



International Basic Education Recommendations for President-elect Biden: Establish a Presidential Initiative on Global Education

The Basic Education Coalition

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BASIC EDUCATION COALITION

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INTRODUCTION

The future development of all nations around the world is predicated upon children and youth acquiring the skills needed to lead their countries into a more prosperous, equitable, democratic, and inclusive society. However, COVID-19 has disrupted the education of over 90 percent of the world's children and youth and severely exacerbated a pre-existing global learning crisis [1]. For the nearly 1.5 billion children and youth who have experienced school closure during the pandemic, the increased risk of learning loss, dropout, poor nutrition, exposure to violence, and social isolation will jeopardize their ability to complete their education on time and lead healthy, peaceful, and successful lives.

Without a quality education, millions of children and youth will fail to meet their potential, thereby diminishing the prospects of their families, communities, and nations. To reaffirm the United States' commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, remedy the losses caused by COVID-19, and return all children and youth to safe learning environments, President-elect Biden should establish a Presidential Initiative on Global Education within the first 100 days of his administration that will expand access to and improve the quality of education around the world.

The pandemic's harmful effect on children's mental and physical health, nutrition, and well-being has once again brought education to the forefront for its critical role in establishing and bolstering stable, healthy, well-functioning societies. In low-income, fragile, and conflict-affected areas, school closures have heightened the threat of child, early, and forced marriage, child labor, sexual exploitation, and recruitment into armed groups. In countries where gaps persist between girls' and boys' access to education, girls are at particularly high risk of not returning to school when schools reopen. For most persons with disabilities, there are now even more impediments to inclusive, equal access to education and essential services.

For children who have been deprived of access to school and distance learning during COVID-19, global learning loss poses a generational threat. Research indicates that a three-month school closure could cost children over a year's worth of learning and, if left unaddressed, many children will never catch up [2]. Those who were already at a disadvantage prior to the pandemic will fall even further behind as lack of access to critical learning resources will lead to a widening of the achievement gap [3]. This has real consequences for the future of the United States and our partners abroad as studies show that lifetime earnings and economic productivity would be drastically higher on a global scale if all children benefited from a complete education and full health [4].

To make sustained progress on U.S. economic and foreign policy goals and achieve a more equitable and prosperous world, access to safe, quality education must improve in low- and middle-income countries. Citizens of low-income countries need widespread literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills that are acquired in pre-primary, primary, and secondary school to collectively make social progress and grow their economies. Basic education lays the foundation for improved health and nutrition outcomes, slower population growth, democracy and political stability, and promotes greater gender equality, understanding, tolerance, and hope [5]. Widespread educational attainment will also strengthen international efforts to build resilience to the harmful effects of climate change [6].

Education in many countries has been woefully underfunded for decades, and domestic education budgets in low- and middle-income countries will be negatively affected by COVID-19 in the coming years due to lower economic output and tax revenue. U.S. foreign assistance will be more vital than ever during this time to overcome the educational challenges that have been created and exacerbated by COVID-19. Over the next four years, President-elect Biden should directly address global education crisis and establish a Presidential Initiative on Global Education that will strengthen U.S. foreign assistance efforts abroad and help children and youth around the world reach their full potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I. LEAD ON GLOBAL EDUCATION FUNDING

It is paramount that the United States assume a leadership role and partner with Ministries of Education, donor governments, and multilateral institutions to increase global funding for education. The U.S. government has a strong history of investing in quality international basic education, with U.S. programs reaching more than 35 million individuals in 2019 alone. Effectively responding to COVID-19 while sustaining progress in learning and education system strengthening and meeting the academic and social-emotional needs of the world's growing child and youth population will require increased resource allocation to international education.

Over the past decade, the United States has led international development efforts to improve the acquisition of literacy skills among early grade learners. The focus on literacy as the essential building block to longer-term educational attainment has yielded improved reading scores, the creation of evidence-based national reading programs, and greater access to quality teaching and learning materials for students, teachers, and governments. However, far too many children still lack access to quality education and are failing to meet developmental milestones. Prior to COVID-19, 258 million children and youth were already out of school and more than 600 million learners were not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics [7][8]. United Nations officials warn that an additional 24 million children could now drop out of school due to the pandemic [9], tragically reversing a global trend that has seen a decrease of nearly 118 million out-of-school children and youth since 2000 [10].

To meet the global need and achieve U.S. foreign policy goals, a significant increase in funding is needed to meet the demand for quality education, further cultivate the acquisition of foundational skills in the early grades, and support additional investments in early childhood education, girls' education, disability-inclusive education, education in emergencies, and education-sector evidence generation.

II. MITIGATE COVID-19'S IMPACT ON EDUCATION AND EQUIP LEARNERS WITH FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

As schools reopen from pandemic-related closures, U.S. foreign assistance should support the efforts of Ministries of Education, local civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to equitably reenroll out-of-school children and youth, especially those from marginalized communities who were already out of school before the pandemic or are at high risk of dropout. Many education systems will also need assistance designing and instituting remedial, catch-up, and accelerated education programs, including assessing learning levels, adapting curriculum and pedagogy to students' current needs, and ensuring the acquisition of foundational skills [11].

Early grade reading will continue to be the bedrock for all future learning and skills acquisition, however, to equip students with a broad range of skills, schools and wraparound services should offer holistic support for basic needs and overall well-being. Literacies of various kinds, a broad base of mathematical conceptual understanding, science foundations, and social-emotional skills are required for children to develop into healthy and productive members of their societies.

Children also need support to make the transition from primary to secondary school so that the growing youth population has the opportunity for gainful employment and personal achievement [12]. Higher-level skills that are acquired in secondary school should prepare students for participation in the fast-paced, rapidly-changing global economy. Automated technologies will continue to replace low-skilled labor and employers will increasingly demand technical, social, and critical-thinking skills. Digital literacy and information engagement skills, including the ability to identify misinformation, build emotional resilience to it, and reflect on one's own information consumption, will be needed for the positive development of children and youth moving forward.

III. BREAK DOWN GENDER-RELATED BARRIERS

It is imperative for the Presidential Initiative on Global Education to aim to break down gender-related barriers to educational attainment in countries where there is persistent gender disparity in school enrollment and completion, particularly in secondary school when girls are most likely to dropout. In many contexts, entrenched social and cultural norms can limit girls' access to quality learning opportunities. Girls face risks of child marriage, early pregnancy and motherhood, gender-based violence, seclusion during menstruation, and greater responsibility for household labor than boys. Further barriers to girls' attendance and success at school include lack of access to water and sanitation facilities during times of menstruation, unsafe passage to and from school, school-related gender-based violence, inequitable teaching practices, and prohibitive school fees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the risks that girls face around the world, including a disproportionate burden on domestic work and unpaid care during stay-at-home orders, limited mobility, vulnerability to gender-based violence, lower access to technology and learning resources, increased risk of unwanted and unplanned pregnancies, and a higher likelihood of school dropout. Research from previous protracted school closures suggests that learning loss combined with girls' unique vulnerabilities can have long-term consequences for girls and the road to gender equality [13]. Projections indicate teenage pregnancy alone threatens to prevent a million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa from returning to school due to discriminatory laws and cultural norms [14]. To address these barriers, girls' education programs must promote holistic and multi-sectoral solutions that prioritize gender equity and broaden support for girls' education at every level of society.

IV. ENHANCE INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

In low- and middle-income countries, too few students arrive at primary school on track developmentally and ready to learn. An estimated 250 million children globally fail to meet their developmental milestones [15], meaning nearly one-third of the world's children are entering elementary grades without the cognitive, social-emotional, motor, and language skills they need to fulfill their potential. U.S. foreign assistance needs to expand programs that improve early childhood care and education, including pre-primary education and multi-sectoral early childhood development interventions for children ages 0–8. While inclusion of children with disabilities and marginalized populations is essential to quality education at all levels, it is especially important during the early years, as they are the foundation and gateway to fruitful, lifelong learning. If the early years are exclusive of these populations, future schooling will continue to be exclusive as well.

In times of crisis, young children are particularly vulnerable to chronic, toxic stress (which harms the developing brain). The economic and social stresses on caregivers caused by the pandemic is harmful to young children and impedes their healthy growth, learning, and development [16]. The Presidential Initiative on Global Education should embrace the empirical evidence in support of investing in young children and immediately provide direction and guidance to U.S. departments and agencies on how to effectively integrate early childhood development and nurturing care interventions into foreign assistance programs. Early childhood development programs should be adapted to the local context, take an integrated, multi-sectoral approach, promote gender-responsive care giving, bridge development and humanitarian contexts, include services that meet the needs of children with disabilities, and promote family well being and safe, protective home environments. Every child deserves the best possible foundation for lifelong learning, and the U.S. government should seize this opportunity to do more for more the world's youngest children and their families.

V. BUILD LOCAL CAPACITY AND DEVELOP THE EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Local leadership capacity in education is always critical, but even more so during times of crisis. As COVID-19 has shown, resilience relies on the capability and ingenuity of people and leadership at the familial, communal, regional, and national levels. Local leaders and educators can engage families and communities, respond quickly to changing demands, and innovate in real time to adaptively meet local needs such as distance learning, remedial learning, girls' education, and skills development. Local leadership enables communities to respond to crises and emerge stronger and more resilient.

U.S. foreign assistance should support locally-led, people-first approaches that develop leadership skills in beneficiaries and partners, including by elevating the voices of adolescents and youth [17]. To ensure that aid leads to sustainable change, leadership development programs should be created at the country level in consultation with communal, regional, and national stakeholders, with the goal of spurring local innovation and knowledge sharing.

Further developing the education workforce will be necessary to sustainably improve a global education system that supports learners and learning for the future. The U.S. government should partner with countries to strengthen their education workforce, including through the recruitment of diverse talent, and address the quality of teacher pre-service and in-service trainings and certification programs. The Education Commission recommends that support for education should focus on improving teacher professional development, provide new roles and pathways for advancement, develop learning teams of educators who have distributed expertise, and build networks to facilitate skill and knowledge sharing [18].

VI. IMPROVE DELIVERY OF EDUCATION ASSISTANCE IN EMERGENCIES

In 2019, U.S. government-funded basic education programs reached more than 14.5 million children and youth in 23 crisis- and conflict-affected countries [19]. However, education is continuously underfunded in international humanitarian response operations and more timely and efficient delivery of education services is needed to reach children and youth in the immediate wake of an emergency [20]. In times of crisis, children need more than food, water, and shelter to regain a sense of normalcy and hope for the future. Access to school and quality education offer children and youth protection from harm, a safe place to recover from trauma, mental health and psychosocial support, and life-saving information and skills. Education also plays a critical community role in supporting stability, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, as well as in strengthening children's resilience to future shocks.

We've learned from COVID-19 that school systems need to be prepared and resourced to facilitate and support extended periods of remote learning during a time of crisis. Lack of access to technology, the internet, toys, books, and other learning materials furthers the learning equity gap for children living in low-income households, those from marginalized communities, and those with disabilities, and should be addressed to ensure that learning can continue for all children in future emergencies. The U.S. government must make a more concerted and coordinated effort to include education as part of the immediate response to an emergency, including by fostering improved collaboration across U.S. humanitarian and development departments and agencies.

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The Basic Education Coalition (BEC) is a group of leading US-based organizations and academic institutions working together to promote global peace and prosperity through education.





The Basic Education Coalition (BEC) is a group of leading U.S.-based organizations and academic institutions working together to promote global peace and prosperity through education. By leveraging our collective technical expertise and combining advocacy efforts, BEC members raise a unified voice to ensure U.S. policy makers support and strengthen education for the developing world.