

THE AFRICA EDUCATION INITIATIVE

Laura Lartigue

Millions of children in sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of them girls, do not have access to primary school. And those children who are able to attend school often receive such poor quality instruction that they fail to acquire even the most basic skills of reading and writing. In response to this situation, President George W. Bush in 2002 announced the Africa Education Initiative, a multiyear, multimillion-dollar program designed to provide training and materials for teachers and students throughout Africa. Guinea is among the many countries already benefiting from the initiative: Teacher training is ongoing, textbooks are being developed and distributed to elementary school students, and young girls are continuing their educations thanks to a component of the initiative known as the Ambassador's Girls Scholarship Program.

Laura Lartigue is with the USAID mission in Guinea.

Africa's progress also depends on the education of Africa's children. ... If Africa is to meet its full potential, these children must have the chance to study and learn.

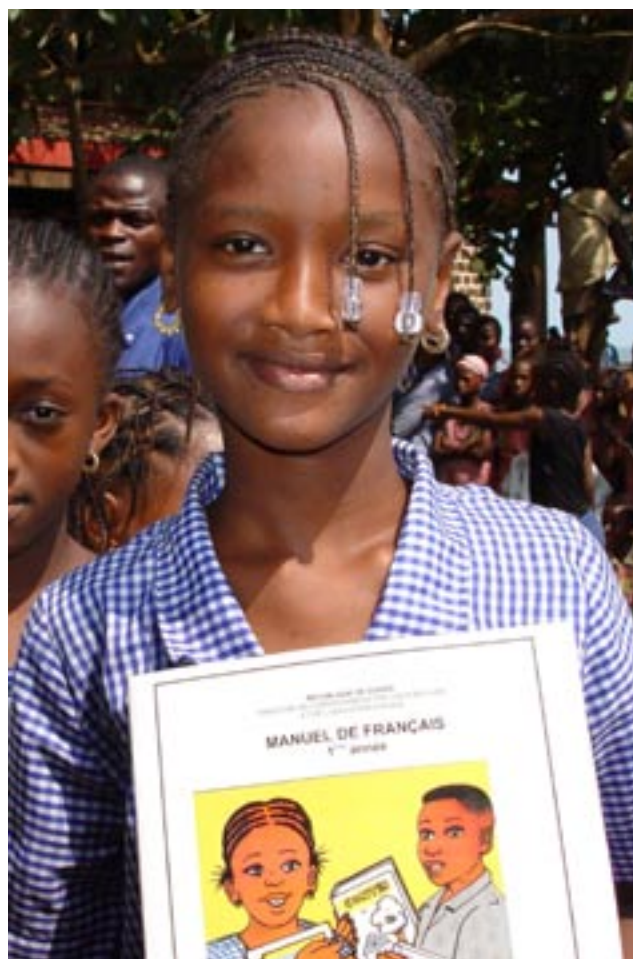
— George W. Bush, President of the United States

In June of 2002, President George W. Bush announced that the United States would commit \$200 million over the period 2002-2006 to the Africa Education Initiative (AEI). The program, which is being implemented by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is intended to provide training and materials for teachers and students throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

The three primary goals of the Africa Education Initiative are:

- train more than 160,000 new teachers and provide in-service training for more than 260,000 existing teachers;
- partner with historically black colleges and universities in the United States to provide 4.5 million textbooks and other learning tools in their local languages for schoolchildren in Africa;
- provide 250,000 scholarships to enable young African girls to continue their educations.

Additionally, the AEI aims to increase the role of African parents in their children's education by working



A Guinean schoolgirl with a brand new textbook produced as part of the Africa Education Initiative.

to make school systems more transparent and open to reforms from parents, and to address the impact of HIV/AIDS on schooling and the education system.

At the time of the president's announcement, schoolchildren in Guinea had no idea that cities in their country would be selected to inaugurate two of these goals. Guinea's capital city of Conakry was the site for launching the textbook component of the initiative in May 2004. And in February 2005, in the village of Tanéné, 12 girls received the first funds and materials distributed in Guinea through the Ambassador's Girls Scholarship Program (AGSP).

TEXTBOOKS FOR GUINEAN SCHOOLCHILDREN

Singing, dancing, and smiling schoolchildren from all over the downtown districts of Conakry, Guinea, animated a ceremony held at the Frederico Mayor Primary School in May 2004. During the ceremony, USAID handed over 500,000 textbooks destined to be used by students in grades one and two throughout Guinea.

Guinea was the first of six African countries to benefit from the textbook component of the Africa Education Initiative. Textbooks and other learning materials have since been developed for and distributed to children in Benin, Ethiopia, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa.

The textbooks for Guinea were designed and produced through close professional collaboration between Guinea's Ministry of Pre-University and Civic Education and two historically black colleges in the United States, Hampton University in the state of Virginia and Dillard University in Louisiana. Both schools are continuing the AEI partnership, developing textbooks for additional grades.

Says Kadiatou Bah, one of the Guinean authors of the textbooks: "It was indeed the collaboration that made for a good product in the end. We were able to formulate subject matter and illustrations for the textbooks that are relevant to Guinean children's lives, and the American universities helped us with the printing, which gave us this nice product."

In a country where the adult literacy rate is only about 40 percent and where rural children and girls in particular face daunting barriers to obtaining a basic education, strengthening Guinea's educational system by ensuring the quality of instruction is essential to the country's development.

Galema Guilavogui, who is Guinea's minister of pre-university and civic education, said in his public speech: "Our American partners understand that the success of our educational program in Guinea is a measure of the harmonious development of our country. ... Providing quality textbooks in sufficient quantity helps us fulfill an essential part of our program—improving educational quality—and will help our children succeed in school. We are extremely grateful."

SCHOLARSHIPS FOR YOUNG GUINEAN GIRLS

Dawda Compo, a small farmer from Tanéné, a village outside of Boké in western Guinea, looked proudly at his daughter Fatou, a 12-year-old schoolgirl who had been chosen to receive a scholarship through the Ambassador's Girls Scholarship Program sponsored by USAID. Said

Compo, "I think the scholarship will help motivate her. It also helps take the burden off of us. I am a poor farmer, and I never got to go to school. If my daughter doesn't study, life will be hard for her. If she studies, who knows? She may even become president!"

Like many other community members in Tanéné, Compo has encouraged his young daughter to go to school. Because of the enthusiasm and the commitment of the community to promoting girls' education, Tanéné was chosen as the site for a ceremony to celebrate the nationwide distribution of scholarships to 6,000 girls in grades five and six throughout Guinea.

Twelve young girls in Tanéné, including Compo's daughter Fatou, were given a scholarship package during a February 2005 ceremony in which U.S. Ambassador to Guinea Jackson McDonald symbolically handed out the first of the packages to the girls at Hamdallaye Primary School. Also in attendance were Galema Guilavogui, the governor of the Boké region, American and Guinean education specialists, and representatives from the local parent-teacher association and the Local Alliance for Girls' Education—two groups that provide strong support to encourage young girls in the area to attend school.

MEETING PRACTICAL NEEDS

The scholarships handed out during the ceremony, estimated at \$100 each, included money for schoolbooks, notebooks, a dictionary, pens, pencils, fabric to make a middle school uniform, and a small amount of cash to cover school enrollment and health insurance fees—all practical items designed to ease the burden of sending young girls to school and encourage exceptional students to excel.

Through President Bush's Africa Education Initiative, the U.S. Embassy in Guinea and USAID have put AGSP into place. The goals of the program are to promote girls' educational opportunities and to raise awareness of the importance of keeping girls in school until the end of the primary cycle. AGSP will also include a girls' mentoring program, innovative projects focused on girls' education, and celebrations of National Girls' Education Day.

Young girls in Guinea face numerous obstacles to going to school. The inability to pay basic school costs, excessive chores around the house and in the field, the responsibility of caring for younger siblings, and lack of access to a primary or secondary school close to home are just some of the barriers parents mention. Primary school enrollment for young girls in Guinea was 67 percent nationally but only 58 percent in rural areas when the AGSP was inau-

gured. Unfortunately, the dropout rates for young girls from primary school are quite high.

SELECTING RECIPIENTS

With this in mind, the selection criteria for the scholarships address the problems faced by young girls from poor families, orphans or young girls who live far from their families, girls who are disabled, victims of early pregnancies, and girls who are infected with or severely affected by HIV/AIDS. AGSP also rewards young girls who are excelling in school, encouraging them to continue their studies and to act as role models for other young Guinean schoolgirls. The overall school and girl selection criteria, from which communities could choose, were developed by a national steering committee presided over by Guilavogui and comprising major organizations promoting girls' education in Guinea.

Says Hawa Sané, president of the Local Alliance for Girls' Education, "The scholarships ease the burden for parents in this community, who are very poor. We think they will also motivate young girls and, hopefully, will encourage other girls to do well at school."

In addition to the Ambassador's Girls Scholarship Program, a complementary program is being carried out in Guinea by a USAID partner, the Educational Development Center (EDC). By offering more than 2,600 additional scholarships to girls in grades five and six in Guinea's capital city of Conakry, as well as in rural areas of the country, EDC has helped USAID ensure national coverage of scholarships to young girls in every corner of Guinea.

THE OVERALL IMPACT

Guinea has benefited from the Africa Education Initiative in meeting all three of the initiative's primary objectives. Beyond the textbook and scholarship components of the program, teacher training sponsored by USAID is an ongoing activity designed to improve the quality of primary education in Guinea. To ensure the sustainability and long-range impact of the three initiatives, USAID is working closely with the government of Guinea and is currently the largest bilateral contributor to Guinea's Education for All (EFA) program.

Although Guinea remains plagued by a shortage of teachers and classroom materials, there are signs for optimism. According to the education ministry, during the 2003-2004 school year, the percentage of school-aged children attending primary school grew from 74 percent



Guinean children participate in a lesson.

Laura Lantigue, U.S. Agency for International Development

to 77 percent, and for girls from 67 percent to 70 percent. Increased access was particularly pronounced in grade one admission rates, which jumped from 61 percent to 65 percent.

The government of Guinea's firm commitment to and continued success in improving education sector management are reflected in the inclusion of Guinea in 2003 as one of the seven countries nominated for the Group of Eight's (G8) Fast Track Initiative, which aims to ensure universal primary education in Guinea by 2015.

A LOOK AT THE FUTURE

Although the first phase of the Africa Education Initiative is still ongoing, the program is already destined to continue for an additional four years. On June 30, 2005, President Bush announced \$400 million for continuation of the AEI over the 2006-2010 period to improve the quality and accessibility of basic education for millions of children in sub-Saharan Africa.

The goals of AEI will be:

- train 500,000 teachers and administrators;
- provide 300,000 scholarships under the Ambassador's Girls Scholarship Program;
- develop and distribute 10 million textbooks and related teaching and learning materials;
- improve access for marginalized students and teachers to learning, educational materials, and training;
- improve access to education and training for out-of-school youth, orphans, and other vulnerable children;
- improve access to productivity-increasing job-skills training and development. ■

TEACHING A CHILD TO DREAM

Who says you can't teach a child to dream? In rural Senegal, a village is doing just that.

In 2002, teacher Ahmet Fall asked students in the village of Pété Ouarack in northwestern Senegal what they hoped to do when they grew up. "Most girls," he says, "wanted to be maids, and most boys wanted to be vendors in the capital, Dakar." The schools in Pété Ouarack do not go beyond the elementary level, and five of the seven schools are temporary shelters built with wood and millet stalks. Four children squeeze onto benches made for two. Only one school has potable water and latrines. According to village elders, no one in Pété Ouarack has ever earned a high school diploma. Without local role models, students could not imagine anything beyond low-skilled jobs requiring minimal education.

When the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), through its Decentralization and Local Governance Program, initiated a partnership with Pété Ouarack in 2002, representatives of the local council and community leaders quickly confirmed that their top priority was to improve the quality of educational services. At the request of Pété Ouarack's newly elected council president, Mor Samb, USAID organized a training session in Pété Ouarack to clarify the council's responsibilities and possibilities for action with regard to education under Senegal's 1996 decentralization law.

Through contact with school administrators and teachers, parents, women's associations, and local organizations, Samb learned that the entire community was eager to participate in improving education, and its members offered innovative ideas to achieve that goal. School staff, parents, and community leaders formed an education corps committed to identifying, planning, and implementing a school charter. Some of its main goals are to build new schools with facilities such as toilets and washrooms, raise funds to buy textbooks and school supplies, and promote adult literacy.

The education corps includes a vibrant teachers association and a parent-teacher association (PTA) that provide important opportunities for dialogue and sharing of skills and ideas. The corps developed an education action plan that outlines practical actions to improve schools and educational quality, such as parent involvement and public education campaigns. With this comprehensive plan in hand, the rural council has also found it easier to approach government and donor partners for assistance.



Young Senegalese students.

The education improvement project has changed the attitudes of Pété Ouarack's residents, who now clearly understand that education holds the key to their community's future. Through the revived PTA, parents and teachers easily discuss children's progress—previously an intimidating process for parents.

Community organizations are donating funds to cover such projects as fees for students entering junior high school, and the rural council's office now helps students obtain necessary identity papers that allow them to take exams to further their education. In July 2004, the community celebrated the academic achievements of its students, giving certificates to outstanding students.

Students and parents recognize the value of school achievement, and they have begun to dream of previously unimaginable careers. Bator Diaw, a 10-year-old girl, wants to be a minister of the state, and Balle Dieng hopes her four-month-old daughter "will one day be president." These are laudable dreams that dynamic local government and civic leaders in Pété Ouarack are helping realize.

Says Djibril Seck, the deputy inspector of primary schools in the Louga region of Senegal: "We see a high level of enthusiasm of students and parents. There has been a change in [the] mentality of the population." ■

Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, prepared by Richard Nyberg, USAID/Senegal.

EDUCATING GIRLS IN KENYA

New Horizons

Making the most of economic opportunities will require broader and better education, especially among women who have faced the greatest disadvantages.

— President George W. Bush, May 9, 2003

Three Kenyan girls of the Maasai tribe realized their goal of completing secondary school and now have expanded their horizons even further. After surmounting cultural barriers to female education at home, the three girls were recognized for academic excellence and awarded full undergraduate scholarships to Chicago State University (CSU) in Illinois. They all hope to become doctors someday and to return to Kenya to serve the Maasai people.

In the semiarid grasslands of Kenya, the Maasai live a pastoral, semi-nomadic existence, grazing cattle as their ancestors have for generations. Education is not always accessible. Girls, in particular, often are not educated, but rather are kept in the homestead to care for younger children and assist older women with domestic duties. They are also often betrothed at very young ages and sometimes married as early as 9 or 10 years old. But through the work of one U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) partner—a Kenyan organization called Maasai Education Discovery (MED)—hundreds of Maasai families are beginning to realize the value of educating their daughters.

THE “BIG THREE”

In December 2004, three of these families, with tremendous community support, spent much of their time preparing their daughters for a journey from their Maasai homesteads to Chicago to begin college more than 12,800 kilometers and a world of difference away.

All three girls have benefited from U.S. assistance for their secondary school education under the Ambassador’s Girls Scholarship Program (AGSP). AGSP, which is part of President George W. Bush’s Africa Education Initiative (AEI), is a five-year, \$200-million effort to increase girls’ enrollment in school, train teachers, and provide textbooks and other learning materials. AEI also integrates HIV/AIDS awareness and mitigation, as well as community and parent involvement in education, as cross-cutting themes. The program is implemented through

USAID in partnership with U.S. nongovernmental organizations and local organizations in Africa. Through AEI, 250,000 scholarships will be provided over the five year-period to enable girls at risk to continue their educations and receive support from community mentors.

Eunice Sitatian Kaelo, age 18, from a polygamous family with two wives and 16 children, is the only one of her mother’s children to receive an education. Despite academic excellence, she was faced with early marriage while still in primary school until a teacher intervened and Kaelo was allowed to stay at school. Evelyn Nashipae Nkadori, age 19, comes from a polygamous family of 15 children and is the only girl in her village to ever attain a secondary school education. Nkadori was a leader in school, a chair of the student math club, a peer counselor, a dormitory captain, and a Sunday school teacher. Agnes Kainet Kisai, age 18, is probably one of the brightest of the Maasai’s young women. Though her parents are not educated, they have been supportive of her education, even though their financial straits made paying school fees very difficult and, at one point, almost forced them to give her away in an early marriage. While in secondary school, Kisai excelled in sciences, participating in national-level science competitions.

Before embarking upon their journey to the United States, the three girls were honored by their communities and relatives with a blessing ceremony, during which elders come together for the cultural rites of their young people. Normally, girls are prepared for traditional circumcision and marriage. Instead, Kaelo, Nkadori, and Kisai were blessed, presented for schooling, and given land, a rarity in Maasai culture as land inheritances are traditionally reserved for men.

Said one mother during the blessing ceremony, “Traditionally, Maasai warriors are given spears to go and bring us cows and make us proud. Because today you are the man—the first born—God has helped us, and through MED we are giving you a pen so that you can go and make us proud and bring us more cows like the warriors did. Remember that this opportunity we could never have given to you. It is God’s work, and we hope you go and remember where you come from.” The expectation, as echoed by their respective communities, is that the “big three,” as they are referred to, will go and come back armed with knowledge that will help their communities to

“walk with one foot in the Maasai culture and the other outside.” They are the first in their communities to receive their parents’ support to bypass centuries of tradition and instead go to college.

THE ROLE OF MED

Maasai Education Discovery (MED), a nonprofit organization based both in Boston and Kenya, is the brainchild of Ledama Olekina, a Maasai tribesman who received his college education in the United States. In response to the many challenges facing his community, Olekina initiated a series of fund-raising walks across America in 1999 and 2000. He traveled more than 3,220 kilometers on foot and gave lectures to raise awareness of the importance of girls’ education and to secure funds to support the development of a university in his home community of Narok, Kenya. Realizing that so few Maasai girls go to secondary school and thus would not be in a position to attend the university, MED began by working with schools and families to recruit about 60 girls and utilize a scholarship program to help them remain in school.

Thanks to the Ambassador’s Girls Scholarship Program, MED has now expanded to include 527 girls. In addition to its scholarship program, MED has been able to build and maintain a multifaceted Community Resource Center that offers distance education college courses to 100 girls, some of whom board at the facility; training at a certified Cisco Networking Academy; continuing education courses for community members; and access to a library collection of more than 12,000 books, audiotapes, and videocassettes.

MED relies on a creative and diverse funding strategy to support these activities, including such income-generating activities as a jewelry store stocked with items hand made by the girls and their mothers and an Internet cafe, as well as private donor and community support and sponsorships by such companies as Coca Cola, Eroquad (Belgium), and Diverse Productions (United Kingdom). Hoping to bring the full benefits of globalization to its community, MED is currently exploring an outsourcing subcontract that it hopes will create 200 new jobs.

AT CHICAGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Sensitive to the “brain drain” that contributes to the shortage of trained and skilled professionals in Africa,

Chicago State University President Elnora Daniel shares the communities’ expectations that Kaelo, Nkadori, and Kisai will receive a first-rate education in the United States and return home to use their knowledge, skills, and networks to contribute to their communities’ development. Daniel, who recognizes the plight of African girls and is committed to promoting more international exchanges, sees the CSU scholarships as a “win-win situation” and as part of CSU’s overall commitment to developing a community of global citizens.

According to Adama Conteh, executive director of CSU’s International Program, for the past five years the university has been helping girls from underprivileged backgrounds and disadvantaged institutions in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa to attend CSU. In 2005, CSU will graduate five girls from South Africa—three in nursing and two in business. As important as the financial investment of nearly \$67,500 for each girl’s three years of study, the university provides academic and social support by assigning tutors and faculty mentors who often open their homes to offer a nurturing family environment.

Since their arrival in December 2004 in Washington, D.C., and then in Chicago, Kaelo, Nkadori, and Kisai have received an outpouring of American hospitality. Their new community presented them with welcome packages consisting of coats and warm clothing, linens, toiletries, and computers donated by USAID’s Leland Initiative. After less than one month in the United States, they had begun to adjust to their new lives. They marveled at the snow and the overwhelming abundance of consumer goods at Wal-Mart.

As the girls ushered in 2005, they shared with their American friends their dreams for the future. In summarizing their feelings, Nkadori said, “I am the new face of the Maasai girl, and I will do all I can to help educate my community and my people positively and to ensure that I am a person who will be regarded as a source of hope in my community.”

The three then offered thanks in their native language, Maa, and acknowledged that this journey would not have been possible without the support of many known and unknown faces on both sides of the Atlantic. ■

Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, prepared by Aleta Williams and Sharon Mangin Nwankwo, Office of Sustainable Development, USAID.