

American Teachers Unions Oppose Innovative Schools—in Africa

Bridge Academies show promising results in Kenya and Uganda, but unions see them only as a threat.



Shannon May from Bridge International Academies with pupils in Monrovia, Liberia, May 25, 2016. *PHOTO: ZOOM DOSSO/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES*

By
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No longer content to oppose educational innovation at home, the unions representing America's teachers have gone abroad in search of monsters to slay.

For nearly a decade, Bridge International Academies has run a chain of successful private schools in the slums of Kenya and Uganda. A for-profit company, Bridge has shown that it's possible to provide high-quality, low-cost primary education to poor children in the developing world. Naturally, the teachers unions are outraged.

“Bridge’s for-profit educational model is robbing students of a good education and depriving them of their natural curiosity to imagine and learn,” said National Education Association president Lily Eskelsen García in October. “This is morally wrong, and professionally reprehensible.”

According to Unesco, the literacy rate among second- and third-graders in Kenya is 32%; in Uganda it's 27%. The teachers unions blame poverty. Only students who are free from want, they say, can be free to learn.

An alternative explanation is that poor-performing schools in Africa—and India, where Bridge expanded in 2017—are simply not geared for learning. In parts of the developing world, a rigid curriculum leaves many students hopelessly behind. No real attempts are made to monitor school performance. Teachers often lack appropriate skills and frequently fail even to show up to work.

In 2013 the World Bank determined that teachers in Kenya’s government schools were absent 47% of the time, teaching an average of only two hours, 19 minutes a day. A government audit showed that 80% of the primary-school teachers certified by Uganda last year could not themselves reliably perform at the primary-school level in reading and mathematics.

African and Indian parents are no different from American parents. They know that poor-performing government schools are letting their children down. Even the desperately poor in slums and rural areas are willing to pay for a better option.

Bridge is a Silicon Valley-style startup. Its founders hope to revolutionize education, taking inspiration from the way Tesla and Uber disrupted their industries. With more than \$100 million in support from Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, the World Bank’s International Finance Corp. and Learn Capital, Bridge has developed a new model of private education.

Bridge school teachers are provided with lesson plans and teaching scripts. They work eight-hour days. Their attendance is monitored; absences are rare. Student-performance data are collected, analyzed and used to improve outcomes.

In Kenya, progress has been notable. After two years in Bridge schools, 59% of students pass the national primary school exam. That's 15 percentage points higher than the estimated public-school pass-rate. In 56 communities from 23 rural and urban counties, Bridge had a 100% pass rate among pupils who attended their schools for at least two years.

These unprecedented gains led World Bank president Jim Yong Kim in 2015 to single out Bridge for helping lift students in the developing world into the modern age. His words of praise enraged Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. "The World Bank's promotion of the fee-charging, for-profit Bridge International Academies in Kenya and Uganda is not an appropriate role for the institution," she said.

In late 2016, Education International, a global consortium of teachers unions, issued detailed reports attacking Bridge's work in Kenya and Uganda. While never mentioning the improvement in student learning, the reports maligned Bridge's use of teaching scripts, claiming that they hindered teacher flexibility and creativity. Not surprisingly, a main concern was that teacher salaries are lower at Bridge schools than they are at government schools. But it seems educational innovation anywhere is a threat to union control everywhere.

Mr. Hanushek is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a special adviser to Learn Capital, which supports the expansion of Bridge International Academies.