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Can a Starbucks Model Educate the World's Poor? Top Tech Funders Think So

[Sue-Lynn Moses](#)

Bridge International Academies is intent on disrupting education in Africa and other poor parts of the world. And with big backers like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Pierre Omidyar, the company has lots of momentum

right now.

That's right: Some of the same funders who are intent on turning education upside down in the United States are up to the same thing overseas.

Zuckerberg, of course, is well known for the \$100 million he put into a bid to reform Newark schools. He's also made an even bigger pledge, \$120 million, to improve schools in Silicon Valley. But, until recently, we didn't know that he was thinking about education overseas. While that would make sense, given Facebook's global reach, it reflects a broadening of Zuck's education agenda. Zuckerberg investment of \$10 million into the for-profit Bridge International Academies also is a departure from an approach that, until now, has stressed outright gifts to nonprofits.

Zuckerberg isn't the only big tech name getting behind Bridge. Bill Gates and Pierre Omidyar, along with a handful of other partners, have made a collective investment of more than [\\$100 million in the company](#).

So why is Bridge International Academies pulling big names and big money? A few reasons. The company, established in 2009, has been challenging the assumption that governments are best suited to run mass education programs. And while that challenge runs straight into a buzzsaw in the United States, it's able to get a better hearing in developing countries where universal education is not yet fully established or defined and resources are scarce.

Bridge wants to help educate over 10 million children across the globe by 2025, but for now, it's focusing on Africa and Asia. Around 126,000 students are enrolled at more than 400 Bridge International Academies. Its business model is Internet-based, with most teachers using Nook tablets for lesson plans and to collect test results, at a low cost. Another way to keep those costs down is that Bridge International Academies are standardized—as in, it has standardized systems that offer a greater level of ease when it comes to replicability. “It's like running Starbucks,” said one investor.

This approach speaks to a key dream of tech education funders: That technology and

organizational innovation can make education cheaper, more widely accessible, and more personalized.

Right now, the efficacy of Bridge's schools remains unclear. What is clear, however, is that governments in countries like Kenya, are unable to keep pace with burgeoning school enrollment rates. So the moment is ripe for private sector players to position themselves as cost-effective alternatives.

This may all sound horrifying to anyone who believes that education should be firmly under the control of a public sector that answers to citizens. But you can see why each of the well-known funders behind Bridge would be jazzed about the opportunities before it. Quite apart from his interest in education, Zuckerberg has long been a proponent of a tech optimism that imagines free or cheap technology greatly elevating the human condition.

Bill Gates, meanwhile, is a big proponent of using technology to make education more affordable, accessible, and better. He said about the Bridge investment through a spokesperson that he saw "significant innovation in the approach and wanted to support it personally." And Pierre Omidyar, of course, has long been a backer of market-based models to solving problems. His money also backs education work in different places and, needless to say, he's another tech optimist.

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Thursday, March 19, 2015 at 03:32PM

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melbourga · 10 months ago

The Functional Education Literacy Program our NGO implemented introduced by modules had a great impact in the communities we immersed Women attend classes on their off hours as agreed .Within the 3 year time we were with them they learned to read, write, be responsible parents through family planning, proper health care and mindful of nutritional needs, etc. taught in an integrated teaching way, thus became too assertive of their rights and active citizens in their communities Now, empowered, most are advocates of responsible parenthood and active citizenry. Fund constraint deprived us getting to other far flung areas for expansion of the program. commitment of implementors is a very critical factor.

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