



FIRST PERSON Replacing Child Labor With Homework

Scholarship program gives girls and boys a better chance to succeed



Photo: US Embassy Meg Riggs

These young girls in Monrovia, Liberia received scholarships from USAID and the US Ambassador to Liberia.

“I don’t have to get up in the dark and sell coal [before school] anymore,” said 15-year-old Beatrice Roberts.

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Sixth grader Beatrice Roberts gazed intensely at the audience as she stood at a church podium in Paynesville, a rural suburb of Monrovia, Liberia. She expressed thanks for the scholarship she received from Ambassadors’s Girls Scholarship Fund (AGSP) that helped her stay in school. The US Ambassador and USAID Mission Director presented scholarships and backpacks stuffed with school supplies to 37 beaming young girls for the start of their classes in January 2008.

Through the scholarship program, funded by the President’s Africa Education Initiative and administered by USAID, girls and boys who are at risk of dropping out of school receive scholarships to cover fees, books, uniforms, shoes, and supplies.

The scholarship program also provides textbooks to schools to improve the quality of instruction. Program participants receive mentoring on important topics such as HIV/AIDS awareness, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence, leadership development, and building confidence and self-esteem.

Volunteer mentors, mostly women community members from a variety of professional backgrounds, are recruited by local USAID partners and work with the students to provide positive examples.

Since the program began in 2004, 5,796 scholarships have been awarded through a competitive interview and screening process. Preference is given to students from very poor households or who are disabled, orphaned or impacted by HIV/AIDS. Scholarships mean the children can go to school and stay in school instead of taking time off to work in order to pay school fees.

As Beatrice told an inquiring visitor after the ceremony, “I don’t have to get up in the dark and sell coal [before school] anymore.” Asked what she liked best about the program Beatrice grinned shyly and said, “the uniform.”

For her it is not only a source of school pride, but also personal dignity, “I don’t get kicked out of school anymore for not paying the fee or not having the supplies,” she said.

Now 15 years old, Beatrice has graduated from elementary school and just finished the 7th grade.