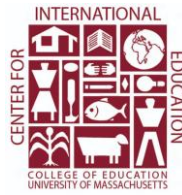




GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR
EDUCATION
UNITED STATES



THE GEORGE
WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC

Summary

The Future of American Foreign Assistance for Basic Education

Summary of a roundtable held Thursday, June 12, 2025

Among 48 participating, international education experts

Convened by:

The US Chapter of the Global Campaign for Education,

The Basic Education Coalition

The University of Massachusetts Amherst's College of Education

George Washington University

The World Hunger Education Service



The Future of American Foreign Assistance for Basic Education

Summary of the Roundtable held on:
Thursday, June 12, 2025 from 12:30 – 4 pm EDT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The US Chapter of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), the Basic Education Coalition, the University of Massachusetts Amherst College of Education, George Washington University, and the World Hunger Education Service held a roundtable on America's role in foreign assistance for basic education on June 12, 2025, convening 48 mostly US-based experts¹ from a wide range of nonprofit, academic, and for-profit organizations as well as some former US Government (USG) officials. The roundtable came at a time of significant retraction in USG foreign assistance for basic education, after approximately 98 percent of USG funds for basic education were cut through the USG's foreign assistance review in early 2025. The co-sponsors planned the session to capture expert thinking on the importance and comparative advantage (or lack thereof) of USG foreign assistance for basic education while it was still top of mind as well as to document recommendations for any future USG foreign assistance for international basic education.

Roundtable participants represented a large spectrum of concerns around international basic education for children. Many of the participants had extensive experience across different for-profits, non-profits, varied donors, and USG agencies at different points in their careers. The session adhered to Chatham House rules, meaning that none of the comments that follow are attributable or specific to any one participant or organization. Participants were asked to represent their own experience and views, but to not formally represent any organizational views.

In the first two segments of the roundtable, the group discussed America's comparative advantages in foreign assistance for education, including education in emergencies and for children with disabilities. In the final segment, participants were asked for recommendations about future programs. Participants emphasized that the world faces an unprecedented learning crisis, with 70% of children in low and middle-income countries unable to read a basic sentence [<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/23/70-of-10-year-olds-now-in-learning-poverty-unable-to-read-and-understand-a-simple-text>], 473 million children living in conflict zones (often without access to education), and 58 million out of school altogether.

[<https://www.prio.org/comments/1152#:~:text=The%20report%20is%20based%20on,living%20in%20a%20conflict%20zone.>]



America's Comparative Advantage in International Basic Education

The roundtable identified America's comparative advantages in education assistance, including extensive field experience, evidence-based programming, technical assistance capabilities, and leadership in foundational literacy and inclusive education. Participants cited research suggesting that the USG's education initiatives have reached millions of children and youth, improving learning environments and reducing political violence. They noted that these programs appear to offer high returns on investment, enhancing economic opportunities and stability in affected communities while advancing US interests. They also noted that America has historically been a leader in technical assistance and capacity building in global education, as the largest bilateral donor for basic education (in total value but not with respect to assistance as a percentage of GNP, in which it falls far behind other wealthy countries). The US was also one of the first donors to focus on improving early grade reading outcomes, and it has contributed significantly to the evidence base of what works to advance basic education outcomes.

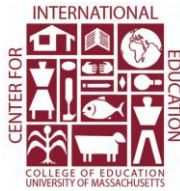
With regard to support for education in emergencies and for learners with disabilities, participants noted that the US was also a leading voice in advancing basic education for these vulnerable students. It was one of only eight countries with national or foreign policies that specifically mentioned support for education in emergencies, and it was leading the way on advancing disability data collection efforts and the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a methodology used to develop materials and train teachers in pedagogy that supports all students, regardless of any learning disabilities.

Participants highlighted the compound effect of USG cuts to international basic education, noting that many USG-funded activities leveraged matching funds to support activities, which are now not available. They said the abrupt loss of USG funds and the delay in paying implementers for education work already performed completely decimated implementers' abilities to continue this critical education work. US cuts to foreign assistance have now cost 233,818 global jobs and an additional 19,519 American jobs. The cuts have also resulted in the loss of nearly \$30 billion in US exports and have significantly reduced the income for 450+ large-scale farmers across the US.

Some participants mentioned that USG aid cuts have led to similar cuts by other donors, including the U.K., which recently made drastic cuts to international education funding, largely as a result of the need for the country to invest more to support Ukraine, following the US's significant reductions in assistance to the country. One participant said that *"the abrupt termination of 163 out of 165 USAID education programs after the reauthorization of the US federal READ Act has been devastating, threatening future funding and jeopardizing millions of children's futures."*

Recommendations for the Future of USG Foreign Assistance in Basic Education

With regard to the future, participants overwhelmingly recommended that the USG continue to invest in international basic education. They cited concerns that the cuts to basic education programming would cripple the US's efforts to make America stronger, safer, and more prosperous. Participants said that education is at the root of sustainable development because education affords people the right to



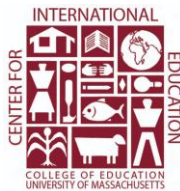
advocate for themselves. It also reduces the need for humanitarian assistance, which is where the vast majority of current planned “development” spending is allocated in 2025.

Roundtable participants said that while the USG and USAID, in particular, were constantly improving their approach to implementing international basic education programs in the years leading up to 2025, this scaling back of education programs offers an opportunity to fully implement the lessons learned over the last few decades of USG assistance for basic education programs. There was a strong call for the future of foreign assistance to be grounded in local systems and owned by local actors, especially governments. Several participants also emphasized the importance of systems thinking, outcomes-based funding, and the need to leverage higher education institutions for teacher training. Others noted the importance of continued monitoring, evaluation, and research about what works to advance learning outcomes in developing countries. And, several participants said the USG should increase its investments in technology for education, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), for learning and diagnostics, while addressing equity concerns related to access to technology. The group stressed the urgency of preserving institutional knowledge, ensuring technical capacity within the State department to manage existing and future education programs, and maintaining momentum in critical areas such as education in emergencies and inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Roundtable participants overwhelmingly emphasized that if the USG were to increase its investments in international basic education in the future, it should use a unified approach led by partnerships and coalitions. This should include co-designing projects and collaborating with the government itself, other bilateral and multilateral organizations, the private sector, regional leaders, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to maximize impact, coordinate projects focused on different regions or aspects of the education system, and reduce competition. Participants said that emphasizing co-creation and co-productivity with all stakeholders, including local actors and national specialists, is vital for designing and implementing effective and sustainable projects.

Participants recommended that:

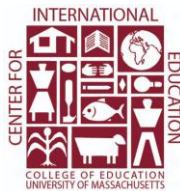
- Congress, the State Department, and other USG agencies that implement foreign assistance for basic education should fulfill the requirements of the READ Act and not cut USG funding for international basic education further, but rather increase funding to 2024 levels or at least to what is proposed in the FY26 budget.
- The USG should include development assistance (and, specifically, international basic education) in the new State Department structure.
- The U.S. State Department and those other USG agencies that support international basic education programs should shift the focus of future basic education programs in stable countries somewhat to ensure they empower local governments to take the lead and are focused on capacity development of the government and strengthening of the local education system and budget. While participants noted USAID and other USG agencies were also making this push



prior to USAID's dismantling, they also said that some USG programs did not go far enough and a few even created systems outside of the local government, hurting their chances of sustainability and country ownership.

- The USG should reinstate former USG knowledge-management hubs related to basic education, and the USG agencies that support international basic education programming should leverage knowledge that has been accumulated in recent decades to inform better aid programs ahead. This includes ensuring that millions of dollars of US-taxpayer supported evidence and institutional knowledge is not lost by advocating to the USG to make the data and reports from the USAID website, EduLinks, Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC), and Digital Development Library (DDL) publicly available as they had been for many years.
- USG agencies that implement international basic education programs should ensure future programs prioritize efficiency and value for money, incorporating metrics to evaluate impact relative to costs and to identify what local governments can continue to implement post-US involvement.
- Congress should appropriate funds in a way that allows more flexibility of how funds are spent to improve education outcomes, and the USG officials who design those programs should ensure they work to connect education, health, nutrition, and child development support for a whole-of-child approach. Participants noted that this would mean reconsidering how Congress appropriates funds, which currently relies heavily on earmarks that make cross-sectoral programming complicated.
- The State Department should work to sustain the expertise that USG officials, NGOs, and other US organizations have accumulated over decades of technical fieldwork. They should leverage US higher education institutions and NGOs to preserve technical knowledge through support for the public cataloging of existing resources and technical guidance and by providing opportunities to engage this community in future USG foreign assistance activities for basic education.
- The State Department and other USG agencies that support international basic education should ensure future foreign assistance programs for basic education incorporate principles for inclusive education, particularly for learners with disabilities and other marginalized groups, such as those who speak minority languages or languages other than the language of instruction, refugees, internally displaced persons, and others affected by conflict.

Participants and sponsors alike agreed that this type of roundtable was effective and valuable and that there should be future roundtables, particularly to engage local voices from stakeholder countries that have benefited from US foreign assistance for basic education in the past. The sponsors are planning a future roundtable to engage this critical group and help to capture demand for USG support for international basic education programs globally.



CONTEXT

Past USG Involvement in International Basic Education

In 1970, wealthy countries made a broad international commitment that they would provide 0.7 percent of their GNP annually to assist poor countries. According to Brookings Institute, five countries (Norway, Sweden, Luxembourg, Denmark, and the U.K.) have typically exceeded that benchmark. The average for all wealthy nations has been around 0.3 percent until recent years, and the US has ranked near the bottom at below 0.2 percent. That was before 2025.

In 2025, after the State Department's review of foreign assistance programs, the vast majority of the US Government (USG) programs for basic education were terminated, including 163 of the 165 international basic education programs at USAID, all of the US Department of Labor's (DOL's) international basic education programs, and most of the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) programs. Funding for the Peace Corps, which has programmed less than 3 percent of international basic education programs in past years, was maintained. And, the status of education programs at the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) remains unclear as of the time of this white paper, though MCC was not tasked with programming the majority of USG funds for international basic education in previous years. Their education programs tend to focus more on vocational education.

Prior to 2025, education had long been a key focus sector within US foreign assistance, with Congress first making the sector a distinctive policy objective of foreign assistance in 1973. According to the Congressional Research Service, Congress added education sector-specific objectives to the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) of 1961 (FAA, P.L. 87-195, as amended) in an effort to target assistance to satisfy the basic human needs of those living in poverty in developing countries. Section 105 of the FAA seeks "to reduce illiteracy, to extend basic education, and to increase manpower training in skills related to development." Successive US Administrations from both sides of the aisle and Congress have considered education a critical component of US foreign assistance programming. As USAID Administrator Mark Green, who served under the Trump Administration, said, "If you don't have quality access, inclusive access to education, there's no possible way you can get to self-reliance. And there's no possible way that any of our other investments are going to be sustainable. So education is an extraordinarily high priority for us, because we see it as the sort of key to every other area we're working on." To carry out the commitments, over the past 15 years, Congress has consistently authorized between \$800-975 million annually towards the international basic education account.

Since 2018, all US assistance for basic education, regardless of implementing agency, has been guided by the USG Strategy on International Basic Education, a whole-of-government document with two principal priorities: (1) to improve learning outcomes and (2) expand access to quality basic education for all, particularly marginalized and vulnerable populations, such as students with disabilities or those from



low-income backgrounds. The Strategy was established after the United States passed the READ Act, which was co-led by then Senator Marco Rubio and signed into law under President Trump in 2017. The Act was reauthorized in December 2024, reaffirming the United States' leadership in international basic education by making the following commitments:

- Implement education programs to reach the goals of the READ Act and the USG Strategy on International Basic Education.
- Designate a Senior Coordinator for International Basic Education.
- Submit an annual report to Congress on the progress of the Strategy, which includes information across all nine government agencies and departments. This report is due to Congress on March 31st of each year and has been submitted every year since 2018.

Rubio said the Act would “empower millions of children...by increasing access to education and reducing vulnerability to poverty, abuse, and extremism.” And, upon passing the reauthorization, he said, ““After years of acute learning loss brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of vulnerable children around the world have lost out on valuable educational opportunities and are confronting futures rife with violence and poverty. The resources provided by the READ Act are now more important than ever.” For many years, America’s leadership in this sector has demonstrated an understanding of the linkages between education, global stability, and economic growth.

USG Accomplishments in International Basic Education

The US was the largest bilateral donor for international basic education programs (in overall terms but not as a percentage of GNP), and, as such, it became the utmost authority on technical programs for basic education, particularly for early grade reading programs. Programs implemented over the course of the 2019–2023 US Government Strategy on International Basic Education reached more than 34 million learners annually. In total, US government programs trained 2.9 million teachers and educators, supplied 174 million textbooks and other teaching and learning materials, and worked to strengthen systems, including by supporting the adoption of 525 new or reformed laws and policies. In addition, the US government provided 17 million children and youth with school meal services during the first Strategy period (the last period for which data was readily available), recognizing that children must be healthy when they enter school, so they are ready to learn. All of this led to children in developing countries staying in school longer and learning more, as demonstrated through reading and math assessment scores. The Center for Global Development estimates that USAID basic education programs had a benefit-cost ratio on the order of 30-1.

Studies show that children who stay in school longer and who have improved learning have higher earnings over the course of their adult lives, tend to have fewer children, and are better able to support the health and well-being of those children. In fact, a recent study by the Center for Global Development showed that children with improved reading and math learning outcomes at age 10 in Indonesia earned roughly 11 percent more as adults than their peers with lower learning outcomes. Another study showed that when mothers are literate, infant mortality rates are cut in half. One



roundtable participant summed up the evidence efficiently when they said, *"The evidence indicates that foundational learning drives later academic success, lower dropout rates, improved employment, lower risk of recruitment into violent extremism, higher GDPs, improved health outcomes, and high returns on investment."*

What does Investing in International Basic Education do for the US?

Investments in international basic education make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous, as described in more detail below:

Safer – Students who receive a basic education (learning how to read and do simple math) are more likely to complete secondary school, and youth who complete secondary education are 48 percent less likely to support political violence. Political violence can lead to instability and make conditions ripe for the growth of violent extremism. Each year of education reduces a student's risk of becoming involved in conflict by 20 percent. Studies show that doubling the percentage of youth with a secondary education can cut the risk of conflict in half.

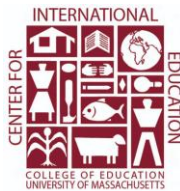
Youth who are out of school and out of work are more likely to join gangs and violent extremism groups as are youth who cannot read or do basic math. Improvements to foundational literacy and numeracy have been shown to lead to a 4.7-5.7% decrease in youth unemployment.

Finally, offering education in emergency settings, as the USG formerly did, reduces both the likelihood that armed groups will recruit children and rates of global instability.

Stronger - Education programs foster democracy, strengthen US allies, and counter the influence of US adversaries including China and Russia. Since the US made cuts to its international basic education programming, China has already moved in to fill the gap in some countries.

More Prosperous - People from developing countries with higher incomes spend more money buying products from the US. Improvements to foundational literacy and numeracy have been shown to lead to a 4-48% increase in earnings and a 1.4-2% increase in GDP – a potential increase of billions of dollars that a country can then invest back into its education system and/or use to become a more productive trading partner. A stronger global economy creates markets for US exports. Eleven out of the top fifteen US trade partners were former recipients of US foreign assistance.

Studies show that people from developing countries whose incomes reach \$10,000/year or more are less likely to emigrate to the US. Outside of these benefits, US support for foreign assistance also supports the US economy through jobs, the purchase of US crops, and support for higher education institutions. US cuts to foreign assistance have now cost 233,818 global jobs and an additional 19,519 American jobs. The cuts have also resulted in the loss of nearly \$30 billion in US exports and have



significantly reduced the income for 450+ large-scale farmers across the US Cutting foreign assistance does not make Americans more prosperous.

Despite what readers know about the benefits of students in developing countries having a basic education, 58 million children are out of school worldwide, 70 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries cannot understand a simple text, and 242 million children have had their education disrupted by natural disasters.

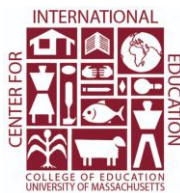
Cuts to USG Support for International Basic Education

As discussed, the vast majority of USG funding for international education programs was cut in 2025, with the passage of the Rescission Act. Specific terminated efforts include (but are not limited to): support for education in emergencies; general basic education programs; literacy programs; teacher education programs; early childhood education; efforts to reduce high school dropout rates; support for local ministries of education; peace building through education; education partnerships with large, land-grant universities in America; special education programs for the hearing and visually impaired; and regional education programs. Regions and countries impacted include (but are not limited to): Sub-Saharan Africa (Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia); the Middle East (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria); Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines); the Americas and Caribbean (Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras, Paraguay); the Caucasus (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo), and Western and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan).

The following sections provide a detailed overview of the roundtable conversation and discussions.

AMERICA'S COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES IN BASIC EDUCATION ASSISTANCE

The United States has long supported basic education overseas through government grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements. Participants spoke from experience about America's unique leadership in the world in forging basic education programs, agendas, and priorities. America has a much wider array of interventions tried domestically as well as internationally, and, having invested in the sector over many years, has demonstrated success in convening other donors and actors. Roundtable participants noted that the US has supported research; the provision of teaching and learning materials; and teacher, administrator, and Ministry training by local and international higher education institutions (HEI), NGOs, and for-profit companies in the US and abroad. For example, the US supported teacher training programs in dozens of countries worldwide to ensure teachers were trained in the science of teaching reading, which is typically focused on phonics rather than whole-word instruction. They also trained



teachers on methodologies for teaching in leveled groups and for teaching universal design for learning (UDL), which focuses on ensuring all children, regardless of whether they have a disability, are able to learn. The US is also known in the sector for having provided more than 174 million textbooks and teaching and learning materials to students in developing countries since 2000 and for implementing programs focused on engaging parents and community members in schools and student learning. Some participants also described US support for for-profit companies, focused on providing internet connectivity to schools and coming up with technological solutions for access to textbooks, AI, and other tools to increase learner access to a quality education, e.g., applications focused on accessibility for learners with disabilities.

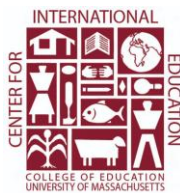
The following are the areas in which participants noted that the US has a comparative advantage in implementing basic education assistance.

Early Grade Reading: Participants noted that the US has led the way amongst donors in focusing on early grade literacy. The US was one of the first donors to focus its efforts on improving the quality of education and specifically reading instruction, and thus, it is known amongst donors and developing countries as having unique expertise and resources in this area.

Presence: Staff of American aid agencies and implementers often have experience at the classroom level, frequently having worked in US domestic school systems, with teachers, students, administrators, and PTAs. The US's efforts also led to many partners having vast experience working with schools abroad. One roundtable participant noted that: *“One value-add has been that American organizations were everywhere. They had footholds in every country in the world.”* Many of these programs have run continuously for decades. This has meant that partners have built relationships with Ministry of Education staff and local NGOs and are deeply entrenched in the local education system.

Networks: US support has benefited from a strong network that includes private companies, NGOs, and state and local government education bodies, as well as higher education institutions (HEIs). This network allows for quick responses and integrated efforts, which may give the US an edge in flexibility and responsiveness compared to other donors. Participants said that American aid is distinctive in its practical, system-focused, and collaborative approach. A further strength of USG funding has been the network of Higher Education partnerships. The ability of US HEIs to partner with and help build the capacity of local HEIs and help in evaluation and research for basic education has been an important advantage.

Early Childhood Education: Participants said another comparative advantage is the USG's technical capacity and resources developed in support of early childhood education (preschool). In recent years, the USG expanded its work in basic education to early childhood education, which it has shown to be critical not only for improving student reading and math outcomes but also for reducing violence in



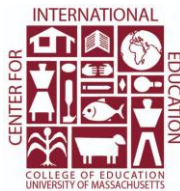
developing countries. The USG was, again, at the forefront of efforts to expand technical support to children have access to preschool and to a quality preschool education. One roundtable participant noted, “*The area of early childhood intervention is one of the greatest strengths of the United States of America. We have the largest early childhood system in the world and the most research on it. We are also training, through other auspices, people around the world in how to do culturally appropriate, culturally derived ECI services.*” Some participants also noted that while USG support for early childhood education increased in recent years, it was not completely integrated with support for early childhood development outcomes, often times supported through funds earmarked for maternal and child health. This might be an area where future USG assistance could be expanded.

Technical assistance: Unlike some donors who focus on direct funding to the local government, the USG has offered robust technical assistance. This includes training and capacity building, which helps strengthen educational systems in partner countries, a depth of support that is less common among many other donors.

Leveraging additional donor funds and support: More so than other donors, USG assistance has been catalytic. Recognizing the importance of education for long-term development outcomes, reduced violence and immigration, and increased trading with the US, the USG has dedicated more money than other countries for basic education. It is important to note, however, that the USG’s investment as a percentage of GDP has been significantly less than that of other countries. Nonetheless, this investment worked to leverage additional participation and funds by other donors, private agencies, and local actors, making the USG a vital actor in the field of basic education internationally. For example, one participant noted a USG-funded education program in Latin America that leveraged \$25 million in USG funds to get \$50 million in additional commitments from donors and partners. Participants also mentioned the importance of partnering with United Nations’ Agencies, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the World Bank, and Education Cannot Wait, among others.

Multiple participants in the roundtable emphasized the USG’s unique convening power amongst other donors and partners and its long-term trusted relationships with local partners, often spanning half a century or longer. This deep trust and network enabled co-creation, improved sustainability of outcomes, and quick implementation of basic education programs, all of which tend to be less common among other donors, enhancing the direct and ripple effect of USG aid delivery. One participant explained the USG’s “*comparative advantage is a distinctive capacity to convene and create enabling environments for innovation... technical excellence plus systems thinking, local adaptation, and cross-sector collaboration, public/private partnerships, etc.*”

Separation of foreign assistance and diplomacy: Participants also noted that, until now with the absorption of USAID into the State Department, a unique strength of the USG’s approach has been its ability to separate foreign assistance investments in the education sector from its formal diplomacy work. This distance has fostered trust with in-country partners, allowing for more genuine engagement

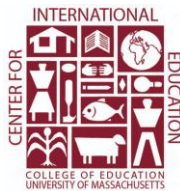


and responsiveness to local needs, which ultimately results in improved education outcomes and benefits to the US through reduced violence and immigration and increased trade opportunities.

Evidence generation and knowledge sharing: roundtable participants said that the USG has in recent years led the donor community in commissioning systematic, rigorous evaluations of its programs, requiring evaluations of all large (greater than \$20 million) education activities and any pilot activities and requiring monitoring and reporting on common indicators across all USG education activities. The USG has also shared the results of this research widely, and US aid agencies have led in evidence-based programming. Finally, the US aid agencies have also supported countries to expand their assessment capabilities and to assess more early grade (grade 1-4) students using assessments such as the USG-funded Early Grade Reading Assessment, which has now been implemented in more than 70 countries worldwide. Some participants *“would love to see US programs provide greater access to knowledge tools, learning tools, applications, low-cost, open-source, free things that we’ve already paid for as US taxpayers.”*

Recommendations:

- Congress, the State Department, and other USG agencies that implement foreign assistance for basic education should fulfill the requirements of the READ Act and not cut USG funding for international basic education account further, but rather increase funding to 2024 levels or at least to what is proposed in the FY26 budget.
- The USG should include development assistance (and, specifically, international basic education) in the new State Department structure.
- The USG should reinstate former USG knowledge-management hubs related to basic education, and the USG agencies that support international basic education programming should leverage knowledge that has been accumulated in recent decades to inform better aid programs ahead. This includes ensuring that millions of dollars of US-taxpayer supported evidence and institutional knowledge is not lost by advocating to the USG to make the data and reports from the USAID website, EduLinks, Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC), and Digital Development Library (DDL) publicly available again. They should also continue to gather evidence on what works and what does not while implementing future international basic education programs, through research, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Congress and the agencies that implement USG foreign assistance programs should continue to fulfill the requirements of the READ Act and not cut USG funding for international basic education account further, but rather increase funding to 2024 levels or at least to what is proposed in the FY26 budget.
- The USG is valuable as a convener and coordinator of foreign assistance education programs, and the US should work to maintain US leadership across multilateral platforms by actively



shaping global education norms and leveraging influence within GPE, UN Agencies, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the World Bank, and Education Cannot Wait, among others.

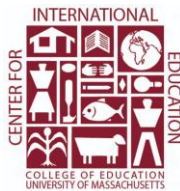
- The State Department should ensure that future USG foreign assistance funds go to support:
 - Activities focused on early grade reading, math, and socioemotional learning (SEL) outcomes (note that participant feedback about math and SEL is described in sections below).
 - Activities focused on improving children’s access to quality Early Childhood Education (preschool) for children age 3-5, and this support should be expanded and integrated with maternal and child health funding to support children's early development prior to preschool for children age 0-3.
 - Activities that put children at the center of all USG basic education programming, ensuring the support addresses what children need at every age and stage in a holistic way.

THE FUTURE ROLES OF THE USG AND AMERICAN AID ORGANIZATIONS

The meeting acknowledged the extensive involvement of private non-profits in America, as well as foundations and private solutions-oriented organizations. US-owned NGOs have built deep trust and partnerships in local communities. One participant noted that, *“In terms of comparative advantage – many US-based NGOs, like Compassion, have deep, longstanding, and ongoing relationships with local partners, and these will remain regardless of what happens with the USG. This has enabled great opportunities for co-creation of programming, sustainability, ongoing capacity building, long-term monitoring for outcomes, quick action and implementation based on deep trust, etc.”* However, many participants noted that the financial capacity of these organizations to continue this work has been significantly reduced, with many of the organizations put out of business and others having to make massive layoffs as a result of the closing of USAID and the end of other USG basic education assistance programs.

Participants said that the network of NGOs brought not only physical presence and technical assistance, but long-standing local relationships and trust, in some cases having lasted over 70 years. Participants also noted that the same is true of USG officials and Foreign Service Nationals (Local staff who supported USG foreign assistance programs in their own countries) who have worked in foreign assistance for basic education programs. They bring deep technical expertise and an extensive network of relationships in the countries where they worked.

Roundtable participants also noted that while the first strategic approach described in USG Strategy on Basic Education is to “prioritize country ownership and locally led development,” from their experience,

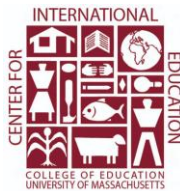


while the USG has made significant progress on this front in the past, there is room for continued improvement, which could also act to ensure USG foreign assistance funds can go further. Namely, they said that while all recent USG programs, especially those at USAID, have focused on co-creation with local entities, in the future, programs in stable areas should be set up from the start to be run by the government, considering government budgets and what is feasible for the government to implement in the long run. Some participants mentioned that there were still some USG programs that were creating parallel systems with the intention of transitioning components to within the system after proving the concept. But, they encouraged the State Department and other foreign assistance entities to start the programs by training local government staff. Participants said engaging local communities and fostering global partnerships were essential for sustainable impact, emphasizing systemic, holistic approaches to education challenges.

Though the READ Act and USG Strategy on International Basic Education aimed to reduce silos by coordinating development assistance across 10 US agencies, which many participants argued was successful, citing specific examples, the roundtable identified insufficient cross-sectoral collaboration across multilateral partners and NGOs. In particular, they noted sectoral silos, which often resulted from sector-specific Congressional earmarks for development assistance funding, served as a barrier to effective education programming. For instance, funding allocated for education purposes was only allowed to be used for those purposes rather than for ensuring quality healthcare, nutrition, and security for children attending school, which is critical to ensuring the children can actually learn in school. The same was true of health and nutrition funding, they were siloed for those purposes, which made it difficult to create cross-sectoral programs.

The discussion also explored the role of technology, particularly partnerships with American tech companies, highlighting both opportunities for innovation and risks of compromising educational quality. Participants gave examples of past programs that expanded WIFI access the last mile to communities and schools, ensuring teachers and students could access educational resources, while ensuring private sector profits through the use of advertisements targeted at non-educational users in the expansion areas. They also discussed the documented benefits of education applications that use artificial intelligence (AI) to adapt to student education levels and needs, suggesting that demand for these services was huge, evidence about their benefits was promising, and the market was largely untapped. Some participants also noted the need for the USG to be cautious in its expansion of these services and technologies to ensure they were designed in a way to reach all children and students and not to leave out those living in rural communities or from impoverished backgrounds.

Finally, participants discussed the crucial importance of continuing to generate evidence, of adapting programs, and communicating widely about those programs. They also said that while there is a great deal of evidence about the impacts of USG foreign assistance for basic education, and while those impacts have been shared on public websites, they have not been widely communicated to the US public



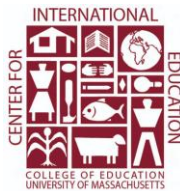
outside of development professionals. This has been a detriment to ensuring American public buy-in to these critical programs and to the impact of them on US taxpayers.

Recommendations:

- The State Department and other USG agencies that support international basic education programs should shift the focus of future basic education programs in stable countries somewhat to ensure they empower local governments to take the lead and are focused on capacity development of the government and strengthening of the local education system and budget. While participants noted USAID and other USG agencies were also making this push prior to USAID's dismantling, they also said that some USG programs did not go far enough and a few even created systems outside of the local government, hurting their chances of sustainability and country ownership.
- The State Department should work to sustain the expertise that USG foreign assistance professionals, NGOs, and other US organizations have accumulated over decades of technical fieldwork. They should leverage US higher education institutions and NGOs to preserve technical knowledge through support for the public cataloging of existing resources and technical guidance and by providing opportunities to engage this community in future USG foreign assistance activities for basic education.
- The State Department and other USG agencies implementing foreign assistance programs for basic education should leverage US foreign assistance strength in higher education for basic education outcomes and work with teacher training, and college teacher training programs to address topics such as system strengthening (an example of which is incorporating as well as promoting inclusive education in pre-service teacher training curriculum).
- USG agencies that program funds for international basic education should ensure those funds are allocated to programs that move beyond traditional implementing models toward more collaborative approaches with other donors and local partners. This means that the USG will need to do more than regularly meet with these multilateral organizations. Instead, they should work to align funding timelines so that activities can truly be co-designed and ensure complementarities and that all programming gaps necessary to achieve outcomes are filled.
- USG agencies that program funds for international basic education should be humble and learn from their mistakes – and from their successes. Moreover, they should communicate widely - through the media and campaigns targeting taxpayers - about the benefits of international basic education.

EDUCATION AS ECOSYSTEM

While the US has demonstrated a comparative advantage in basic education programming in recent years, with the largest systems and most research globally, as discussed above, participants noted that due largely to funding earmarks, that programming has generally not been coordinated with health and education funding that ensures a comprehensive system of care for children from birth through the end



of primary school.. One participant noted: *“Some of the models coming out of the UK recently have more of a systems thinking, are more coherent and strategic at this point.”*

Education should be seen as part of larger global health and food security ecosystems. *“We know that for example secondary education is proven again and again to reduce girls' HIV infection rates”, risk of exploitation, conflict, violence, and forced marriage or migration, while increasing earnings and GDP.* Participants emphasized that USG Investments in basic education improve the health of the families they affect, which makes them better able to invest in the economy and buy American goods. Such investments also reduce violent extremism, making America safer.

Participants suggested that the US should invest in foundational services for children, especially from birth to age three, a period of critical developmental growth. This is operationally urgent, as when large numbers of children reach age three with developmental delays, those deficits become extremely difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. One participant said: *“We have to think about how are we going to address this issue, which will make it less costly and more effective to have thriving educational systems.”* Another noted: *“To achieve change at a large scale takes more time and funding to develop the systems-level changes, build capacities, and ensure localized resources are aligned. This is often why pilots can see larger change quicker in comparison to systems-level initiatives, which need heightened coordination across donors, ministries, implementers, etc.”*

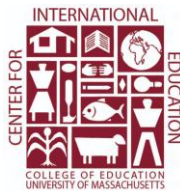
As discussed above, participants also spoke to the importance of localization or devolving more power and decision-making to local actors for sustainable outcomes over many years, decreasing dependency on the US or other international donors and suggesting transition or phase-out plans.

Recommendations:

- Future USG funding for international basic education programs should avoid silos, and include complementary support to address children’s nutrition and health challenges that might prevent them from learning in school. Programs should focus on transforming the entire system that surrounds students. For example, education programs should incorporate screening for students with disabilities and provide adequate referrals to clinics that are able to properly diagnose disabilities in children. Next, programs should also ensure students are provided sufficient meals and nutrition to enable learning, this can be done through school feeding programs or vouchers or cash assistance to parents.
- As discussed above, USG investments in international basic education should include a focus on long-term system strengthening and technical assistance rather than short-term outputs.

INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITY

Participants discussed how in recent years, the USG has made considerable progress in addressing disability in education and related programs. A specific concern was the underdiagnosis of



neurodivergent children, such as those with spectrum disorders such as dyslexia, autism, ADHD, OCD, etc., which affects many learners, and the need for better support systems to address the learning challenges these students face. Participants noted that the USG was just beginning to ramp up its programming to support students with disabilities when most of the programs that provided this assistance were cut.

The US has robust laws like the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), which has served as a model for inclusive education globally. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a foundational US-based framework with strong potential for adaptation and application in international contexts. When curriculum and pedagogy are designed incorporating UDL principles, they have worked to improve reading and math outcomes for all students, not just those with disabilities. As such, prior to its dismantling, USAID made a commitment that every education project would have an element of universal design for learning.

The USG Basic Education Strategy also required that USG foreign assistance for basic education programs work to ensure the inclusion of all children, including children with disabilities. Furthermore, early in 2025, at the Global Disability Summit in Germany, UNICEF pledged that 10 percent of their funding (part of which comes from the USG) would be dedicated to focus on children with disabilities. While it has had a bona fide Disability Policy since 1997, the USG is a fairly recent actor in advancing inclusive education at scale, e.g., in a \$25 million inclusive education project in Uzbekistan, as well as in a \$23 million project in Bangladesh. Roundtable participants said cuts to USG foreign assistance will likely mean less focus on UDL and less support for children with disabilities. One participant said, *“Disability historically has been an area that you can go into that is non-controversial in other countries. It’s usually seen as a good cause.”* But, at present *“In many countries there are no mechanisms to assess or diagnose disabilities and no laws to require their inclusion.”*

Participants also discussed the potential of AI to enhance inclusivity and support diverse learners, citing the recently concluded USAID program called, “All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development,” which funded innovative IT and AI solutions to advance education amongst students with disabilities as well as others. They said there is a lot of untapped potential in this area.

Recommendations:

- The State Department should ensure that future USG investments in international basic education provide funds to support local governments with integrating solutions to ensure better data collection for diagnosing and tracking disabilities to improve educational outcomes and advocacy efforts. They should also enhance diagnostic structures, particularly for young children (ages 0-5), through partnerships with the health sector to identify and support students with disabilities early.



- They should also ensure such programs incorporate funding to support government creation or ramp up of hearing and visual testing as part of the start-up of the school year and to guide teachers and principals with available and appropriate mitigation strategies.
- Next, they should ensure USG basic education programs reach children early, when the brain is plastic and when delays can be overcome before they have lasting effects. This will work to support children so they can be healthy and productive citizens who contribute to the economy.
- The State Department and other agencies that implement international basic education programs should also ensure future USG programs integrate use of the Orton-Gillingham structured literacy approach, UDL, and other inclusive education models. This includes designing programs that work with local governments to include Orton-Gillingham, UDL, and other inclusive models in teaching and learning materials as well as in pre- and in-service teacher education programs.
- Finally, they should ensure such programs integrate use of the Orton-Gillingham structured literacy approach, Universal Design for Learning, and other inclusive education models into teacher training programs to better address disabilities and benefit all learners.

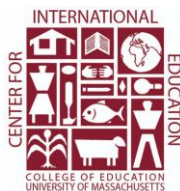
EMERGENCIES & CONFLICT

Participants talked about the critical needs of children affected by conflict, crisis, and displacement. One participant noted that 473 million children live in conflict zones and 242 million face education disruptions due to natural disasters: *"you can't get kids on a positive trajectory and away from things like being recruited into armed forces, for example, without some kind of sustained support [for education]"*. In crises, education's role is *"one of the pieces that can create stability for families quickest"*

and has potential as *"a preventative factor for unwanted migration"* and *"to prevent further recruitment of children into armed groups"*. Participants noted that there was strong evidence of the impact of education on reducing both violence amongst children and youth and their recruitment into armed groups. They also mentioned the economic benefits of educating all children, especially those in conflict and crisis zones, noting that education increases individual wealth outcomes and also contributes to the country's overall GDP.

Participants discussed how in situations of conflict, there is a need to act as quickly as possible to deescalate, and education, whether it's formal or non-formal, can become a stabilizing factor. They said that the US can move faster than other countries in providing aid, *"with the largest number of warehouses and ability to deploy individuals to respond quickly to new emergencies, in comparison to almost anyone."*

Education in conflict and crisis is more than just learning – *"it is about a holistic child development opportunity, preventing them from entry into fighting forces; healing them from the violence they*



experienced, preventing extremist ideologies and building up the social and emotional competencies to meet the new, 21st century skills required for work, business creation, adaptability and resilience under adversity.” As well, there is the moral imperative it offers the United States to serve in a leading role in shaping populations’ knowledge as key partners for peace and economic development in future. Participants again noted that educating children in conflict and crisis makes America safer, stronger and more prosperous, by: 1) reducing violence and terrorism targeted at the US and US interests, 2) winning hearts and minds, and 3) expanding demand for US products and services.

Recommendations:

- The USG should continue to invest in education in crisis and conflict zones globally to make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous. In line with other recommendations above, the USG should also ensure all future USG programs focused on education in emergencies are designed to include children with disabilities, whom evidence shows are disproportionately negatively impacted by crisis and conflict responses.
- In countries with stable or strong governments, USG agencies that implement international basic education programs should ensure Ministries of Education co-lead planning and implementation efforts for the education of displaced children so that those children can transition seamlessly into formal schools and sit for national examinations in the future.
- USG agencies that implement international basic education programs should ensure future programs focused on educating children in emergencies include efforts to accelerate remedial education classes to bridge learning gaps quickly and to help learners catch up to grade-level competencies. They should implement accelerated education programs (AEPs) that compress primary-level content into shorter cycles, enabling over-age or out-of-school youth to catch up.
- USG agencies that implement international basic education programs should ensure future programs train teachers in SEL and basic psycho-social first aid so classrooms also serve as healing environments, as evidence shows that students with better SEL outcomes also have improved reading and math scores.

EVIDENCE, MONITORING AND EVALUATION, AND KNOWLEDGE-SHARING

Participants spoke about the need for greater measurement of how US aid in education results in cost-effective outcomes and results. They noted that while the USG has invested widely in monitoring and evaluation of USG international basic education programs, they have done so in ways that are not always timely to ensure the adaptation of programs and the design of follow-on programs. They also noted that past measurement has made aggregation of final outcomes and impacts difficult, meaning that much of the reporting to Congress has focused on inputs and activities, such as amounts of money spent or numbers of children or learners reached. Some participants also said that, in line with USAID efforts, the



USG should work to measure the cost effectiveness and/or cost benefit of USG international education programs more broadly so that this information can be communicated to the American public.

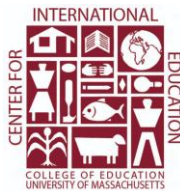
Next, the roundtable included a discussion about the importance of measuring fidelity of implementation and assumptions about the causal chain. For example, many past USG programs have worked to train teachers in new pedagogy or curriculum, but teachers have not always implemented what they have learned. Studies should work to understand why - exploring what barriers are preventing teachers from implementing new, evidence-driven approaches, e.g. cultural or personal beliefs, time, access to resources, etc.

Participants applauded the USG's strong systems to prevent fraud and ensure transparency, noting that the USG has led in this regard and also expressing concern about the vast (if not complete) cuts to USG funding focused on research and evaluation and the communication of results. They said sharing evidence and ensuring transparency is critical to learning from past mistakes, continually implementing activities with more efficiency and effectiveness to save taxpayers' money, and building and maintaining American public buy-in and trust for international basic education activities and their impact on making America safer, stronger, and more prosperous.

One participant said, *"In addition to the evidence and knowledge base, the USG commitment to generating global public goods and open access resources is stronger than other organizations. That commitment has meant that organizations can learn from and build on prior knowledge and experience and ideally, replicate success."* However, participants said this commitment appears to have ended with the recent cuts to USG foreign assistance, which they fear will hurt the efficiency and effectiveness of not just USG programs but development programs implemented by other actors globally.

Recommendations:

- The State Department and other USG agencies tasked with implementing USG foreign assistance programs should ensure that future USG international basic education programs continue to dedicate at least 3 percent of the budget to research, monitoring, and evaluation of those programs and of what works to improve access to a quality basic education in different contexts and amongst different groups, including those from marginalized backgrounds.
- The State Department and other USG agencies tasked with implementing USG foreign assistance programs should communicate broadly about the impact of international basic education programs, emphasizing the high return on investment of foreign assistance in education, which benefits both recipient countries and the US by enhancing global and US stability and economic prosperity. Education investments are seen as making America safer, stronger, and more prosperous.
- The State Department and other USG agencies tasked with implementing USG foreign assistance programs for basic education should also carefully document the unintended benefits and outcomes of such programs, including, for example, the cost of excluding marginalized groups in such programming.



- USG agencies that implement international basic education programs should ensure future programs are designed based on evidence about cost effectiveness and cost benefit and also that they continue to gather evidence of such, to prioritize efficiency and value for money.
- Such agencies should also ensure international basic education programs include studies of the fidelity of implementation and of gaps in that fidelity and the assumptions associated with it.

MECHANISMS OF PROVIDING ASSISTANCE

Much of USG funding has been provided for technical assistance, primarily through NGOs and for-profit partners. American know-how has been extensively applied in advising governments and local schools and administrators in dozens of countries. Yet, *“Often limitations in cross-sectoral work was due to the complexities of USAID’s contracts and funding streams.”* Further, *“funding has also impacted the USG’s ability to be flexible and adaptive in programming”*. Participants said that in revising the future of this work, it would be great to include more flexible funding/contracts for cross-sectoral work and improved effectiveness of the work in general. They noted that, despite the USG’s best efforts, past funding mechanisms often prioritized completion of activities or generation of inputs and outputs (e.g. books supplied and students reached) rather than outcomes (improved access to a quality education and improved learning). This is partly because mechanisms were not designed to allow room for partners to adapt programming based on learning.

Next, participants said that, in the past, most mechanisms also restricted implementation timelines to five years, which is not a sufficient amount of time to make major shifts in education systems. They said that these timelines sometimes meant turnover in partners and staff and also made it difficult to require major shifts in outcomes, which often take several years to solidify and then measure.

Recommendations:

- In designing future USG international education programs, the USG should expand multi-year funding to allow for longer contracts and awards (potentially 10-year programs) while requiring achievement of concrete milestones to ensure those education activities are on track to achieve outcomes. Participants said this would ensure sustained support for children in low-income and crisis settings, focusing on meaningful learning outcomes rather than just enrollment numbers.
- The USG should also establish truth-based, outcomes-driven funding approaches that empower local partners to set their own targets and take the lead in implementation, with funding linked to the outcome they propose.
- The USG should consider combining grants and contracts offered to contractors to build local government and organization capacity with concessional loans offered either through the USG directly or through partnering and co-creating programs with the World Bank and other development banks that already provide such loans (partly through USG contributions to these organizations). Participants said that beneficiary countries will have more ownership when they receive a loan and/or, if and as relevant and appropriate, beneficiaries are expected to contribute in-service and/or in-kind.



TECHNOLOGY

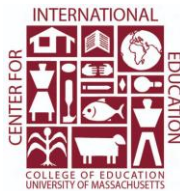
Looking forward, participants generally felt that there was enormous untapped potential for applying emerging technologies toward both greater access to education in the poorest countries and also in overcoming barriers to access faced by disabled people. Several participants spoke about better coordination with Silicon Valley private donors.

AI is one such technology that should complement rather than replace traditional educational systems. The discussion emphasized using AI to add value, such as through personalized learning or teacher support tools, rather than fully automating education. As one example: participants described the benefit of the USG's investment in AI bots in Nigeria that served as tools for teachers to access training content by calling or writing to ask questions. They said these bots enhanced teacher capacity without replacing classroom sessions. Participants also highlighted AI's translation and representation capabilities as tools to create culturally appropriate educational content, making education more accessible and relevant globally. For example, one participant said, *"For NGOs' ongoing work in communities, Artificial Intelligence will help us for content creation, for content curation, for teachers, and for data."*

Participants also emphasized that AI, like other technologies, is prone to introducing inequalities, *"so we have to plan for overcoming that."*

Recommendations:

- The USG should continue to invest in programs that develop and distribute low-cost or open-source educational materials to support teachers and parents. They should also develop low-tech, community-based programs tailored to specific contexts, such as regions with limited access to cell phones or Wi-Fi, to ensure accessibility and relevance. They should also ensure access to electricity is considered and can be supported with USG education funding to ensure the sustainability of such programs and resources.
- They should also ensure any such programs that invest in AI, ensure AI applications prioritize privacy and consent, especially in contexts where children cannot consent to data use.
- Next, similar to a recommendation highlighted earlier, they should ensure any IT or AI resources developed or scaled with USG funds integrate use of specific instructional methods that allow all students to learn, such as the Orton-Gillingham approach and UDL.
- The USG should continue to explore the use of AI to expand and improve education delivery at scale while maintaining cultural sensitivity.
- They should also engage American companies in the technology sector to create opportunities for innovation in education and to crowd in additional development funding while also creating markets for American companies.
- Finally, the USG should avoid requiring burdensome reporting by local partners, which tends to have the unintended consequence of reducing innovation and responsiveness.



NEXT STEPS

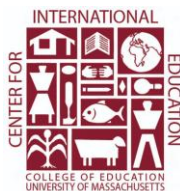
The roundtable co-sponsors and facilitators are planning a second roundtable to be conducted with officials from Ministries of Education, former local USG staff, and other local organizations that have engaged with USG foreign assistance. Once that roundtable is complete, the co-sponsors and facilitators will update this paper to ensure it reflects the opinions of this expanded group of stakeholders.

In addition to the co-sponsors' next steps, participants also recommended that Congress, the State Department, and other USG agencies that implement foreign assistance for basic education should fulfill the requirements of the READ Act and not cut USG funding for international basic education account further, but rather increase funding to 2024 levels or at least to what is proposed in the FY26 budget. The State Department should ensure that future international basic education programs communicate their effects on national security and the US economy. They should also develop a renewed Theory of Change about aid for basic education, one that focuses on investing in capacity building for local governments and organizations above all else. Finally, they should build new programs based on evidence from programs that have closely coordinated with local governments (e.g., those in Uzbekistan, Jordan, Sierra Leone), all of which have explicitly requested US technical support for inclusive or crisis-responsive education in the future.



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Mention of institutions below is solely to help identification of participants. Participant comments reflect only their own personal perspectives and do not represent those of their institutions. All participants joined the roundtable on their own time through use of their own resources.

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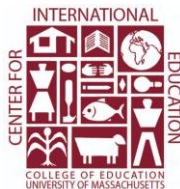
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Center for International Education, College of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst engages in implementation and research activities in international development of educational institutions and systems-especially in conflict or crisis contexts. CIE works to provide professional development and capacity building, education policy and leadership, nonformal and popular adult education, higher education, and internationalizing US education. See: <https://www.umass.edu/cie/>



The **Basic Education Coalition** (BEC) is a Washington, D.C.-based alliance of US organizations and academic institutions advocating for global access to quality basic education as a cornerstone of international development. The Basic Education Coalition (BEC) works to advance the global goal of "Education for All," initially set at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. Established in 2001, BEC unites over 30 member organizations-including NGOs, humanitarian groups, and research institutions-to leverage collective expertise in promoting education policies and programs that advance economic stability, health, gender equality, and democratic values worldwide. By mobilizing US funding and technical assistance, BEC-backed programs aim to improve primary and secondary education completion rates, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Their work underscores education's role in breaking cycles of poverty and countering external influences from geopolitical adversaries. Members and their links at: <https://www.basiced.org/who-we-are>



The **Global Campaign for Education-US** (GCE-US) is a Washington, DC-based coalition founded in 2003 to advance universal access to quality education as a fundamental human right. With over 40 member organizations, it mobilizes political will to address systemic barriers to education, particularly for marginalized groups. It is part of the broader Global Campaign for Education, based in Johannesburg, South Africa, with members in over 100 countries. Key initiatives include advocating for increased education funding, supporting inclusive education for children with disabilities, and organizing events like the Global Action Week for Education. Its 2025 webinar "Inclusive Education: Ensuring the Right to Education for All" explored the role of inclusive education in ensuring meaningful access to quality education for all, with a focus on AI and education for learners with different abilities. GCE coordinates annual campaigns with international partners to spotlight issues like teacher support and early childhood education. See: <https://www.gce-us.org/>



George Washington University, in downtown Washington, D.C. includes the Elliot School of International Affairs, and schools of anthropology, geography and public. GW has served as a convener of these Roundtables and is strategically located near the US federal offices involved in aid, as well as to the World Bank and many NGO offices. See: <https://global.gwu.edu/study>

World Hunger Education Service (WHES) was founded 50 years ago as a non-profit in Washington, DC to bring together policy makers and experts to promote education about effective American development assistance. It educates the public about aspects of hunger, basic education, girls' education and poverty. WHES publishes "*Hunger Notes*"; its online flagship news and feature journal with news & interviews, at: www.WorldHunger.org

