantial national and external resources and may, for a number of countries, be beyond immediate reach.

To educate girls, the need for government intervention is even greater, because the costs may seem higher to parents and the benefits more distant and harder to capture.

- **Less Clear and More Distant Benefits:** Where daughters traditionally “marry out” of their families and join their husbands', parents may doubt they will benefit from having more-educated daughters.
- **Four Costs to Parents of Educating Girls:**
 1. **Direct fees:** Studies show fees for tuition can amount to 5–10 percent of household income—or 20–30 percent in poorer families. The fees may be similar for girls and boys, but parents may be less willing to pay them for girls.
 2. **Indirect fees:** Parents are sometimes charged fees for parent-teacher associations or to supplement teacher salaries; these fees can sometimes be as much as the cost of tuition.
 3. **Indirect costs:** Parents sometimes also face a number of indirect costs associated with sending children to school, such as for transportation, clothing, and safety. These costs may be greater for girls than for boys because of the need to ensure modesty or meet cultural requirements, such as the cost of escorts for girls.

4. The **opportunity cost** of having girls in school, in terms of lost chore time and contributions to family income, is a formidable barrier as well. In many African and Asian countries, daughters are the victims of a self-fulfilling prophecy: as they are traditionally expected to do more chores at home than are sons, the opportunity cost of educating them seems higher and so they are kept home.

IV. What Works to Educate Girls

The Evidence

Effective government intervention to get girls in school must offset the increased costs for parents of sending their girls to school and improve school quality to enhance the benefit side of the equation for both parents and the country as a whole. Most evidence suggests that what is needed is a package of policies and programs in four areas to improve girls' access to and achievement in education.

A. Make Girls' Schooling Affordable: The fastest and most direct way for governments to boost school enrollments is to reduce the direct, indirect, and opportunity costs to parents of educating their daughters.

1. Reduce Direct Costs: Cutting School Fees Increases Girls' Enrollment

- **Enrollment in Uganda jumped 70 percent after fees were cut as part of major school reforms.** In Uganda, total girls' enrollments went from 63 percent to 83 percent, while enrollment among the poorest fifth of girls went from 46 percent to 82 percent (Bruns et al. 2003, Deininger 2003).
- **Attendance doubled in Tanzania after eliminating fees** (Bruns et al. 2003).
- **Asian countries including China, Korea, and Sri Lanka also boosted enrollments by reducing fees** (Herz et al. 1991).

2. Cover Indirect Costs and Compensate for Opportunity Costs: Scholarships, Stipends, and School Health and Nutrition Programs

- **The pilot areas in Bangladesh's Female Secondary School Stipend Program saw girls' enrollment rise to double the national average.** The stipend covers tuition, books, uniforms, and transportation (World Bank 2001). The program has been extended nationwide, and now 55–60 percent of girls and boys are enrolled in secondary school (Khandkher and Pitt 2003).
- **The Mexican PROGRESA Program helps those who enroll in primary school complete the cycle.** The program gives poor families cash awards to cover the opportunity cost of sending kids to school, a feature that has especially helped girls. It has become a model for other such scholarship programs across Latin America (Schultz 2003, Morley and Coady 2003).
- **Brazil's Bolsa Escola stipend program virtually eliminated drop-outs.** Preliminary evaluations suggest it will help enroll one-third of all out-of-school children aged 10–15 (Lavinias 2001, Morley and Coady 2003).

B. Build Local Schools with Community Support and Flexible Schedules:

An extensive body of research shows that building decent schools with adequate supplies and teachers nearby boosts girls' enrollment by making school a practical option and encouraging parents to get more involved in the education of their children.

1. Building Schools Close to Girls' Homes Boosts Enrollments

- **Egypt:** Constructing new schools in rural areas during the 1980s boosted girls' enrollments by 60 percent. Rural boys' enrollments increased by 19 percent (Rugh 2000).
- **Malaysia:** The absence of a secondary school in the community lowers the probability of girls' attendance by 17 percent and boys' by 13 percent (World Bank 2001).

2. Community Involvement in Local Schools Is Key

- **Nonformal schools run by the Bangladesh Rural Action Committee (BRAC) achieved nearly double the completion rates of government schools—90 percent vs. 53 percent.** The program focuses on involving communities in transitioning the hardest-to-reach populations from informal, more flexible BRAC schools into the formal system (Rugh and Bossert 1998, Herz 2002).
- **Colombia's Escuela Nueva program of multi-grade community schools contributed to a 30 percent increase in rural enrollment** (Benveniste and McEwan 2000).
- **A study in Pakistan finds that rural community-based schools increase girls' enrollments to more than four times the provincial average** (World Bank 1996).

3. Providing Flexible Schedules for Safe Schools Helps Enroll Girls

- **A study of Bangladesh's BRAC program finds flexible "satellite" schools increase girls' primary enrollments** (Herz 2002).
- **In Pakistan, a study finds that double sessions in community schools are key to raising girls' enrollments** (Herz 2002).

4. Providing Preschool and Child-Care Programs Appears Promising

- **India: Programs offering early education near or in village primary schools increase girls' enrollment** (Rugh 2000).
- **Kenya: A 10 percent jump in child-care costs cuts girls' attendance by 13 percent** (Lokshin et al. 2000).

C. Make Schools More Girl-Friendly: Providing a basic school nearby, with a teacher and books, is an important first step to increasing girls' enrollment. But to both enroll and keep girls in school, in many circumstances other measures are also necessary to meet cultural and practical needs. Fortunately, many of these can be accomplished at relatively little cost:

1. Private Latrine Facilities Are a Must

- **A Pakistan study finds that parents require toilet facilities for girls** (World Bank 1996).
- **Girls in Africa miss school during menses if no private toilet is available** (Forum for African Women Educationalists 2001).

2. Ensuring Girls' Privacy and Safety in Line with Cultural Requirements Is Key

- In some cases, cultural requirements for privacy entail measures such as separate schools for girls, boundary walls for girls' schools, or separate hours for girls in schools shared with boys. **Such measures are critical not only for increasing enrollments, but also for achieving gender parity in primary education** (World Bank 2001).

3. Teach in Ways That Discourage Gender Stereotypes and Encourage Girls to Achieve

- **Studies find traditional curricula and materials often portray women as passive** (Gachukia et al. 1992, Obura 1985, Biraimah 1980, Ethiopian Ministry of Education 1980).
- ◆ A study of one country's curriculum found that while males mentioned were often described as leaders, fighters, or soldiers, females were most often described as breast-feeders, fertile, pretty, or pregnant (Obura 1985).
- **In Nigeria, studies find teaching favors boys.** Boys are given more opportunities to ask and answer questions, to use learning materials, and to lead groups; girls are given less time on task than boys in science (UNICEF 2002).

4. Provide Female Teachers for Girls

- **Experience in many countries finds that having female teachers encourages girls' enrollment.**
- ◆ **Some cultures require female teachers especially for older girls, and female teachers can also be important role models.**
- ◆ Countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India have set national goals for hiring women teachers recently. As a result, tens of thousands of qualified women have joined the teaching force in South Asia and Africa (World Bank 2001, Herz 2002).

- **Studies find even very young women can teach programmed curricula effectively, if they are trained and given support.** Sometimes finding qualified women teachers is difficult, and age and education requirements may have to be temporarily eased. But this doesn't have to mean a decline in quality (Kim et al. 1998, Khandkher 1996, Rugh 2000).

D. Focus Particularly on the Quality of Education: Where parents are more ambivalent about educating girls, improvements in education quality may be particularly important to tip their decisions to educate daughters as well as sons. As a first step, to function effectively, any school needs enough qualified teachers who attend school regularly.

What children learn also matters. In some countries, curricula are outmoded, and some may even perpetuate gender and ethnic stereotypes or misinformation. In other cases, countries may provide a good curriculum but insufficient teacher training. Schools are more effective at attracting girls if they teach curricula that equip children for the twenty-first century, and if they have the requisite books and learning materials.

1. Provide Enough Teachers

- **Countries should aim to reduce maximum class size to forty students,** research shows, and insist that teachers attend more regularly. The World Bank has determined that a 40-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio can help ensure access and quality as part of the Education for All Fast Track Initiative framework (UNICEF 2002, Bruns et al. 2003).
- **Indonesian experience shows that teachers are key to the expansion of enrollment for both boys and girls** (Duflo 2001).

2. Improve Teachers' Education and Training Levels

- **Studies from Kenya and Bangladesh find quality of teaching influences demand for education for girls even more than for boys** (Lloyd et al. 1998, Khandkher 1996).
- **A Swaziland study finds teacher training helped raise girls' enrollments to boys' level** (Gilmore 1997).

3. Provide a Curriculum That Equips Children for the Twenty-First Century, with a Focus on Math and Science

- **In Kenya, parents are more willing to pay to send girls to school if girls can study science** (Herz et al. 1991).
- **In Brazil, Swaziland, and Uganda, as part of broader education reforms, curricula were revamped to focus more on issues of greater relevance, to broaden beyond basics, and to encourage problem-solving** (Herz 2002).

4. Provide Adequate Books and Supplies

- **A Peru study finds providing textbooks raises girls' enrollments 30 percent.** When free textbooks were supplied to primary schools, controlling for other influences, girls were 30 percent more likely to enroll, but no effect was recorded for boys' enrollments (King and Bellew 1991).
- **A multi-country study finds that textbooks boost enrollment and achievement** (Rugh 2000).

V. Getting the Job Done

The central policy question has moved beyond *what* works to educate girls and should now focus on *how* to build support for and provide affordable, quality education. Extensive research from countries that have undertaken reforms suggests that countries can make rapid progress and reach universal education, if they successfully address three critical components:

A. Leadership and Political Will at the Country Level: Experience from countries such as China, Morocco, Sri Lanka, and Uganda suggests high-level government leadership is key to raising the profile of girls' education and making progress on getting more girls in school (World Bank 2002).

- **In Uganda, with President Yoweri Museveni's leadership on education reform, budget support for primary education increased from 11 percent to 22 percent.** If Uganda's education spending and increasing enrollment continue, the World Bank projects the country will achieve universal primary education by 2015 (Bruns et al. 2003).

B. Development of Comprehensive National Education Strategies

- **The commitment of more than 180 countries to the Dakar Framework of Action on achieving universal education by 2015 embodies a global compact between poor countries and donors:**
 - ◆ Poor countries agree to develop comprehensive, nationally owned strategies for achieving universal education. Such plans include a clear domestic fiscal objective and commitment to education reforms. Donors agree that where such plans are credible and accountable, and where performance shows a demonstrated ability to reform, no country should fail due to lack of resources.
 - ◆ Research suggests that developing a carefully prioritized national education strategy and regularly assessing performance can catalyze rapid and substantial improvements in girls' (and boys') education (Sperling 2001, Herz 2002).
- **The Education for All Fast Track Initiative moves donors toward a global compact.** The initiative, a financing structure organized by the World Bank, creates a coordinated process for donors to support poor countries that develop and implement comprehensive national education strategies (Sperling 2003b).
- **The World Bank has developed guidelines for national education plans within the Fast Track process based on the class sizes and fiscal targets associated with successful reforms in poor countries** (Bruns et al. 2003).

- **Beyond these guidelines, the most successful national plans have incorporated strong, credible budget transparency and anti-fraud provisions** (Sperling 2003b, Moseley 2003).

C. Mobilizing Internal and External Resources

- **A 56-country analysis established a strong relationship between adequate public spending and boosting primary enrollments** (Fredriksen 2002a). Countries on track to achieve universal education, such as Bolivia and Uganda, spent more on primary education—1.7 percent of GDP on average, versus a 1.4 percent average across all countries studied—and maintained reasonable unit costs for facilities, supplies, and teacher salaries.
- **Yet the external resources required to achieve universal basic education are at least an additional \$5–\$10 billion per year**, particularly if country strategies include effective but expensive programs such as stipends to get more girls in schools and efforts to address HIV/AIDS (Sperling 2003b, UNESCO 2002).
- **A contingent commitment of donor funds could offer a “third way” beyond the traditional resource debate, jump-starting a global compact on universal education.** By making a strong commitment of ex ante resources, but disbursing funds over time and only when recipient countries develop credible plans and demonstrate sound performance, donors’ budgets are not immediately affected. Yet such a commitment empowers countries already committed to serious national reforms and provides strong incentives for countries that are not quite there (Sperling 2003a).
- **High-level political commitment from the members of the G-8 group of highly industrialized countries could assure the necessary political and financial resources for the Education for All Fast Track Initiative.** The next two G-8 meetings—the June 2004 meeting hosted by the United States and the 2005 meeting hosted by the United Kingdom—may provide a critically important window of opportunity for generating the kind of political and financial support necessary to turn the Fast Track Initiative’s progress to date into a true global compact on universal education. Such a commitment from donor countries can be critical to the success of country plans, and to the credibility of the Education for All goal as much more than another lofty, but empty, promise.

VI. Conclusion

An overwhelming body of research demonstrates that investing in girls delivers high returns for economic growth and broad benefits ranging from smaller families, to disease prevention, to women's health. Educating girls as well as boys is an achievable goal and attainable in the near term, if substantial resources are matched with comprehensive nationally owned plans for education reform that include measures of accountability and a commitment to ensure all kids are in school. Realizing steady improvements also comes down to national and international commitment, political leadership, and an emphasis on tailoring policies to local circumstances to meet the distinct challenges each country faces. Serious efforts, even in countries with highly constrained resources, are likely to yield impressive results, both for educational outcomes and for the society as a whole. In short, there may be no better investment for the health and development of poor countries around the world than investments to educate girls.

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