

The issue of imposition of school fees

(Adapted from RESULTS US 2007 World Bank briefing package)

"It is a scandal, it is a disgrace, it is wholly unacceptable that 100 million children are not going to school today...and that so many more still have to pay for their education, even when their families can not afford it."

– Gordon Brown, U.K. Chancellor of the Exchequer

Key Issue

In much of Africa and in many other poor countries, public primary schools require fees, most of which were originally implemented in the 1980s and 1990s at the behest of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Partially due to the work of RESULTS Educational Fund (REF) in the US, the World Bank reversed its policy on school fees in 2001, acknowledging their detrimental effects on pro-poor development. However, many countries continue to charge school fees in part because they lack the resources to scale-up to serve the initial influx of new students if they remove this barrier.

Abolishing school fees is absolutely necessary to increase enrollments and ensure gender parity. Removing this barrier is absolutely a prerequisite to reaching the MDGs on access to education and gender equality. More proactive action and increased resources are needed to support countries in eliminating school fees.

Background

Status of Primary School Fee Abolition

School fees (as well as other imposed policies such as budget ceilings) reduce governments' ability to provide basic resources for their people and limited access to basic education for the poor. Fees include not only the price of tuition, but also indirect costs such as textbooks, compulsory uniforms, transportation, and other expenses. Abolishing school fees is absolutely necessary to increase enrollments and ensure gender parity. However, according to Ghana's Minister of Education, Science, and Sports, an estimated 77 out of 94 poor countries, mostly in Africa, continue to charge some type of fee for basic education, despite the fact that fees raise relatively little revenue^[1].

Removing this barrier demonstrates a commitment to giving children access to an education and thus hope for a brighter future. A number of countries in Africa have eliminated school fees. They include Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, Rwanda, Malawi, Lesotho, and Cameroon and, most recently, Burundi. The results have been stunning. Within a few days, Kenya's student enrollment jumped by 22 percent, Uganda's enrollment increased by 40 percent and Tanzania's enrollment more than doubled, from 1.4 million to 3 million children. There was a nearly immediate dramatic improvement in gender parity after school fees were eliminated. The same result can and must be achieved in all other countries.

Following the first election in 12 years, Burundi recently eliminated school fees and expected an increased enrollment of 226,000. The number of new students that came to school, however, was 500,000 — double what teachers and schools were prepared for. Schools were caught short, without enough textbooks, teachers, or even the space to house the increased numbers of students. As students gathered in tents for their lessons, it might have appeared that Burundi had made a mistake. In reality, Burundi is perhaps the best example of why the elimination of school fees must happen. A quarter of a million children — previously uncounted and unexpected — showed up, eager for an education. The arrival of these children speaks volumes about how poor and vulnerable children are left behind and forced out of the education systems by school fees, and just how invisible the uneducated children have become.

The abolition of school fees is only the first step to achieving universal primary education by 2015. Additional incentives, such as school feeding programs, immunizations, and other community resources, also become more available to children and families through schools and can mean the difference between a child not being able to afford to go to school and a child not being able to afford not to. Poor countries next need an increase in resources so that they can scale up their education systems to serve the millions more children that will come to the classroom once this barrier is removed. The World Bank has reversed its policy on primary fees, but many countries, especially in Africa, still have fees. More proactive action and increase resources are needed as an incentive for countries to eliminate school fees.

Example from Rwanda:

Jean Pierre Nzamurambaho dropped out of school in the middle of his third year of primary school when he was just 12 years old. “I decided to drop out because I was tired of being sent home because we couldn’t pay school fees,” explains Jean Pierre in his native language of Kinyarwanda. “I spent two years doing domestic jobs, but I could not see any future for myself.”

In 2004, two years later, the Government abolished primary school fees and replaced them with capitation grants (grants that are determined by the number of pupils attending the school). Jean Pierre was able to return to his primary school in a rural village of Rulindo district in the Northern Province. His ambition now is to become a teacher and provide an education for the children of his village.

Jean Pierre is typical of many of the pupils who have been given a chance to study. Between 2002 and 2006, the net enrolment rate rose from 73.3% to 94%, which means over 500,000 more children getting an education. And this includes girls, whose education has long been sidelined in Rwanda in favor of male children.

13 year old Seraphine had the same experience. She says, “During my first year, I was always sent back home because of either school fees or uniform. Nowadays, teachers are no longer sending us back home, and even if I don’t put on uniform, I come and study freely. I only have to make sure I’m clean.” This new opportunity has allowed Seraphine to set her sights on becoming a nurse in the local health clinic.[\[13\]](#)