

**FHSMUN XXIX
UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL
ORGANIZATION**

COMBATING CORRUPTION IN EDUCATION

“...unfairness and partiality in education convey a wrong message to the younger generation. In fact, it teaches them that cheating and bribing is an acceptable way to advance their careers; that personal effort and merit do not count; and that success comes from favouritism, manipulation and bribery. It thus contributes to the development of a ‘culture of corruption’ and of cynicism. It undermines any incentives that would motivate young people to work hard. In this sense, it contradicts one of the major aims of education, which is to transmit civic culture together with values of integrity, equity, fairness and social justice.”¹

“Father: ‘My son has an exam with you tomorrow, but he is not well prepared. I am afraid that he will fail.’”

“Professor: ‘I bet you \$500 your son will pass.’”²

Introduction

Education is always a key issue for societies around the world. A high-quality education can provide students and their communities with the knowledge and skills to improve their lives, to forge productive relationships, create new businesses, develop new technologies, and resolve the deep-seated injustices and problems within their societies. These hopes and aspirations, then, are at the heart of the problems created by corruption in education. UNESCO, the UN System’s leading educational body, has been guided by 1990 by its principle of Education for All (EFA) by 2015. If corruption in education is tolerated and festers, growing in strength, it is, tragically, all too clear that this goal will not be met.

Corruption in education takes many forms and has many consequences, many of which are not always immediately tangible. Corruption in education leads to inefficient allocations of resources, slows and/or reverses economic growth, and tarnishes the reputations of politicians, students, and teachers. Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson noted in a 2007 report that “...corruption in education constitutes a serious threat to the successful achievement of EFA [Education for All], as it tends to reduce the resources available for education, to limit access to education (particularly for the most disadvantaged groups), to deteriorate the quality of education, and to increase social inequalities.”³ Government and international efforts to combat corruption in education

¹ Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, “Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?” UNESCO and International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) Paris 2007 p. 56.

² Georgian joke about corruption in education. Found at: *BBC News*, “Georgia purges education system” July 29, 2005.

³ Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, “Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?” 2007 p. 55.

have led to the firing of school and government officials, including former Minister of Education Fabian Osuji of Nigeria in 2005.⁴ Resorting to the most extreme measures to remedy perceived corruption, in 2002, separatist rebels in the eastern Indian state of Manipur shot and wounded a senior education official that they claimed was guilty of taking bribes.⁵ These direct political consequences garner the headlines but the all too common tragedies of students dropping out or concluding that education is not worth the effort or is defined solely by one's last name or how much one is willing to pay for it are only rarely reported. Teacher and administrator misconduct represents another form of corruption in education, especially when it is either not investigated or when the investigations are strictly perfunctory. UNESCO and its partners throughout the international community, including related UN agencies and departments, national governments, teachers' associations and unions, non-governmental organization (NGO's), educational providers and schools, parents, and students, must all work cooperatively to eliminate corruption within education. By doing so, these relevant stakeholders in the multilateral dialogue on education and educational reform will make the goal of providing every child with a high-quality, fair education possible.

Scale of the Problem

Corruption is never easy to measure objectively. Those engaged in corruption do not want their actions discovered or reported and victims often do not report instances of corruption for fear of retribution, from feelings of shame and embarrassment, or a sense of resignation, that reporting the crimes will not change the situation. Corruption, unfortunately, is also truly global in nature and thus cannot be attributed strictly to any one political or economic system or culture. Education is frequently an enticing target for corrupt officials and others looking to advance their own interests because it often involves large contracts for building, textbooks, technology and teaching materials, and even degrees and diplomas.

Corruption in education tends to increase in size and scope the more layers of administration and bureaucracy that enter the process. Hallak and Poisson assert that "experience demonstrates that the more administrative levels are involved in the financing of education systems, the greater the risk of fund leakage."⁶ In the worst cases of misappropriations of funds, over half of all the funds set aside for school construction are pocketed by government officials, both national and local.

In the country of Georgia, "officials believe that up to \$30 million – more than the country's entire education budget – was spent on bribes every year."⁷ In Bangladesh in 2000, "over 96 per cent of the students had to pay fees to be allowed to sit for the first term examination, as teachers did not receive payment for conducting exams. The total amount of unauthorized fees collected in the eight *Upazillas* [districts] surveyed

⁴ *BBC News*, "Nigeria sacks 'corrupt' minister" March 22, 2005.

⁵ *BBC News*, "Manipur violence over school corruption" May 25, 2002.

⁶ Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, "Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?" 2007 p. 67.

⁷ *BBC News*, "Georgia purges education system" July 29, 2005.

amounted to about 20 million Bangladeshi taka (BDT) – equivalent to about \$350,000 USD.”⁸ In the United States, college lenders defrauded college students and the government out of hundreds of millions of dollars, forcing Congress to pass the Student Loan Sunshine Act in 2007. Adam Doster, writing for *The Nation*, noted that “exploitative lenders were providing kickbacks to universities and their personnel in hopes of landing on preferred lender lists distributed to students, an act of collusion that only hurt unsuspecting young people.”⁹ Corruption also occurs in the certification of teachers as well as due to inadequate supervision of teacher misbehaviors that include accepting bribes and selling grades, sexual harassment and exploitation of students, and being paid while never actually teaching, so-called “ghost teachers.” Students also find themselves at the mercy of teachers and administrators in many instances. High-profile cases of teachers engaging in inappropriate and/or sexual relations with students or sexually harassing students are not confined to any region of the world, but the consequences of these relationships and liaisons can be tragic, especially in areas where HIV/AIDS is widespread.¹⁰ Hallak and Poisson write that “it is interesting to note that while malpractices in the area of teacher behaviour, for instance, which have a major impact on access, quality, equity and ethics, are often characterized as petty corruption, fraud in the area of school construction, which is typically considered grand corruption, has an impact mainly on access and on quality. This illustrates the fact that the issue of petty corruption (in particular that linked with teachers) should by no means be neglected.”¹¹

Causes of Corruption in Education

As corruption in education is a truly global problem, it is essential to identify as many of the root causes as possible. One of the most commonly cited factors is that teachers and related education providers frequently earn comparatively low salaries and wages, sometimes too low to afford basic necessities. When salaries are comparatively low and oversight either ineffective or nonexistent, opportunities to supplement teaching incomes will often come through payments from parents and students for grades. In November 2007, 26 teachers and education officials in the southern Vietnamese province of Bac Lieu were put on trial for helping students cheat on university entrance exams.¹² Teachers whose salaries are extremely low sometimes teach phantom classes so as to boost their overall incomes. Low teacher salaries and relatively poor working conditions, coupled yet again with ineffective or nonexistent oversight, also leads to high rates of teacher absenteeism, which in turn frequently impedes student achievement.

⁸ Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, “Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?” 2007 p. 92.

⁹ Adam Doster, “Looking Out for Number One: American students do very little advocacy for themselves” *The Nation* June 20, 2007. Found at: http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070716/number_one

¹⁰ *BBC News*, “Teacher-pupil sex blamed for HIV rise” November 18, 2003.

¹¹ Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, “Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?” 2007 p. 73.

¹² *BBC News*, “Vietnam teachers in ‘exam bribes’” November 27, 2007.

Political and education systems that are not transparent also exhibit, not surprisingly, high degrees of corruption. One factor influencing corruption in education that is often cited by those wishing to privatize social services is the fact that in most countries, the public school system has a virtual monopoly and the lack of competition for resources can lead to entrenched interests seeking to enrich themselves. One suggested way to overcome the corruption that accompanies the perceived monopolization of education by public bureaucracies is to either privatize the school systems, at least to a degree, or to forge stronger public-private partnerships, including charter schools. Another related idea for reducing corruption in education is decentralization of decision-making within the school system. Moving more decision-making authority to the local and school levels has produced mixed results in terms of combating corruption but it is one of the most frequently advocated solutions. Decentralization and privatization can offer, however, other venues for corruption in education because private companies are not required to disclose information as frequently or in the same ways as public institutions. Describing some of the initiatives in reforming New York City's public schools, Samuel G. Freedman, writing for *The New York Times*, notes that "the use of private money has shielded it [the Leadership Academy – a new system for opening many new schools and training principals in New York City] from inquiries about just how cost-effective it has been." Freedman also notes that "another facet of the de facto privatization has been the marked increase in no-bid contracts."¹³ UNESCO, in its *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008*, noted that when teacher recruitment and assignment is decentralized, more response to local needs is allowed, "but at the same time, are more open to the influence of local élites or pressure groups, especially where administrative capacity is weak."¹⁴

Combating Corruption in Education

In order to effectively combat corruption in education, all of the relevant stakeholders must commit themselves to reporting incidents of corruption, and those responsible for enforcing the appropriate laws must then mete out significant and justified punishments. Furthermore, all of these stakeholders must recognize the so-called "red flags" of corruption in education and investigate and/or address them as soon as they are identified. Hallak and Poisson note some classic red flags of corruption, including: "poor records or documentation; unusually neat records; lack of separation of duties of managing funds; extravagant lifestyle of employees; unusually voluminous and complex transactions; and inadequate internal and external audits."¹⁵ By creating and maintaining participatory structures for both internal and external audits of budgets, decision-making processes, and the daily operations of schools and related educational institutions, the international community can most effectively monitor and eliminate corruption in education.

¹³ Samuel G. Freedman, "The Not-So-Public Part of Public Schools: Lack of Accountability" *The New York Times* September 13, 2006.

¹⁴ UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008: Education for All by 2015: Will we make it?* Oxford University Press Oxford, United Kingdom 2007 p. 128.

¹⁵ Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, "Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?" 2007 p. 71.

In 2001, UNESCO and the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) launched an important research project titled “Ethics and corruption in education.” The first major workshop was conducted in Paris in November 2001 and the attendees were invited representatives from international institutions engaged in fighting corruption such as Transparency International, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank Group, the Asian Development Bank, as well as government officials from Hong Kong and Mexico.¹⁶ During the workshop, the assembled participants focused on the need to increase effective oversight of budgetary processes as well as to establish and enforce teachers’ and administrators’ codes of conduct.

As efforts to combat corruption in education require widespread and sustained participation from relevant stakeholders, these efforts must involve a mixture of subjective and objective measurements of corruption. Climate or perception surveys of parents, students, and teachers can reveal a great deal about perceptions of corruption within the schools, particularly from those most directly connected with education itself. These must be supplemented by more objective fact-finding and statistical analyses of budgets and educational processes. Hallak and Poisson also advocate the use of social audits, which they describe in the following manner: “a social audit evaluates how public resources are used to reach social objectives, including how they can be better mobilized to meet these objectives. It focuses on the ‘value for money’ of public services and assesses their coverage, effectiveness, equity, impact, accountability and costs. Through community mobilization, social audits tend to increase transparency and reduce leakages.”¹⁷ Combining these various methods for assessing and measuring corruption will require greater care, vigilance, and time but the positive results of reducing corruption and ensuring greater access and equity in education for all relevant stakeholders will make these initial sacrifices truly worthwhile.

Conclusion

Effectively combating corruption in education will definitely require the sustained efforts of all relevant stakeholders. Few, if any, of the commonly cited instances and examples of corruption in education are new. As the relevant stakeholders delineate clear priorities for combating corruption in education, they will also signal to their respective societies that equity of access and quality in education is not a commodity to be bought and sold nor to be doled out on the basis of family name, ethnicity, religion, gender, or status of disability. Refocusing the attention and efforts of national governments, educators, parents and community groups, and students, as well as international institutions, to rooting out corruption in education is vital to achieving UNESCO’s stated goal of Education for All by 2015.

¹⁶ For a full list of the participants, please see: Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, “Ethics and corruption in education: Results from the Expert Workshop held at IIEP, Paris 28-29 November 2001” IIEP/UNESCO Paris 2001 pp. 183-185.
Found at: <http://www.unesco.org/iiep/PDF/Forum15.pdf>

¹⁷ Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, “Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done?” 2007 p. 94.

Guiding Questions

How does your country fare in terms of combating corruption in education? What are the perceptions of relevant stakeholders within your country regarding corruption in education? How does your country fare, in terms of Transparency International's and other organizations' indices, when measuring levels of corruption overall?

What internal and external audits does your country use to assess corruption? How participatory are your country's processes for assessing corruption in education? What laws and codes of conduct are in place for educators and other actors involved in the educational process?