



MOTHERS' ASSOCIATIONS IN BENIN

ADVOCATES AND AGENTS FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

World Education, Inc.

OVERVIEW

Since 1994, World Education, Inc. has been committed to improving education in the Republic of Benin by fostering higher quality instruction and promoting greater school access to children who've been "left behind," particularly girls. With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Department of Labor (USDOL), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), among others, World Education has led and implemented a number of innovative programs to spur greater participation and achievement in a country where the average adult has only 2.7 years of schooling (1.7 years for women) and 65% of adults (and 76% of women) are illiterate.

In its two decades of experience, World Education has achieved a strong track record of improving girls' access to

education with the *Batonga Girls' Education*, *Civic Action in the School Environment*, and *Combating Child Trafficking through Education* programs, benefitting the most disadvantaged groups and regions of Benin. Reflecting on these experiences, it became clear that a key catalyst for improved education was being underutilized: mothers.

Starting in 2003, World Education launched a program to enhance women's participation and influence in the management of local schools by organizing and empowering School Mothers' Associations or *Association des Mères d'Elèves (AMEs)* in French. Designed to give women a greater voice and representation in Parent-Teacher Associations (*Association de Parents d'Elèves* or APE), which are official organizations in Benin typically dominated by men, World Education piloted school mothers' associations in 36 villages. These initial AMEs proved to be an effective and efficient way for mothers to become better involved in education

and for girls to be supported and retained in school. The AMEs also led to improved school management, from school feeding programs to the purchase of school supplies and higher general enrollment and achievement.

AMEs quickly became a movement which has now **spread to more than 650 communities**, or 9% of Benin's entire primary school system, a nearly twenty-fold increase. As news of the success of this approach spread, other organizations have incorporated AME creation and support into their programs with similarly positive results.

Given the benefits, USAID funded the Girls' Education and Community Participation (GECp) project from 2008 to 2014 to improve access to education for girls in the most educationally disadvantaged areas of Benin using AME formation as a main approach. Under the GECp project, World Education worked with AMEs in 750 schools to register girls for school, monitor their attendance, and help them overcome obstacles that prevented them from going to school. Such obstacles included: early/forced marriage/pregnancy, rape (especially when teachers were the guilty party), work, child-care when mothers were at the market or in the fields, and the view that educating girls was of little benefit.

THE ASSOCIATION DES MÈRES D'ÉLÈVES APPROACH

AMEs are created through a participatory process that involves most community stakeholders, including APEs. In areas where World Education works, the two groups are organized into committees that visit households and determine why some children are attending school and others are not. After the visits, the AME and APE come together to discuss their findings, and invariably the male-dominated APE finds value in the insights offered by the AMEs that not only benefit local schools, but the entire community as well. The APE and AME then establish a more permanent relationship with the APE accepting the AME as an informal subgroup with its own organizing principles, priorities, and name.

The AMEs often start with self-initiated activities (including advocacy for girls' education and equity concerns), to catalyze community education planning and problem-solving. AMEs have become involved in everything from creating school feeding programs (snacks and lunch) to convincing the parents of children trafficked for work to send them back to school when the conditions are safer.

They have also contributed to community safety and accountability. Boys and men who commit rape or assault are tracked down by AMEs and negotiations are held with the boy's parents (or in the case of teachers, school principal or district education office) to decide how justice will be served. AMEs have also helped girls promised in marriage to older men (to settle debts or create advantageous family alliances) stay in school by intervening with their "husband-to-be."

In addition, AMEs meet with school directors to discuss absence-related issues or other problems that the children (girls or boys) are encountering. They try to make the director aware of the problems caused by teacher absences and help with the funding and construction of local teacher housing so that teachers can live in the community instead



Women meet as part of the Association des Mères d'Elèves (AMEs) or "School Mothers' Associations"

of having to travel long distances. School lunch programs are enhanced by setting up cooperative school gardens to provide condiments, and even staples, in the absence of a government feeding program at their school. Daycare arrangements have also been established, so that older children are not removed from school to take care of younger siblings. School directors are also involved in these discussions to make sure that school clean-up tasks are equitably divided between boys and girls and that teachers call on girls as much as boys in class. These best practices, which are often shared among different AMEs, are only a sample of what these mothers' associations can accomplish.

As AMEs gain experience and grow, they often want to do more ambitious projects, including building or repairing a new classroom, purchasing school furnishings, constructing granaries, digging wells, or the like. Recognizing the potential of such projects, World Education offers a grant of

up to \$1,000 to provide funds for 80% of an AME-identified priority project if it can be completed in three months or less. These projects have not only improved community-wide infrastructure, they have also opened new income-generating opportunities, including fishing cooperatives and tree nurseries. USAID has lauded World Education's mothers' associations as an effective and sustainable model for integrated community development, educational improvement, promotion of girls' and boys' education, and women's empowerment. The response from communities has similarly been positive: while World Education only requires a 20% contribution, most communities contribute an average of 30% towards project costs.

As part of GECP, World Education partnered with more than 15 Beninese NGOs to support and nurture the AME initiative, whether self-funded or co-funded by World Education. These local partners delivered World Education-developed trainings that educated and mobilized women to address barriers to girls' education (like daycare, labor, trafficking, and early marriage) and school management issues. The strength of these relationships is such, however, that even when AMEs graduate from NGO mentorship, the connections remain.

Today, World Education is seen as a pioneer and one of the earliest international NGOs to champion girls' education in Benin. It is also one of the few organizations to maintain a long-term, on-the-ground presence in northern Benin (Parakou), where the weakest schools are located and poverty is the most severe.

As a result of this long track record, people appreciate and trust World Education. As the women from an AME in

Zapkota sang at one of their community ceremonies, "A program that gives you only money is not a good program. World Education taught us so much; now we have a voice. If World Education was a dress we would buy it because it is of the best quality!"

SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED—AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

Women Excluded from Decisionmaking Processes

Recognizing that women could be influential in diagnosing and solving education-related problems even though they are marginalized, World Education endeavored through the original 36 AMEs to become more deeply involved in community development and decisionmaking.

As in many developing countries, the benefits of education are not readily apparent to parents who must sacrifice much to send their children to school. Apart from a non-schooling tradition, children contribute greatly to a family's livelihood through chores, childcare, and labor. To help mothers and fathers better understand the real benefits of education for their daughters and sons, World Education developed a series of live and recorded local-language radio broadcasts on topics related to children's access to school. Partner NGOs have gathered parent associations (both APEs and AMEs) to listen to the broadcasts, which are followed by facilitated discussions and suggested action plans, where both women and men are engaged in a deliberate planning process in a way that was previously unlikely, with the voices and concerns of all segments of the community represented.





Participants from the Partenariat AME.

Teacher Shortages and Absenteeism

In northern rural areas, where most people are subsistence farmers, education levels are extremely low and teachers must often be recruited from afar to meet local needs. Some refuse the positions, as community infrastructure—including electricity, water, health facilities, or teacher housing—is often inadequate or non-existent. Of those that do accept the position, many must travel far on poor roads to reach the community when proper housing is scarce, resulting in teacher absenteeism.

To ameliorate this situation, World Education has helped AMEs build dozens of teacher housing facilities, which has resulted in improved teacher attendance, as teachers can be held more accountable when they live in the community. Much, however, remains to be done and adequate housing remains scarce. With luck, AMEs will be able to attract more attention from the government and donor community to this crucial issue.

Girls Not Regularly Attending School

Unfortunately, teachers molesting or assaulting students remains a major impediment to girls' participation in education. Girls as young as 10 or 11—and up to 16 or 17—can be highly vulnerable to unscrupulous and predatory teachers. While the government's stated policy

is to deal harshly with teachers who molest female students, rarely does any discipline or punishment take place. It is only when AMEs directly confront the offending teachers, or push the local police, that things change for the better. Unfortunately, many of these teachers are simply transferred rather than punished, which usually means that they continue their pedophilic behavior at the new schools.

Parents' associations also started to approach Imams and animist leaders—asking them to alter religious training schedules (usually during the summer and Christmas vacation periods) to allow girls to go to secular school. Boys are benefitting from the same arrangements.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT AND PERSISTENT PROBLEMS

Traditional (but not official) laws permitting polygamy

Polygamy is still quite common, often causing intra-family disputes where children especially suffer. Unfortunately, child trafficking is often an unintended result, since men who take on extra wives are sometimes not able to care for or protect their offspring. Some mothers then resort to trafficking children because they cannot afford to feed their children. Traffickers make the mothers believe that they are sending their children into situations where they can get a good education or technical apprenticeship. World Education uses AME exchanges to educate women about these scams and the dangers they pose for children. This is a longstanding problem that has adversely affected many children's access to education.

Dropping HIV Rate

With an infection rate of just 1.9%, Benin is not an HIV-prevalent country. However, AMEs are now highly aware of the problems of unprotected sex and multiple partners, both of which are norms in the male-dominated Beninese culture. World Education has provided training about the pandemic, as well as measures that can be used to reduce its incidence. Sexually transmitted infections are actually more common and present serious dangers for both mothers and children. AMEs put on skits about the correct use of condoms, which has had a huge impact, even in rural, conservative areas, educating not only girls, but boys and husbands, too. In part because of such education and training, HIV is continuing to decline in Benin and is no longer regarded as a priority.

Promoting Literacy in the Mother Tongue

The lack of opportunities for AME members and other women to become literate in their own mother tongue has held back AMEs from taking on even greater roles in community schools. Nationwide, roughly 24% of all women are illiterate, but that percentage is much higher in rural areas. An experimental AME literacy project involving 600 women in northern Benin has proven to be very popular and quite successful, both with the women readers and with outside observers, too.

The project contributed to a 30% improvement in school attendance, reduced drop-out rates to less than 5%, and improved school performance and pass rates.

GECP PROJECT RESULTS

GECP project-collected statistics indicated that the project contributed to an improvement of more than 30% in school attendance rates over the final project's six-year period, reduced drop-out rates to less than 5%, and improved school performance and pass rates in the zones in which it operated.

Additionally, many school directors reported that AMEs have made a noticeable difference both in children's attendance at school and in genuine learning.

World Education's local partners have noticed that many AME members have become more visible as members of other community organizations, too—including the APE, village women's groups, water management committees, school infrastructure repair and construction work, and village health committees. They also report increased numbers of girls enrolled in and consistently attending school.

Perhaps most importantly, girls say they are proud to see their mothers actively engaged in publicly promoting education. While their mothers were formerly invisible to their children in the public realm, they have now become highly valuable and respected members of their local

communities—true models for their daughters.

CONCLUSION

Since World Education introduced the concept in 2003, school mothers' associations, or AMEs, have been helping women create a more equitable gender balance in Benin's community education efforts. Aside from empowering women, the chief focus has been educating girls by bringing them into or back to schools and making sure their parents, teachers, communities, and school directors support this important effort.

Although the women and girls have had to overcome many obstacles—including sexual harassment, traditional duties at home, attitudes about the worthlessness of girls' receiving education, and unequal treatment in the classrooms—things are changing slowly but dramatically.

The AMEs bring women together to improve themselves, their community, and their country's future. Together they validate their life experiences, both good and bad. For example, women have gained information and negotiating skills from GECP project trainings and have also learned from GECP project-sponsored radio broadcasts that girls should be sent to school and given the time to study. As women learn together, they gain



confidence, which enables them to stand up in front of community audiences and to become more active and visible in public fora. This is of critical importance to Benin's development, because empowering women and promoting girls' education buoys the entire country, as demonstrated repeatedly in other nations.

Although the mothers' groups have not replaced the male-dominated APEs, they have in effect become an integral part of them—adding their own voices to those of the men in helping the schools and their children. They have also increased collaboration between AMEs and school directors, who consult directly with the women when girls are having problems in school or are frequently absent from class. The resulting interventions have been critical for keeping girls in school.

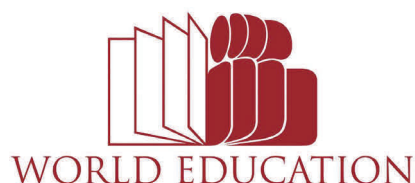
In addition, the women have joined with men to invest their limited and precious resources to improve school infrastructure. They have lobbied the government to provide more qualified teachers and to hire

“community” (i.e., untrained) teachers when they do not. They negotiate with other women to delay arranged marriages to boys from neighboring villages so that girls can finish the primary grades before marriages take place and schooling for the girls is terminated. Politely, but forcefully, women also weigh in on community priorities in education before final decisions are made. In sum, AMEs have helped women become a force that men in the community, officials, teachers, and religious leaders—formerly almost exclusively male domains—must respect and reckon with. As a result, Benin is becoming a stronger, healthier, and better educated nation of people with greater participation from all members of its society.



World Education is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of the poor through integrated literacy programs, and economic and social development.

This series of technical briefs highlights program approaches that are breaking new ground and achieving results for populations where implemented.



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