In the world’s more developed countries, school attendance is compulsory and public schools provide a free education for children and adolescents. This is not the case in less developed countries, where there are still many children out of school. In 2012, nearly 58 million primary school age children and 63 million adolescents were out of school, failing to receive a basic education.

For many children who do attend school, the quality of education is poor. As of 2011, 250 million children – 1 in 4 young people living in lower and middle income countries – were unable to read a single sentence. Tens of millions of children who start school end up dropping out due to the poor quality of the instruction and lack of books and school supplies. A recent study found that over half the sixth grade students in Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia attend classrooms that do not have a single book.

**Why are so many young people not in school?**

The largest barriers to school enrollment are poverty, discrimination, disability and geographic location. Children and adolescents from the poorest households are three times more likely to be out of school than children from the richest households. In many countries, school is not free. Parents must pay for tuition, books, supplies and uniforms. Considering that a third of the world’s people live on less than $2 per day, school is often unaffordable for many families.

Some of the world’s most vulnerable children, including children living in areas of conflict and children with disabilities, remain excluded from education systems in many places. Over half of children out of school live in areas affected by conflict; many of them have been displaced from their homes.

**Gender inequality in education**

While the gender gap is narrowing worldwide, the majority of children and adolescents out of school are still girls. Even in the richest households, girls are more likely to be denied an education than boys. In some cultures, it is common for girls to leave school early to help care for younger siblings or to be married off at a young age. In some traditional societies, girls trying to attend school are threatened with violence by extremists, such as the 270 school girls abducted in Nigeria by a terrorist group in 2014 or the now-famous activist, Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban in Pakistan in 2012.

**Benefits of universal education**

Education is a human right and a strong catalyst for social progress. According to UNICEF, getting every child in school and learning is essential to reducing global poverty, improving health, fostering peace, bolstering democracy, improving environmental sustainability and increasing gender equality. Without an increase in educational attainment among the world’s youth, the largest generation of young people in human history will be exposed to unemployment, poor health, civil unrest and increased vulnerability.
Education is not only a fundamental human right, but the most effective way to alleviate poverty. Each dollar spent on education yields US$10 to US$15 in economic growth over a child’s lifetime. If all students in low-income countries left school with basic reading skills, 171 million people could be lifted out of poverty – the equivalent of a 12 percent drop in world poverty. In fact, an individual’s earnings increase ten percent on average for each year of school he or she completes. The effect of education is stronger for girls, with wages rising 20 percent for every year beyond fourth grade that a girl is in school.

Fertility rates tend to be highest in the world’s least developed countries. Poverty, in turn, increases the likelihood of having many children, trapping families and countries in a vicious cycle. One of the most effective ways to lower population growth and reduce poverty is to provide adequate education for both boys and girls. Countries in which more children are enrolled in school – even at the primary level – tend to have much lower fertility rates. Women who are empowered through education tend to have fewer children and have them later. If, and when, they do become mothers, they tend to be healthier and raise healthier children, who then stay in school longer. They earn more money with which to support their families, and contribute more to their communities’ economic growth. Girls who reach secondary school are especially likely to have fewer children.

What’s being done?

In 2000, the United Nations launched their Millenium Development Goals to meet the needs of the world’s poorest people. One of the eight goals is to “achieve universal primary education” by 2015 (MDG 2). The number of out-of school children dropped from 102 million to 57 million from 2000 to 2011. Since then, progress in reducing this number further has stalled as international aid to basic education in 2011 fell for the first time since 2002. UNESCO estimates that $16 billion per year in additional international assistance is required to reach Education for All (EFA). This aid is needed to fund investments in infrastructure, teacher training, curriculum development and classroom materials.

In 2013, Rep. Nita Lowey (D-NY), introduced the Education for All Act in the U.S. Congress to expand school access globally and to close the gender gap in education. The legislation would address strategies to reaching the world’s most disadvantaged children.

In September 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon launched the Global Education First Initiative. As part of the initiative, young people from 45 countries had an opportunity to weigh in on a youth resolution, “The Education We Want,” which calls for universal education that prepares young people for life and the workforce, and that aims to reduce extremism, encourage political participation and promote intercultural learning and respect.

Sources

Basic Education Coalition, www.basiced.org
Campaign for Female Education (Camfed), www.camfed.org

©2014 Population Connection