

Congress must reauthorize the READ Act and keep international education a priority

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These days, it is not often that Members of Congress face easy decisions. As the former Chairs of the House Appropriations Committee and Foreign Affairs Committee, with almost 60 years of experience between the two of us in the House of Representatives, we know very well that most votes are tough votes. Thankfully, there is one pending decision before Congress that is not at all a tough one – that is, renewing our bipartisan support for international pre-primary, primary, and secondary education programs.

In 2017, Congress passed the Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development (READ) Act to ensure that the U.S. government had a comprehensive strategy to partner with countries around the world to strengthen their education systems, improve learning outcomes, and better reach young girls, as well as other vulnerable or marginalized populations.

As we all know, access to quality education affects every aspect of life, from health and economic development to civic participation and political stability. Education is truly the cornerstone of free and stable societies, building security, peace, and prosperity for everyone.

Thanks in large part to the READ Act of 2017, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has led our whole-of-government efforts in over 50 countries to promote quality and inclusive basic education so that millions of children gain the skills to become productive members of their communities. In FY2020 alone, USAID helped educate over 24 million children and youth, trained more than 300,000 education officials, assisted more than 93,000 primary and secondary schools, and provided more than 580 higher education institutions with support.

Unfortunately, the progress we've made in both access and quality of education is in jeopardy. The COVID-19 pandemic devastated education systems worldwide and many have not recovered. According to the World Bank, schools around the world were closed for an average of 141 days between February 2020 and February 2022. In South Asia, Latin American, and the Caribbean closures lasted over 200 days. Millions of children not only lost months of learning, but their mental and physical health, skills and job potential, and risk of being pushed into child labor, early marriage, conflict, and unsafe situations were all made significantly worse.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged and disrupted access to education across the globe, there was a growing global emergency of children in crisis settings without access to education and nurturing care. In 2022, the World Bank estimated that 222 million school-aged children were affected by crises globally, with 127 million children in crisis settings out of school and many others receiving a poor quality education. The youngest, pre-primary, children suffer

the worst outcomes when they are denied access to education and care in the most critical phase of early childhood development.

This is why it is imperative for Congress to reauthorize the READ Act for another five years. Thanks to the leadership of Senators Dick Durbin and Marco Rubio and Representatives Chris Smith and Grace Meng, bipartisan, “clean” extensions of the legislation have been introduced in both chambers to ensure that the Administration is held accountable for the results of its international education programs through annual reports to Congress and continues to update our basic education strategy.

The READ Act is our best tool to keep international education a priority. We urge our former colleagues to reauthorize this important legislation before it expires in September. It is one vote that is both uncomplicated and non-controversial.

Nita Lowey (D-NY) served in Congress from 1989-2021 and was the first woman to chair the House Appropriations Committee from 2018 until 2021. Ed Royce (R-CA) served in Congress from 1993 to 2019 and was the Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs from 2013-2019.