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Multi-grade Teaching: One Step Toward Improved Access to Quality Education in Benin



A multi-grade classroom in Benin. Pupils of each grade face a different blackboard. Photo by World Education

“I was really surprised when the School Mothers' Association handed me the list of children applying for admission to first grade,” the principal of Toumboutou Primary School in northern Benin said emphatically. “The list was very long! Last year, in 2009, I had to go from house-to-house to find a few children to enroll in our first grade class. “This year, they want to enroll lots of children and we aren't even supposed to start a first grade class!”

“Without a place to learn and teach from, little progress can be made raising children’s enrollment rates. Having classrooms where qualified teachers cover two or more grades at a time offers a possible solution.”

In northern Benin, for lack of students, teachers, and buildings to teach all six grades of primary school every year, so-called “bi-annual” schools are common. This means the school would have only grades one, three and five one year and then only the other three grades the next year. However, the mothers association of Toumboutou is lucky. Their school principal wants to help and let the new children enroll in first grade. At other schools, principals refused to open first grade every year as they don't have space or teachers.

The bi-annual strategy hurts enrollment, already low in northern Benin. For example, only 31 percent of children in the school district of Karimama, and 41 percent in Malanville are enrolled in school, compared to the 88 percent national enrollment average. Girls' enrollment is much lower.

Since April 2008, World Education, with USAID funding, has been working in over 450 primary schools in five northern school districts to raise primary school enrollment rates, especially for girls, which is significantly lower than national averages. The chief strategy is to mobilize women's efforts through School Mothers' Associations. In Benin, cultural norms prevent women from openly expressing their ideas in front of men. However, through the Mothers' Associations, women are able to speak up and act as a group, and to influence and improve the management of local primary schools. School Mothers' Associations complement and balance the male-dominated Parents' and Teachers Associations (PTA).

Without a place to learn and teach from, little progress can be made raising children's enrollment rates. Having classrooms where qualified teachers cover two or more grades at a time offers a possible solution. However, the lack of qualified teachers and inadequate school classrooms are problems beyond the reach of School Mothers Associations, no matter how essential their contribution is.

These multi-grade schools are common in developed countries such as the United States, Canada, and France. They are also seen in other African countries, such as Guinea, Senegal, and Mali, as well as many Asian and Latin American countries. With USAID support, Benin's Ministry of Primary Education's Institute of Teacher Training and Education Research (INFRE) and World Education, began experimenting with multi-grade classrooms in 2009 in selected "education-deficit" areas.

Results are promising. Karimama, for example, shows a 52 percent increase in first grade enrollment, and 38 percent are girls. This means that more than 60 percent of girls started school in 2009 as opposed to only 26 percent the previous year. The multi-grade classes will allow these students to have qualified teachers all the way through to 6th grade. Similar good results are also coming in from the other four school districts in the multi-grade classroom experiment. A very satisfied Minister of Primary Education sent a letter to World Education for its multi-grade classroom collaboration with the government and its success in improving access to quality primary school for Benin's children. Successful multi-grade teaching requires

specialized training, teaching materials, and close follow-up of teachers. All of which entail the long-term support and commitment of the Benin government. Early indications are that it is doing its part to ensure all of Benin's children can go to primary school every year. □

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