

Remarks

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United Nations Literacy Decree (UNLD) Mid-Decade Review
Highlighting the Global Literacy Challenge at the UN

“The Interface between Literacy and Development”
Panel Discussion

October 7, 2008

1:00 – 2:45 p.m.

United Nations Delegate Dining Room 5-8

United Nations Headquarters

First Avenue at 46th Street

New York, NY

Thank you, Mark.

I appreciate your kind introduction. But more importantly, I thank you for your dedicated leadership in global literacy and education initiatives for UNESCO, which are improving lives in communities around the world. Verizon has been working the issue of literacy and education in the USA for a long time. Now we have the opportunity to extend our reach and impact globally through the great work of UNESCO and our emerging partnership.

It is a distinct honor for me to be part of this event with our esteemed First Lady Laura Bush, and with the distinguished Mr. Byll-Cataria and Ms. Ochir, who are so deeply dedicated to meeting the literacy challenge.

I am excited to have the opportunity to join in dialogue with the members of this panel, and with all the dedicated leaders in this room, about the integral role of literacy in economic and social development.

I am here representing Verizon Communications, and serve as the head of the Verizon Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the corporation.

Patrick Gaston , President, Verizon Foundation
UNESCO Panel: Highlighting the Global Literacy Challenge at the UN
10.07.08

I believe I have the best job in the world – I am literally paid to think about the issues and find ways for the corporation to contribute to the greater good.

I would like to give you some perspective on the influence my own life and experiences have had on how I see the issue of literacy.

I was born in Haiti. And, like so many countries in our world, Haiti is far behind the starting line in terms of education and literacy...and often, Haiti never knows when the race has begun, much less when the finish line is reached.

When I was quite young, my parents immigrated to the U.S., in order to give me and my sisters a better chance in life. While we benefited greatly from our parents' decision, I have to say that it was not easy...for them or for us.

While my sisters and I spoke only French and Creole, we were able to acquire English within six months of being in the U.S. However, I didn't realize the difficulties my parents faced until I was much older.

At the core of the difficulties was that they could not read or write English. They were not literate, and that severely limited their opportunities and options in America.

Through these experiences...and through our work at the Verizon Foundation...I know the value of basic literacy. I know that it opens the door to economic opportunity. I know it makes educational attainment possible. And I know that the definition of basic literacy has become more complex, and represents a host of skills that are fundamental for people to live, learn and work in the 21st Century.

We all know it's true. "Basic literacy" – as in learning to read and write – is not sufficient in today's world. 21st Century literacy has a new definition.

At Verizon, this new definition has a profound impact on our business. It influences our job applications for the kind of technically sophisticated worker we need to support the most extensive broadband network in the world. And it governs our product development and service array, which is focused on serving the needs of sophisticated customers who are technologically literate.

So that brings me to today's discussion...about the interface of literacy and economic and social development. This interface is not only obvious to those of us in the broadband industry...or those of us in corporate philanthropy. It is obvious to anyone who has the ability to observe our world and recognize that literacy is the basis for social and economic development.

But if literacy is the key, what are the factors that can increase literacy achievement and embed the appreciation of education and learning in a culture that yearns for stability and prosperity?

UNESCO and so many of you have been working on this issue for a long time. I do not profess to have the answers to issues that have confounded so many of us, but there is progress. I have the experience of seeing three things that make a real difference in driving literacy achievement and, in turn, the individual and social benefits derived from a literate society.

The first driver is the power of public/private partnership. Private enterprise approaches issues from an entrepreneurial perspective, and often breathes that energy in a very impactful way.

One example of a successful public/private partnership is Verizon's work with Georgetown University. We partnered with Georgetown to support their work with UNESCO in building and sustaining a Web-based network of universities engaged in literacy initiatives – a network called The Global Learning Portal. This resource for educators offers online

professional development courses, a library, translation services, software and materials for literacy instruction published in English, Arabic, Portuguese, Spanish and French.

There are many other examples, because the Verizon Foundation's work is largely accomplished through public/private partnerships with nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations, academic institutions and governmental entities.

We work with our partners to develop and implement programs to further literacy and improve education...toward a mutual goal of a trained workforce, which then can contribute to a prospering economy.

I believe that the area of public/private partnership has great potential to expand throughout the developing world as a force to support literacy attainment that, in turn, produces social advancements and economic vitality.

The second driver for literacy achievement...and for social and economic development...lies within each of us. It is the power of the individual to make a difference in society. By that I mean the spirit of volunteerism.

Every person has it – the power to give the gifts of time and talent to help others. It is a way of life in communities and corporations across our country. It certainly is for us at Verizon, and as a global corporation, we carry this banner with us around the world.

Verizon employees have been volunteering to improve literacy for many years...working in community-based programs and schools. Today, our volunteers are active in thousands of towns in the U.S.....and, in India, Argentina, the U.K., Hong Kong and Brazil.

Let me give you an example.

Verizon employees in Chennai, India work with students at the Olcott School. Our volunteers have set up a computer lab for the students, and they work in the lab to teach computer

skills to help increase students' literacy skills. This is a great program because it not only taps into our employees' volunteer spirit, it also leverages their core competencies in technology as they help these students acquire 21st Century skills.

We've seen it throughout our company and in every community: Volunteers can be and are a powerful force for good – and they can mean the difference between gaining a foothold on the future....or not. I believe that people's capacity for volunteerism is a key enabler in solving world problems.

The third driver of literacy and social and economic development is at the heart of Verizon's business and our core competencies, and that is technology.

Verizon knows the value of technology for literacy and learning. We know that technology can make learning tools and resources available anywhere there is a connection...whether on a wireline or wireless network.

In fact, we are doing that every day through Verizon Thinkfinity.org – a Web site that provides free lessons and learning resources that align with our national educational standards and with research-based instructional approaches.

We are also doing this through our partnership with Georgetown University and ProLiteracy. The partnership has produced an innovative online course called "Literacy for Social Change," which is designed for broad use in teacher training in universities and non government organizations.

This course incorporates a new, research-based instructional approach to adult literacy – and uses literacy as the lever to create sustainable community change in healthcare, housing, economic self sufficiency and the environment.

This two-part course will be featured on the Global Learning Portal, and is a unique resource for teaching literacy acquisition as a key to social and economic development.

Today, around the world, technology is the tool we all need to know how to use. It is also where we find content for learning...the source we turn to for information. And it is the distribution system that gives us access to learning, crossing all boundaries and reaching into every community, every school and every home where there is wireline or wireless connectivity.

I believe these three key enablers can help drive literacy in the 21st Century:

1. Collaborating for common goals through public/private partnerships;
2. Using the power of volunteers; and
3. Leveraging technology so that people can find information, know it, understand it...and use it to build more prosperous lives and communities.

It is not an easy task. It is not simple, nor the job of just one of us. It is the job of all of us. And Verizon stands with you,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate with you in this important forum and discussion.