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PRESS RELEASE

UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009: Ideology Triumphs over Children's Future

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The 2009 Education for All Global Monitoring Report was launched recently by UNESCO in Geneva. The report is titled *Overcoming Inequality: Why Governance Matters*. As it turns out, 'governance' in the title actually means 'government.' It eschews all private alternatives and argues that our only salvation is the state.

The UNESCO report questions the very idea of the role of the private sector in education.

In the section "Choice, competition and voice: school governance reform and EFA" (pp. 152-171 in Chapter 3 of the report), the authors take a clear stand against choice as well as competition. The report states that "the bottom line, for governments in countries where public-sector basic education is failing the poor, is to fix the system first and consider options for competition between providers second" (p.239).

In almost all countries today, the state assumes the ultimate responsibility for school systems. Governments set policy, curriculum and standards and are responsible for assessment and regulation. The report rightly states that "within this framework, however, many approaches are possible" (p. 159). Education service delivery can be publicly funded and publicly provided, publicly funded and privately provided, privately funded and publicly provided, and privately funded and privately provided. These are four different approaches and opinions on which are the most suitable options to provide education to all in a country differ widely. However the report advocates a monolithic approach: all education must be publicly funded and publicly provided!

Today, choice and competition are at the centre of public debate in both developed and developing countries. Across the world, the larger public is unhappy with the performance of state schools, in US as well as in Uganda. Large investments and efforts are undertaken to improve schools run by governments. Being frustrated with the pace of improvement, people have turned to various forms of public-private partnerships (PPPs). School vouchers, conditional cash transfers, charter schools, contracting out management of government schools are some of the examples of PPPs.

Supporters of vouchers and other measures which increase access to private schooling often claim that competition from privately operated schools will improve student achievement and lower costs in public schools. By breaking the

monopoly on the education of the poor, these efforts could also put genuine pressure on government schools to improve.

The report emphasizes that evidence is not clear cut. While it is true that different studies have given very different results, the report's claim that "evidence from PISA data does not point to strong effects of school competition on learning outcomes" is challenged by a different study. In "*School Choice International*" released in October

2008 by *Education Next*, Martin West and Ludger Woessmann, explore historical reasons for different extent of private schooling in countries and the effects of competition on student achievements and public educational expenditures. They used data from 21 European countries, the United States, Australia, Canada, Mexico, Turkey, New Zealand, Korea and Japan.

The findings of this large scale, international study speak quite clearly: Competition from private schools improves student achievement, for public school students as well as private school students. A 10-percentage-point increase in the share of national student enrollment in private schools generates an improvement in PISA math scores of 9.1 percent of a standard deviation and an improvement of about 5.5 percent of a standard deviation in both science and reading (West and Woessmann 2008, pp. 60-61). Interestingly, competition produces these benefits while decreasing expenditures on education, as measured by cumulative educational spending per pupil. A 10-percentage-point increase in the private school share today leads to a \$3,209 reduction in cumulative spending per student, or 5.6 percent of the average OECD spending level of \$56,947.

The GMR 2009 states that evidence of successful public-private partnership schemes from developed countries (eg. Sweden) cannot be used to predict positive outcomes of the same schemes in developing countries since countries differ too much. However, later in the report the authors go against their own logic and state that evidence of unsuccessful public-private partnership schemes from developed countries (eg. the US and England) indicates that such schemes would also not work in developing countries. This undermines the credibility of the authors and shows a clear bias.

The report describes that low-fee private schools are rapidly emerging in developing countries. The report asks "to what extent have [low-fee private schools] raised standards and enhanced equity?" (p.31). The report's authors think that they have not. However, comparative studies indicate that learning levels are higher in low-fee private schools than in government schools. James Tooley's two-year in-depth study in India, Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya suggest that fears that most low-fee private schools are of the lowest quality are unwarranted. In Hyderabad, for example, mean scores in mathematics were about 22 percentage points and 23 percentage points higher in private unrecognized and recognized schools, respectively, than in government schools. The advantage was even more pronounced for English (James Tooley, *Private Education is Good for the Poor: A Study of Private Schools Serving the Poor in Low-Income Countries*, 2005). The well reputed *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2007* finds that students from low-fee private schools in rural India perform better than students in government schools. Take the *percentage of children in standard 1 who can read letters or more*: 60% in government schools against 80% in private schools;

the *percentage of children in standard 3 who can do subtraction or more*: 40% in government schools against 52% in private schools; and the *percentage of children in standard 5 who can read level 2 text*: 58% in Government schools against 69% in private schools.

The report rightly states that “government spending patterns around the world are often highly inequitable” (p. 142). Quoting a study of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Pacific, the Middle East and North Africa, the report highlights “that total expenditure on education was not pro-poor in any region. In a recent study, the Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, has found that allocation of funds by the Government of Delhi to the schools it runs and operates seems rather arbitrary and inequitable, ranging from Rs 1,403 per child per year to Rs 31,756 per child per year. There is a great deal of inequity in the funding of government schools by governments themselves. It should be a matter of great urgency to bring equity in the funding of state schools through some form of a per child formula.

The authors actually ask “why are governments not using their capabilities to deliver equitable and affordable public education?” (p. 168). The report states that “the bottom line, for governments in countries where public-sector basic education is failing the poor, is to fix the system first and consider options for competition between providers second” (p.239). However, in most countries the Herculean efforts “to fix the system” have not delivered desirable results. Instead of waiting for the state education system to change, it is now time for fresh thinking and to approach the problem with new ideas. How many generations must be sacrificed at the alter of the dogma of state monopoly on education? Given these ideological blinders, it is not surprising that Education for All is still a distant dream. Surely the new ideas are unlikely to solve all problems of education but we owe to ourselves and particularly to the next generation that we don’t closet our minds. Instead of advancing novel ideas to address our education problems, the UNESCO report sadly offers ideology.

EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009 available at:
<http://www.unesco.org/en/education/efareport/>

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