

Education Goes Global In The Fight Against Terrorism

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In 2000, the world's nations committed themselves to assuring universal primary education by 2015 our hopes were raised but as 2015 approaches we are not so sure that targets can be achieved even though Britain has taken the lead on the issue. Certainly the politics of global poverty has undergone a seismic shift since the Clinton years, and Sept. 11 was the pivot point, with terrorism replacing communism as a rationale for winning the hearts and minds of poor people in developing countries. But although the number of children out of school globally has fallen to 77 million from 98 million in the past five years.

Naturally we do not question the motives of the global community in regard to their plans for universal education because of their obvious sincerity. We also want our children to get a good education, so we too are willing to spend large amounts to send them to all sorts of institutions. And if, as the candidates say, public education is an important way to combat terrorism and extremist ideas as thousands of young people are being taught to hate the United States by militant extremists. "When you understand that, it suddenly becomes clear: global poverty is not just a moral issue for the United States," but the need to restore the United States' moral standing is paramount. Mrs. Clinton co-sponsored similar bills with Representative Nita M. Lowey, Democrat of New York, in 2004 and 2006, but this was the first time the legislation had Republican backers: Representative Spencer Bachus of Alabama and Senator Gordon H. Smith of Oregon. Mrs Clinton said, "This is the political stars coming into alignment and we hope the president will take advantage of it."

The proposed legislation is to spend US \$10 billion over five years to build classrooms, train teachers and get millions of children, especially girls, into school in the developing world. Senator Barack Obama of Illinois and John Edwards of North Carolina have made their own ambitious education proposals for poor nations in recent speeches. All three are positioning education in developing countries - which has commanded increasing, though still relatively modest federal resources - as a national security issue.

According to United Nations estimates, African countries in particular have brought millions more children into school by abolishing school fees and investing more in education, though some countries have struggled with severely overcrowded classrooms and falling achievement. Zimbabwe has not been so lucky because although its school system was one of the best on the African continent after the country gained independence in 1980. Previously the government provided furniture and other necessities but today education in Zimbabwe is in a bad state. The standards have deteriorated alarmingly compared to 10 years ago. And because of the harsh economic environment, teachers are now selling sweets and knitting jerseys. The education sector is losing highly qualified teachers to neighbouring countries. Kids at public schools are left with teachers who have no interest at all in the job because of low salaries.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, federal financing for education in developing countries ranged from US \$100 million to US \$ 200 million; in the Bush years, it has risen to more than US \$ 500 million. Estimates of the cost of educating a child in poor countries range from US \$ 50 to US \$ 100 a year. The Bush administration claims credit for increased federal spending and is interested in expanded efforts on education, a senior administration official who was not authorized to comment publicly said. And recently the first lady, Laura Bush, spoke in Washington about the transformative power of education in Africa.

"We like some of the ideas in what's being proposed in the bill," the administration official said, referring to Mrs. Clinton's plan, which would gradually increase federal spending over the next five years for a cumulative total of US \$ 10 billion. In March, Mr. Edwards proposed a five-year, US \$ 15 billion effort by the United States to educate 23 million children in poor countries. Mr. Obama, a presidential candidate said in a recent speech that he would advocate a US \$ 2 billion global education fund in his first year as president, part of a broader assault on poverty and a doubling of foreign aid that would help ensure "that every child, everywhere, is taught to build and not to destroy."