



## **State of the Planet: Feed and Educate Kids First**

**By Tom Freedman and Richard Fritz**

Education and security clearly are top priorities for both George Bush and John Kerry. In their campaigns, however, the critical links between education, a full stomach, and national security go unmentioned. In fact, the long-term security of the United States and the advancement of democracy worldwide are inextricably tied to the feeding and education of children around the globe.

Higher education levels lead not only to improved incomes, but also lower birth rates and a literate electorate. So here's an idea that would guarantee improved outcomes for all nations, and at relatively low cost: within the decade, let's provide a decent meal a day and an education for every child in the world. While there have been periodic bipartisan steps in this direction, the hunger and food gap grows year by year.

The scope of the problem is huge. Today, an estimated 300 million children in developing nations are chronically hungry. More than one-third of these children, roughly 120 million, do not attend school. Sixty percent are young girls, because in too many countries fathers see no reason to send their daughters to school. The futures of young, uneducated women, some of whom marry as early as age 11, are sadly predictable. A terrible cycle of poor health, powerlessness, and poverty plagues one generation after the next. Even in America, approximately 13 million children—nearly one in five—live in households that are hungry or at risk of going hungry.

One program aimed at attacking these problems is in real trouble. The Global Food for Education Initiative (GFEI) encourages parents to send hungry children who currently don't get an education to school by providing a free meal there. A pilot project under GFEI, created by President Clinton, provided this incentive to poor parents, assuring some nine million children in the developing world that they could get at least one meal a day.

Amidst the ongoing turmoil and tragedy in the Middle East, the plague of AIDS in Africa, and the most recent news that global hunger has risen to affect 840 million people, there should be a new urgency to discussions about America's role in the developing world. Unfortunately, that is not happening.

Recently, the U.S. government decided to slash foreign funding for GFEI. The \$300 million per year international program designed to attract and keep children in school is likely to be reduced to a mere \$50 million in the currently debated agricultural appropriations legislation. Cutting funds that bring children into the classroom to learn about the three R's and democracy and tolerance undercuts America's desire to bring good governance and freedom to many parts of the world. And, when people have hope that their lives and the lives of their children will improve, they simply have a larger stake in political and economic stability.

Everyone knows that better education is key to building stronger democracy, more prosperous societies, and a more stable world. Studies show girls who go to school marry later and have fewer children. More educated and mature mothers are better equipped to care for their kids, have higher incomes, and raise healthier families. The link between education and economic success is clear. In countries with an adult literacy rate of about 40 percent, GNP per capita averaged \$210; in those countries with at least 80 percent literacy rates, GNP per capita is \$1000 and above.

Creating the global school lunch program had bi-partisan backing—Senators Robert Dole and George McGovern established it in 2000. The Dole-McGovern GFEI program requires that students and families must actively participate in educational advancement in order for the child to receive food benefits. In addition, the nations in which the school-feeding program operates must commit to universal education: both boys and girls must be able to go school. The recipient country must also commit to the educational goals, agreeing to take over the U.S.-funded school-feeding program after a few years so the benefits will continue into the future.

The concept of free or reduced-cost school lunches worked in this country—again supported more than 30 years ago by Senators Dole and McGovern—and it should be expanded today to benefit world peace and development. There is no doubt it offers a good return on the investment. It costs only 19 cents per day, \$34 a year, to feed a child in school. A few billion dollars would reach tens of millions of children and help avoid the billions it costs the U.S. when impoverished nations explode into violence and despair.

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