

The Honorable Nita M. Lowey
International Literacy Day Speech
Thursday, September 8, 2011
Ronald Reagan Building, Pavillion Room

Good morning. So many good friends who are here today. I'm happy to join on this panel Dan Wagner, Richard Whelden and all the Ministers of Education. There are so many friends in this room from USAID and other of our agencies who have been working with me and I truly want to share this award. This is a great honor and unexpected, and I really really appreciate it. I thank you, Administrator Shah, for your very kind introduction and for your leadership and dedication to U.S. development efforts. Your commitment to maintaining and strengthening USAID's role as the world's premier development agency and to ensuring through initiatives such as USAID Forward that every dollar we spend on development is used efficiently, effectively, and accountably is a model in this climate of economic hardship.

We are so fortunate to have Dr. Shah in this position of leadership, and I want to applaud you.
APPLAUSE.

What a pleasure it is to be here this morning to discuss an issue about which I care deeply. I can think of no better way to mark International Literacy Day than to be here with the experts and leaders you will be hearing from today as well as all of you who work tirelessly to achieve universal education for all the world's children. I have had the opportunity to visit the schools and training programs in a great many countries where we are building the next generation of world leaders. The work you do is invaluable and I thank you.

One of the trips that I will never forget was a few years ago, when I traveled to Dadar, Pakistan, to reopen a girls' school. Has anyone visited my school in Dadar, Pakistan? (Laughter) It took about 6 or 7 planes to get there, right? I was privileged to be there with the delegation to reopen a girl's school. The school had been devastated by an earthquake, but the girls' thirst for knowledge was undiminished. They were so beautiful and so eager and so enthusiastic and they asked me for computers, they wanted me to send them a science teacher. Even in that very conservative part of the country, these girls knew that access to quality education brings the promise of a better life.

And that's why we are here today – to discuss strategies that work and explore new approaches to bringing the promise of education to every child throughout the world. We have made progress in recent years, but there are still an estimated 67 million students who are not in primary school, and tens of millions more drop out each year.

And we all know the facts, but I think it's important to repeat them:

Education does lead to economic prosperity and reduces poverty. Each additional year of school adds 10% to an individual's earning potential and, on a nationwide scale, boosts a country's GDP by 1%. No country has reached sustained economic growth without achieving near universal primary education.

Education enhances health. Universal primary education would prevent 700,000 HIV cases each year, and children born to mothers who can read are 50% more likely to live past the age of five. Girls' education in particular has outsized impacts on a wide spectrum of health outcomes.

Education builds strong communities. Schools can bring together parents, students, teachers, and government officials, offering services that support and lift up communities and families.

Education promotes democracy and stability. Studies have shown that increased education leads to decreased risk of civil war. Education lays the foundation for sound governance and strong institutions, and is not just a building block but a cornerstone of free societies.

Working towards universal education is not only a moral imperative, it is a national security priority. Freer, healthier, more prosperous, and more stable societies are resilient against the teachings and recruitment of terrorist organizations. The mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan may be the front lines in our battle with Al Qaeda and its sympathizers, but the real war is against ignorance and fanaticism. That's a battle best fought in the classroom.

And throughout my time in Congress, I have remained committed to increasing the United States' role in achieving universal education. From the time I became Ranking Member of the House Foreign Operations Subcommittee in 2001 and throughout my four years as Chair, I successfully increased, with a lot of help from you and your colleagues, funding for basic education from \$100 million to a high of \$925 million in FY2011.

In these particularly challenging times when budgets must be cut, foreign aid becomes an easy target. And so it is our job – each and every one of us – to make sure that every Member of Congress and every American understands just how important these programs are. Now is the time to invest in what works, and we know that promoting basic education is among the wisest investments we can make for our security, economy, and our standing around the world. Scaling back these programs means scaling back our own national security and economic prosperity.

It is also an appropriate time to be looking at ways that each dollar can go further and have the most impact. That is why I hope that this can be the first year that the United States contributes to the Education for All Fast-Track Initiative. This multilateral effort to address the challenges of achieving universal education will leverage each U.S. dollar with contributions from other donor countries, as well as – and this is critical – contributions from each partner country, and will augment the United States' bilateral efforts across the globe.

But funding is not enough, which is why I, along with Congressman Dave Reichert, have reintroduced the Education For All Act. This bill places the United States squarely in a leadership role in the march for access to education worldwide. To achieve the goal of universal quality basic education, the Education for All Act lays out U.S. policy that includes working with other countries, multilateral institutions, and civil society to assist developing countries in providing children with a quality basic education and strengthening their educational systems.

The bill supports activities that train teachers, build schools, and develop effective curricula. It also recognizes that it is imperative to focus on strategies for reaching the most disadvantaged children – girls who live in poor, remote areas; children in conflict zones; child laborers; those with disabilities; victims of human trafficking; and children who are orphaned or negatively impacted by HIV/AIDS.

The Education for All Act requires that basic education be included in all comprehensive U.S. development strategies, and it creates an Education for All Coordinator position to help improve the coordination and effectiveness of all U.S. government agencies' education assistance programs.

Passing the Education for All Act will be a big step forward, but it can't take the place of the many small steps each of you takes each day to provide a quality education for children everywhere. The work you have been doing – including the development of USAID's education strategy and the Center for Universal Education's Global Compact on Learning – helps move us closer and closer to our shared goals. May our conversation today with leaders in the field, including representatives from several countries that are

working to achieve universal education, inspire us all to keep marching with a renewed commitment to global education.

On Sunday, we will commemorate the 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks. It will be a day of sadness, of reflection, and a time to remember those we lost on that horrific day. But it will also be a day when we can commit to redouble our efforts to defeat global terrorism, to stamp out the roots of fanaticism, and ensure that no more innocent civilians are the victims of such heinous crimes. Our commitment to education for all is part of that effort. In fact, the 9/11 commission concluded that educational opportunity is essential to rooting out terrorism once and for all, because unstable and poorly-educated societies are incubators of violence.

Working together we can make a difference. A commitment to basic education provides an opportunity for the United States to positively interact with populations around the world, while supporting our foreign policy and diplomatic goals.

So, I want to conclude by thanking you for this very special award. Thank you again for all your work towards universal basic education. I look forward to working with you as we strive to bring the promise of education to every corner of the globe. Thank you very much.