

III.

A BROKEN BRIDGE:

The Primary to Secondary Transition Gap

Transition rates illuminate a critical area of intervention

Since so few children complete primary school, those who do must be able to continue their schooling in order for students and society to reap the full benefits of their initial investment in a literate, educated population. The Ugandan Commissioner for Secondary Education, Yusuf K. Nsubuga, explains, “Failure to absorb the growing number of primary school leavers will undermine Universal Primary Education and broader national goals like the elimination of poverty.”¹² Unfortunately, this is exactly what is happening. Currently, 83.8 percent of children worldwide attend primary school, but the rate drops to 59.3 percent for secondary school.¹³ The transition rate to secondary school — or the percentage of children who complete primary education and continue to secondary education — is 67.1 percent for East and Southern Africa and only 52.4 percent for West and Central Africa. This contrasts sharply with 98 percent in the industrialized countries and 85 percent worldwide.¹⁴ In fact, in one out of every four African countries, just half of children enrolled at the end of primary school move on to study at the secondary level. In another 25 percent of African countries, only one in three continue on to the secondary level; and in two countries—Tanzania and Burundi — less than 20 percent of children do so.¹⁵

The reasons for this broken bridge are many. As a UNESCO fact sheet explains, “Some families cannot afford to continue sending their children to school...And in some countries, there simply are not enough places in secondary school and so

¹² Kirungi, Fred. “Uganda Tackling School Bottlenecks.” Africa Recovery Online: A United Nations Publication. Last accessed 15 June 2006. <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol14no2/uganda.htm>.

¹³ Huebler, Friedrich. “Education Statistics.” Quoting UNESCO’s Global Education Digest 2005. 17 July 2005. Last accessed 13 June 2006. http://huebler.blogspot.com/2005_07_01_huebler_archive.html.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ UNESCO. “How Many Children in Africa Reach Secondary Education?” UNESCO Institute for Statistics Fact Sheet, January 2006. Last accessed 14 June 2006. http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/EducGeneral/UIS_Fact%20Sheet_2006_02_SecAfr_EN.pdf.



authorities screen children through public examinations or by using other methods.”¹⁶

Most often it is girls who must give up their dreams. In sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of girls do not complete primary school, and only 17 percent are enrolled in secondary school.¹⁷ The barriers to girls’ education worldwide, and particularly to secondary education, are numerous, but among the most prevalent is a lack of access, due to the absence of secondary schools in rural communities and high fees required for admission and enrollment.

Girls and boys have the right to an education that guarantees their full participation in society and the economy. It is clear that in addition to the large investments being made in primary education, the world must make secondary education an equal priority, particularly for girls who are most often denied that right. A renewed push to ensure that girls have access worldwide to secondary — as well as primary — education is necessary now if the investments made to date are to pay off — for girls, their communities, their countries, and the world.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sperling, Gene B. “The Case for Universal Basic Education for the World’s Poorest Boys and Girls.” Council on Foreign Relations, November 2005. Last accessed 13 June 2006. http://www.cfr.org/publication/9739/case_for_universal_basic_education_for_the_worlds_poorest_boys_and_girls.html.