



March 17, 2026

From: John Richards, Stephen Heyneman
To: Overseas Assistance Observers
Re: RE: CANADA'S "WHOLE SCHOOL" CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION HAS BEEN SURPRISINGLY EFFECTIVE

In August 2024, the "students' revolt" in Dhaka toppled Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh prime minister since 2008. The student leaders chose Muhammad Yunus, winner of the 2006 Nobel peace prize, as interim prime minister.

And last month, after a fair election, Tariq Rahman, leader of the Bangladesh National Party, won a two thirds majority, and is now prime minister. He has acknowledged weak quality of government provision of public education and health services when his party was in power prior to 2008 – and promises to govern better.

His government is just getting started. The reforms needed in Bangladeshi primary education are many and difficult.

Canada can contribute, and one contribution is to support reputable NGOs managing "whole school" projects; NGO-led initiatives independent of government.

The NGO manages all crucial dimensions – from student selection, curriculum, teacher hiring and training, and assessment of learning. Typically, these projects enrol children from very low-income families and enable them to complete the primary school cycle (grades 1 – 5). These, along with low-cost private schools, routinely out-perform government schools.

Global Affairs Canada (GAC) partners with many organizations, such as [Global Partnership for Education \(GPE\)](#). For the five fiscal years, 2022-26, GAC provided \$265 million to GPE. That includes \$45 million over five years for the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), initially led by Sir Fazle Abed. It has grown since 1971, and now undertakes numerous education and health projects, most in Bangladesh but also in 10 other countries. Qatar's Educate-a-child financed half the large "whole school" project we evaluated. Canada and several high-income countries financed the other half.

Canada contributes to numerous education projects for children in developing countries. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, are most in need of better economic productivity, which requires higher literacy rates. (As defined by the World Bank's "learning poverty" rate in these continents, the majority of young teenagers are unable to read.) Over the last five years, GAC has supported worthy projects in 11 categories, ranging from women's entrepreneurship training, to awareness of child marriage.

However, only one category refers to learning foundation skills (reading and arithmetic). A current theme in Ottawa is to improve economic productivity. Surely, GAC should contribute regularly to "whole school" projects, which usually teach basic reading and arithmetic better than government schools. Among online GAC categories only one of the 11 categories refers directly to ability of children to read and do arithmetic by financing some of the "whole school" project: "[GAC] helped 83,000 out-of-school children aged 7 to 14 years, from Grade 1 to 4, to transition back into appropriate grades in government primary schools."

We are two of the three evaluators of this "whole school" project who conducted a quantitative and qualitative randomized assessment of the BRAC-managed "whole school" project in Bangladesh that educated 83,000 out-of-school children.

An unexpected finding was that two thirds of children in the project had not dropped out of a government school in an early grade; they simply never enrolled in a government school. In our qualitative survey, children and parents found the BRAC school far more preferable to a government school. Nearly all students in the BRAC-managed project completed the primary cycle to grade 5 (terminal grade in South Asia). Probably, and most continued to secondary level schooling.

In our randomized at-home assessment, we assessed students' ability to read and do basic arithmetic among students in the BRAC-managed project in Grades 4 and 5. We used the well-known Indian protocol (ASER) undertaken for large at-home surveys. The BRAC student ability to read was somewhat better than the national Indian ASER average; the ability to answer arithmetic problems was much superior to the national Indian average. There is no Bangladeshi equivalent to ASER at-home surveys. (India and Bangladesh run similar curriculum-based assessments of reading and arithmetic. In government schools, the results are well below the BRAC project.)

The fourth education Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4), aims to realize the goals by 2030. SDG4 focuses on primary education for quality and gender equity. Unfortunately, in South Asia, the level of foundation skills has stagnated for the last decade.

In frustration, Jim Yong Kim, president of the World Bank in 2010s, wrote: "Schooling without learning is a terrible waste of precious resources and of human potential."

The lesson provided by Mr. Kim is two-fold: There are large numbers of children in low-income countries who are not served well by regular government schools. Government policy and budgets should support collaboration with effective NGOs. Secondly, GAC and similar development agencies in high-income countries should direct more assistance to these creative projects, not simply transfer money to government school budgets.

John Richards and Stephen Heyneman are two of three evaluators of a large whole school project in Bangladesh. They are, respectively, emeritus economic professors at Simon Fraser University and Vanderbilt University.

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