

EAN 20th Anniversary Conference
Closing Plenary: Looking to the Future: Sharing the Vision

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A Global Edifice for Education

I – Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Michael Nettles, and I am Senior Vice President of the Policy Evaluation and Research Center at Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey.

I would like to thank Mee Fong Lee and the conference organizers for inviting me to address you this afternoon and for giving me the opportunity to deliver some of the final words of this 20th anniversary convening of the EAN annual conference.

II – About ETS

As you may know, ETS designs, administers, scores, and reports the results of many of the most well-known and widely used educational assessments in the world. These include the TOEFL and TOEIC English-language assessments, and the GRE admissions test for graduate schools. We also collaborate on several of the world's most prominent large-scale, group-score assessments of human capital. These include:

- the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMMS
- the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA
- and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, PIAAC

In the United States, our tests include:

- the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which assesses fourth- and eighth-grade students throughout the country
- large-scale state-level tests of primary- and secondary-school students
- and teacher-certification and licensure assessments

ETS 's interest and involvement in education goes beyond testing and assessment and includes research on equity and access for disadvantaged population groups. The Policy Evaluation and Research Center, for example, conducts extensive education policy research and program evaluation. We focus on improving the quality of instruction in schools, closing achievement and social mobility gaps for underrepresented populations, and investigating factors that affect progress at all levels. We also convene symposia that bring together leading scholars and practitioners to engage the public in addressing complex challenges in education. The Center's clients include schools and colleges, foundations, professional associations, education organizations, state and federal research and education agencies, and private corporations.

III – A Few Thoughts on the Conference

The 20th anniversary EAN conference has been a resounding success. The conference has had a rare vibe from start to finish, primarily because of the exuberance and enthusiasm of the nearly 200 participants. The papers and speeches presented at this conference during the past few days have been of very high quality equipping us all with new ideas and knowledge that will enable us to perform our tasks better when we return to our respective homes.

IV – Looking to the Future: Sharing the Vision

My discussion topic is “Looking to the Future: Sharing the Vision.” It is an excellent topic for discussion, not least because education is forward-looking and revelatory. It is a process of discovery that occurs over time.

Education — learning — is not the only way to improve our circumstances and our world. But without education, we have very little prospect of improving either ourselves or our communities. That seems especially true in our era. Our challenges are too vast, too complex, too interrelated, and too profound to muddle through and hope for the best. Meeting and overcoming our challenges will require undistracted focus and effort. Those of us with some years on our backs know that it also will entail learning from experience.

And that is what I would like to spend the next few minutes discussing: a proposal for how best to expand not only access to higher education, but also quality in education for underserved students worldwide, from preschool to adulthood.

Now, you may have noticed that I have cleverly enlarged the theme of the conference — from “Student Diversity in Higher Education,” to “access and quality in education” for learners of all ages. Let me assure you that I am very much committed to the goal of widening access to higher education for underserved and underrepresented students. That was the principal concept behind ETS’s founding as a nonprofit education research and services organization more than 60 years ago. And it is constitutes a substantial portion of our time and energies today, particularly at the Policy Evaluation and Research Center.

However, over the course of a career spent working on, thinking about, and proposing ways to improve and expand access to education, I have concluded that diversity does not equal quality. Diversity — among students, faculty and administration — is fundamental, and no system of education is equitable without it. And I would argue that diversity is an aspect of quality. But my experience tells me that demographic balance alone does not connote quality. **Access** is not quality. **Quality** is quality.

V – The Rich Get Richer

Over the past several decades, access to **all** levels of education has expanded rapidly, from Chile to China. And yet, educational gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged groups persist, often stubbornly so. In 13 Latin American countries, enrollment in higher education has grown by as much as 500 percent in 30 years. And yet, data gathered by Raul Atria, of the University of Chile, show that roughly 40 percentage points separate the college-going rates of the richest and the poorest 20 percent of the population. This holds true elsewhere. Between 1994 and 2009, every social group in Britain increased its university attendance rate. And yet, higher social groups outperformed lower ones by almost

exactly the same amount each year, according to research by Lee Elliot Major, the research and policy director at the Sutton Trust in the United Kingdom.¹

Nor can we infer that a postsecondary degree indicates that a student has learned the curriculum. In many colleges and universities in the United States, for example, grade inflation is rampant, devaluing the bachelor's degree. We simply do not know enough about quality, in the U.S. and elsewhere, because over the past 40 years, the focus has been on student access rather than on student learning outcomes.

Thus, for these and many other reasons, including rank bigotry, bias and class protectionism, despite our efforts, education and social mobility gaps among populations worldwide have become deeper and more entrenched. This is how Jochen Fried, Director of Education for the Salzburg Global Seminar, recently put it: "The new knowledge society clearly privileges those who are living in countries which have rich educational resources and a good public infrastructure to optimize their talents. Others fall behind, more and more rapidly."²

This is true within as well as among countries. In Brazil, test scores in the southeast top those in the northeast. In Nigeria, wealthy city children spend 10 years in school, while poor rural girls from the Hausa ethnic group average less than six months. In the United States, Hispanic and African American students graduate from high school at far lower rates than their White and Asian American peers. In China, educational opportunities vary so much from region to region that "it's not one country. It's a country of four different worlds," observes He Jin of the Ford Foundation's Beijing office.³

The expansion of fee-charging private schools and of private financing of higher education further widen the gaps.⁴ And despite an almost universal acknowledgment among national governments that higher education is essential for competitiveness and prosperity, public funding is declining as a proportion of total higher-education expenditures.⁵

It is ironic, then, that as knowledge and information accumulate and disseminate more rapidly than at any point in human history, knowledge and skills gaps continue to widen, leaving the least off further behind. As the expression goes, "The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer."

VI – The Broad Approach

It is an untenable situation. Everyone agrees. Educators, advocates, policymakers, political leaders — there is no serious dispute. Unfortunately, there is also a wide gap between acknowledgement and action. Last fall's status reports on the Millennium Development Goals noted uneven progress and outright setbacks in achieving MDG milestones by the 2015 deadline. A resolution adopted by the General Assembly last October expressed "deep concern" that the effort was falling "far short of what is needed."⁶

One of the Millennium Development Goals, as we all know, is universal primary education. In its report, the MDG Gap Task Force said that even though enrolment has continued to rise, "the pace of progress is insufficient to ensure that ... all girls and boys complete a full course of primary schooling" by 2015.⁷ According to the report⁸:

¹ "Optimizing Talent: Closing Educational and Social Mobility Gaps Worldwide." *ETS Policy Notes*, Vol. 19, Number 2, page 3.

² *Ibid*, page 2.

³ *Ibid*, page 3.

⁴ *Ibid*, page 5.

⁵ Institute for Higher Education Policy, "Issue Brief: The Global State of Higher Education and the Rise of Private Finance," pages 6-7.

⁶ General Assembly Resolution 65/1, page 1.

⁷ "The Global Partnership for Development at a Critical Juncture," *MDG Gap Task Force Report 2010*, page 16.

⁸ *Ibid*, page 18.

- Household data from 42 countries show that rural children are twice as likely to be out of school as urban children.
- Girls in the poorest 20 percent of households are 3.5 times more likely to be out of school than girls in the richest households, and 4 times more likely to be out of school as boys in the richest households.
- In Malawi and the United Republic of Tanzania, being disabled doubles the probability that a child will never attend school. In Burkina Faso the risk rises to 2.5 times.

This is not to say that there has been no progress in expanding access to education. Many countries have made remarkable gains in the past decade. But the world is not on track to meet the universal primary education goal. If current trends prevail, some 56 million children will be out of school in 2015.⁹

I do not mean to single out the Millennium Development Goals. I count myself among those who were, are, and continue to be inspired by and committed to them. But I also confess to having concluded from experience that the approach may not be the most effective. Knowing what we have learned, I believe there may be a better way.

VII – A Focused Approach

Again, let me repeat: I believe the MDG effort is a credit to humanity. It is visionary and reflects the best of our impulses. But I believe we need to improve upon the effectiveness of its approach vis á vis education. It is simply too broad. Universal primary education, after all, is only one goal among eight immensely ambitious goals. Notwithstanding the interrelatedness of all eight goals, I worry that the efforts to eradicate poverty, hunger and gender bias, and to achieve environmental sustainability over the next four years detract from what is paramount to all of us here: expanding and improving education.

I also worry that its exclusive focus on primary enrolment undermines the equally important goals of lifelong access — from preschool to senior citizenship — and systemic quality. There is substantial research on how critical early childhood learning is to future success. But there is a growing body of research, and rising alarm, that millions of adults are being left out of the global information economy, to the enormous detriment of their nations' competitiveness.

Holistic approaches can be effective, but they are by nature diffuse, especially in attracting attention and resources. The world has no shortage of problems competing for international attention. Floods and earthquakes ravage poor countries; children die of preventable diseases; glaciers melt and sea levels rise. There is an edifice of advocacy for these causes — organizations devoted exclusively to ameliorating global warming, or preventable disease, or providing development assistance. But there is no strong international voice speaking for education, despite universal agreement that education is fundamental. No international institution effectively monitors the uses of development aid, ensuring that money goes where it can be most effective in enhancing education outcomes.

Last fall, ETS, the Lumina Foundation and the Salzburg Global Seminar conducted the first of a series of global seminars on closing social mobility gaps through education. Some of our participants are here today. The point was made that donor nations and agencies make aid decisions in response to complex political and bureaucratic influences. Sometimes historical, often colonial, ties between donors and recipients determine which countries receive help.

⁹ Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010," page 6. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606E.pdf>.

With no one monitoring whether these individual aid decisions make sense in the aggregate, the results are head-scratching inequities and omissions. In sub-Saharan Africa, some countries get less than \$5 per child in education aid, while others get more than \$50. Although half the adult women in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are illiterate, donors have provided little support for programs aimed at people who missed out on primary education — even though educating women reaps huge dividends for individuals and societies.¹⁰

Birger Fredricksen, a former World Bank official who was responsible for education aid to Africa, made an incisive point: “It is politically difficult,” he said, “to give priority to issues that will only give returns in the long term if you are in a country with very few resources and you have teachers knocking on the door that need to have their salary paid.”¹¹

VIII – Building an Edifice for Education

We can ask why these unjust and self-defeating conditions exist and prevail. Or we can acknowledge them and act accordingly, by creating the global edifice for education. That is to say, we need a more focused effort on improving educational access and outcomes — one that is dedicated exclusively to education.

The conversations we are having here can be the foundation of a global strategic alliance of colleagues and interested partners committed to collaboration, advocacy, and most importantly action. We need to have an impact. That is the goal of the ETS/Salzburg Global Seminar initiative. Our program last fall focused on organizing ourselves, setting out themes, and planning our next steps. In December, we will reconvene to focus on education up to age 18. And in 2012 we will address postsecondary education, the transition to the workplace, and lifelong learning.

Our goal is to have an impact. We want to be the Red Cross or Red Crescent of global education: well-financed and well-organized; both strategic and effective on the ground; able to work through and on existing policy structures; cognizant of the need to adapt to local conditions and circumstances; aware of whom to recruit and call on in Brazil, Belgium, Bali or Botswana; able to recruit the next generation of education advocates and entrepreneurs; and successful in creating a globally recognized brand.

It is an ambitious goal, but no more ambitious than eradicating poverty by 2015.

Thank you.

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¹⁰ “Optimizing Talent: Closing Educational and Social Mobility Gaps Worldwide.” *ETS Policy Notes*, Vol. 19, Number 2, page 10.

¹¹ *Ibid*, page 7.