

NATION BUILDING BEGINS WITH EDUCATION

BY RICHARD NAVARRO



Richard Navarro currently serves as chief of education for UNICEF in Afghanistan, where he is based in Kabul and travels widely across the country. Dr. Navarro has worked on education policy issues in the United States, Mexico, and Sri Lanka for the past 20 years. He recently chaired a California commission on integrating technology into K–12 education. He is on leave from his position as dean of the College of Education and Integrative Studies at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

As happened to many Americans, September 11 changed my perspective on the world—in my case, quite literally. Two years ago, I was preparing for another year as a college dean in California. Today, I find myself 8,000 miles from home and family, directing efforts to help the people of Afghanistan rebuild their nation’s war-ravaged public education system.

My parents, immigrants from Mexico, taught me that education offers opportunities for personal achievement, as well as the responsibility to ensure that others are given the same chance. In Afghanistan, educational opportunities—along with 90 percent of the school buildings—have been shattered by decades of violent conflict.

Two-thirds of the nation’s 77,000 public school teachers have less than a twelfth-grade education. Only one-quarter graduated from a teacher-training institute. Teacher salaries average \$36 per month, covering less than a third of the estimated cost of living. Many schools lack facilities; children attend “schools” in which they sit around blackboards propped up in culverts, even in relatively prosperous areas. And only 30 percent of the students attending public school are girls.

Nonetheless, my visits to schools found Afghans deeply committed to rebuilding their country through education. Children are excited to be in school, even if class is held in the shade of a tree. Though many

teachers have not been paid for months, their dedication remains undiminished. These students and teachers are the hope of Afghanistan’s future, and they affirm my belief that public education is an essential catalyst for fueling economic growth and social change in that country.

Between 1952 and 1977, USAID provided Teachers College, Columbia University, with funding to help the Afghanistan government build a national network of primary and secondary schools and a higher-education system to support them. Now, the same players and UNICEF are working to help the new transitional government of Afghanistan create the National Academy of Education in Kabul, which will be the focal point for rebuilding the nation’s teaching force and education system.

Afghanistan’s citizens will be the most important agents in revitalizing their nation’s education system but, to serve its 5.8 million students, Afghans must have the sustained and coordinated assistance of other nations. Yet, of the \$4.5 billion that world leaders pledged to Afghanistan for its education system, only one-quarter has been received—a situation that threatens to derail efforts to reach Afghanistan’s politically alienated regions by providing them with a strong public school infrastructure.

The events of September 11 should serve to remind all of us just how essential education is to nurturing peace, prosperity, and democracy. I hope the United States and its allies will remember the lessons of their own development and will commit to rebuilding Afghanistan through public education. If we fail, hope will turn to despair, and Afghanistan could become an even more dangerous place in the future than it has been in the past. ■