

Supporting the Nation's Efforts for Universal Access to Education

By Dr. Jama Gulaid,
UNICEF Country Representative

More than 60,000 Swazi children returned to school in 2006 thanks to the Government's OVC bursary. Now, UNICEF and other partners are working with Government to ensure these children remain in school by giving them support both in and outside the classroom.

In 2005, Swaziland adopted a new constitution. In it, the country promised that all children would have access to primary school education within three years. Today, the country is working hard to achieve that target.

Swaziland currently has a primary school enrolment rate of 77%. While this is an improvement over previous years, it still leaves thousands of children out of school. Many of these children are orphaned or vulnerable. Few can afford to pay schools fees. Many leave school, able to return only after several terms, forced to repeat the same grade. Others never return to school at all.

After a decade of decline in the proportion of children completing primary and secondary school, the Government took a major step toward reaching the goal of universal primary education by establishing a bursary to cover school fees at all government schools for the nation's growing number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). His Majesty King Mswati III initiated the programme and government intervention began in 2004.

Busisiwe*, a sixth-grader in Lomahasha, is one of the tens of thousands of children in Swaziland who were able to secure access to schooling in 2006 thanks to the Government's commitment to education for orphans and vulnerable children.

Busisiwe stands quietly outside her classroom, with eyes turned down. Her black buckled shoes are dusty from playing in the dry school courtyard and her jersey is zipped up tightly despite the sun. She suddenly flashes a smile when asked about her favorite subject in school.

"I like maths and English," she says quietly. "I want to be a nurse when I finish school."

Completing school is a new goal for the 13-year-old. Busisiwe lives at home with her Gogo and three older brothers. For a time, none of the children were in school.

"I didn't like being at home," she said. "I wanted to go to school with my friends. I didn't want to be left behind."

Her parents passed away a few years ago, father first, then mother. Her grandmother took in Busisiwe and her brothers but didn't have enough money to pay school fees, so the children stayed at home.

"I am happy to be back at school," she says, "and thankful."

Since its establishment, the bursary for OVC has been expanded each year, allowing increasing numbers of children to return to school. In the first year of the bursary, E20 million was allocated to the OVC fund. In 2006, that number rose to E47 million. Today, the 2007 budget apportions 66 million for OVC.

The continued and increased allocation to the OVC bursary is a clear commitment on the part of Government. The announcement of the increase in the OVC fund by His Majesty King Mswati III at the

opening of Parliament this year was met with pleasure and gratitude by policy makers, teachers, parents and students.

“Children in our community have really benefited from the government bursary,” said a primary school teacher in Lomahasha. “Students who have been out of school for quite some time are now back and able to attend classes. Everyone appreciates this fund.”

Bridging Gaps

Despite the impressive efforts of Government, challenges remain for teachers and for the Ministry of Education. The process of disbursement of the OVC fund is complicated, with heavy burdens shouldered by both teachers and the Ministry. Delays have been inevitable, placing the Ministry under increased pressure and forcing head teachers to provide for additional students without additional funds.

At the start of the 2007 school term, the situation provoked head teachers to threaten expelling OVC, creating a standoff between teachers and the Ministry that was played out in the media.

But all remains quiet at the moment, several weeks into the second term of the 2007 school year. The silence may be a sign of hope or an indication that lessons were learned from the challenges of the past. Only time will tell.

To help the Ministry realize its goal of increased enrollment and retention of OVC, and to provide OVC themselves with a greater sense of stability in school, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education to review processes, identify strategies for optimal utilization of grants, and to identify challenges resulting in delays in grant disbursement. A Commission of Inquiry on OVC funds was established to make recommendations in this regard. The findings from the Commission are eagerly awaited.

Unfortunately, even the best intentions sometimes have negative consequences. The benefits of the bursary -- surging enrollment and packed classrooms -- can present problems of their own.

“The bursary is a good thing for children in need,” said Beatrice Lubisi, deputy headmistress at Lomahasha Primary School. “All children should be able to attend school. But we must keep facilities up with the increased enrollment. We have students sitting on bricks and buckets during class. Some write their exercises on the floor. This is no way to learn,” she said.

Headmistress Ndlovu of Mbalenhle Primary School in the Sikhuphe area agrees. “We have to keep in mind that more children in school mean more resources are needed. With the bursary, our school enrollment went up by more than 100 children. We are running short of classrooms and furniture. We even need more toilets.”

The shortages include teachers. Teacher-pupil ratios are climbing at alarming rates.

“I desperately need more teachers,” said Ndlovu. “My grades 1 and 3 are so congested that the teachers have a very hard time teaching. It's getting like that with other grades as well.”

School-based community volunteers could be an effective strategy for dealing with the challenges faced by schools with high enrolments, enabling them to offer quality education and the necessary psycho-social support required by vulnerable children.

In a pilot project to assess how volunteers could assist in schools with exceptionally high teacher to pupil ratios, UNICEF supported 32 schools with volunteer teachers in 2004. Approximately 3,000 children were retained in these schools due to the efforts of the volunteers, not only to teach and provide educational support, but to offer basic counseling and linkages with other community service providers.

UNICEF is working closely with the Ministry of Education to use the findings of this pilot to develop strategies that will best serve the increasing number of students.

Turning Schools into Safety Nets

Unfortunately, challenges at school are often only the first hurdle in the lives of an orphaned or vulnerable child. These children often live under difficult emotional and physical circumstances which can spill over into the classroom, impacting the way they learn and the way they interact with both their peers and their teachers.

Sifiso,* who just returned to Grade 6 this year, says he is not happy to be back at school. An only child living with his grandmother, he has trouble focusing in class and often falls asleep.

“I miss my parents,” says the 12 year old. “After school I fetch water and firewood then help Gogo, who is sick. I am very tired at night but I can't fall asleep.”

To try and provide holistic support to children like Sifiso, the Ministry of Education with support from UNICEF, introduced the Schools as Centres of Care and Support (SCCS) project in 57 schools in 2006. The majority of schools in the programme are in rural, hard to reach areas with high numbers of vulnerable children and extreme poverty.

“The SCCS initiative is designed to be a comprehensive answer to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children,” said Tizie Maphalala, the former Education Programme Officer at UNICEF Swaziland, who recently moved to the UNICEF office in Zambia. “A child cannot learn if he is hungry. A child will not learn if she is being abused. Schools as Centres of Care and Support mobilizes the community to use the resources it has to ensure that all needy children have what they need to attend and stay in school, whether that is food and water or psychosocial support.”

The SCCS seeks to make schools more child friendly, especially to vulnerable children, through a strengthened protective school and community environment. In each SCCS community, the school committee; elected school support teams, made up of two teachers, two students and two community members; and teams of community carers take on the responsibility of monitoring the welfare of OVC to ensure their access to basic services, including full participation in education. The project supports more than 10,000 children in 21 schools in the worst drought-affected areas to receive schools meals from WFP and NERCHA. Four model trench gardens in two SCCS regions were established. The gardens provide a balanced diet, assist in sustaining school meals and provide the students with livelihood skills that they can extend to homestead gardening and continue to use later in life. More than 1,200 teachers and parents were also trained on how to maintain the trench gardens and extend the skills to their own homesteads.

Outside of the SCCS initiative, Ministry of Education partners such as World Food Programme (WFP), NERCHA and civil society, have established school feeding schemes that provide thousands of hot meals to children in schools across the country, to ensure that no child must choose between attending school and looking for food.

The SCCS communities provide the safety net that many OVC no longer get at home. The project has trained the country's nine school health nurses on paediatric HIV care to identify and assist children who may be infected. Since OVC are more vulnerable to abuse, neglect and exploitation than other children, networks of community members and Lihlombe Lekukhalela (LL) child protectors have been trained to identify and support abused children.

UNICEF, together with civil society partners, trained nearly 7,000 LLs throughout the country on

handling abuse and exploitation of children. These LLs are both adults and children, those in school and out of school. The training raised awareness in communities and encouraged others to commit themselves to protect children from abuse. This led to an improvement of reporting of abuse cases, child labour cases and children out of school. It also assisted in forming linkages with other service providers for children. UNICEF also supported the Social Welfare Department by training each of its social workers on counseling of abused children.

“SCCS was introduced just last year,” said Maphalala. “We started with a small number of schools. Once these communities are trained and empowered to watch over the welfare of children in need, we hope to include more and more schools in the programme.”

Another important partner in the march toward universal primary education is the European Union (EU). The EU Education Sector Programme supports OVC in schools through a pilot capitation grant scheme. The scheme supported 10 schools in 2006, increasing to 30 schools in 2007. Under the capitation grant, Government maintains its commitments to teacher salaries and student textbooks but introduces a per pupil grant to meet other school costs. Capitation would eventually replace bursaries in the schools. The entire scheme is conditional on the community bringing back out-of-school OVC. The capitation grant from the EU is E100 per student with an additional E150 for each OVC. The capitation grant scheme tests one kind of strategy for streamlining the bursary payment system for the country.

The Way Forward

Perhaps the most important step forward to achieve universal access to primary education is stronger collaboration between all stakeholders in the education of children. Currently, no single framework exists that articulates a plan to achieve the goals of universal access. UNICEF endorses an education sector strategy outlining in a single document, the objectives, strategies, and resource mobilization needs to reach the target of access to primary education for all Swazi children. Under the leadership of the Ministry of Education, all stakeholders would have input into the development of a comprehensive sector plan that would define the responsibilities of each partner in achieving the goals of the sector plan.

Indeed, the nation still has a long way to go to ensure that all its children have equal access to education. But the steps taken by Government, UNICEF and other stakeholders bring this goal closer each day. The true judges of the work being done today will be the voices of Busisiwe and Sifiso.

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in 155 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

**Names have been changed to protect the children's identity.*