
**BRIDGE OPEN LETTER RESPONSE TO:
GLOBAL INITIATIVE CALL ON INVESTORS TO CEASE SUPPORT TO BRIDGE INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIES**

2 August 2017

To all concerned,

We are glad to see the signatories of this letter recognise that investors in Bridge are genuinely concerned about children in poverty, and that they acknowledge the need for significant improvements in education across many low and middle-income countries.

We stand on common ground with them in wanting to see children in some of the most challenging environments given the opportunity to learn. At last count, nearly 600 million children were [being failed](#), either through not being in school or being in schools where learning is not happening.

The reasons behind today's global education crisis are numerous and complex: fragile states, conflict, weak government institutions, school shortages, and ineffective management, to name only a few. In this landscape, there is no single magic solution to the education situation. It will take a [full spectrum of actors](#) and influences, across governments, international bodies, charities, companies, faith groups and more to make real lasting change.

We know that Bridge is only one small part of the overall effort to improve outcomes for children in the developing world. Yet, as Bridge empowers children from families living below the global poverty line to flourish, and become leaders in their own communities and countries, the work we do disrupts the status quo; by demonstrating that schools on limited budgets can still have the resources to support teachers with extensive training and learning resources. Today's status quo of 600 million children either out of school or attending schools where learning is not happening is simply unacceptable.

We are very proud of the work we do and I'm delighted that our investors have independently recognised the current and future contribution of Bridge. We believe, as do our investors, that effectiveness should be measured on outcomes and in the case of education, [learning gains](#).

It should be noted that most of the reports and evidence collated in this report were commissioned by Education International and their affiliates and has largely [been rebutted previously](#). These organisations openly campaign against education reform and are avid protectors of the status quo; the reliability of their assertions is fundamentally undermined by this starting premise.

To address the issues raised in the letter by Global Initiative, I am pleased to set the record straight:

1. No government or country is calling for Bridge to be closed.

In the past there have been misunderstandings about Bridge, due to the spread of misinformation originating from those who wish to pursue ideological arguments rather than focus on how to benefit children quickly and effectively. False allegations about Bridge are used to try and discredit a model of high quality, affordable education that threatens some stakeholders with vested interests. Today,

there is no government attempting to close Bridge. We have directly explained and shown African ministers and civil servants the reality of our good quality schools and our desire to help governments improve education access and quality by complementing their overall mix of nursery and primary school provision, and where partnerships exist, serving the government directly in public schools.

2. All Bridge schools meet local government standards for safety and cleanliness and Bridge fully complies with all national laws.

All Bridge buildings are safe and meet local standards and legal requirements. But Bridge believes that school performance should be measured by outcomes not inputs. We don't focus on the aesthetic appearance of our schools, but rather the teaching that is happening in our classrooms and the learning gains achieved by our pupils. Keeping our buildings simple keeps costs low for parents and allows us to focus investment in teacher support and R&D of teacher and learner resources.

Allegations have been made in the past and these were unfounded. That is why no Bridge school has ever been closed.

We take our responsibility to keep our students pupils safe very seriously. As should all schools. Any individual found repeatedly on Bridge premises using a false identity will be taken very seriously and reported to the appropriate authorities. This is not a question of transparency, it is a question of safety.

3. There have been numerous independent assessments of Bridge schools and pupils, which have shown positive results, and there will be many more independent evaluations.

The [growing evidence](#) from internal and external studies shows Bridge students learn more than their peers at traditional public schools. Bridge students do better on tests that matter. Passing the Kenyan Certificate of Primary Education Exams (KCPE) is required to graduate from primary school, and to attend government secondary schools. In 2015, Bridge pupils achieved a 63% pass rate compared to the national average of 49% (44% in public schools). In 2016, Bridge pupils scored 10% more than the national average. For Bridge pupils who have been at Bridge for 4 years, the pass rate increases to 74%. The first cohort of pupils at Bridge Uganda will sit the PLE this year. We are confident that every country we operate in will replicate the success of our Kenyan pupils.

A [report published](#) in collaboration with the Liberian Ministry of Education and the University of Liberia revealed Bridge PSL pupils made more progress toward achieving national literacy benchmarks. In just 4 months, 17 percent of Bridge PSL second graders met the reading fluency benchmark for the first time, compared to only 4 percent of second graders at traditional public schools.

Bridge is participating in two randomised controlled trials, one in Liberia conducted by Center for Global Development and Innovations for Poverty Action and one in Kenya led by Michael Kremer (Harvard), along with other economists from UVA, the World Bank, and Columbia University.

We look forward to continued partnerships with economists and the education research community in the years ahead.

The President of the World Bank, Jim Yong Kim, said ‘one of the most effective ways to encourage investment in the extreme poor and improve health and educational service delivery is accountability’. He went on to say that in Bridge International Academies ‘after about two years, students’ average scores for reading and math have risen high above their public school peers.’ We support evidence-based decisions and policy-making, and have been supported by shareholders and partners that also look to evidence to solve the world’s greatest social justice crisis today: that 600 million children are either out of school or in school not learning. We must disrupt the generational transfer of poverty through schools that fulfil their role to close the achievement gap.

4. All Bridge teachers are trained to teach, and we meet or exceed government quotas for use of registered teachers.

Each country in which Bridge operates has different qualifications and requirements for teachers. Bridge adheres to all of them. We provide high-quality professional training and support for all of our teachers, both after they are hired but before they enter the classroom, as well as throughout their careers.

Bridge runs a carefully designed pre-service training program, and supports its teachers with continuous professional development programs both inside and outside the classroom. The training prepares teachers in subject fundamentals, conduct interactive lessons, lead small group and 1:1 instruction, use a variety of effective teaching techniques, and become comfortable with technology for records, lesson materials, and communication.

The UN estimated that 69 million extra teachers will be needed to reach the 2030 goals. A recent World Bank report indicated the average teacher absentee rate in [Ugandan classrooms was 56%](#), and [in Kenyan 47%](#), while in Bridge the rate is about 5% and 1% respectively.

5. Many of our pupils attend a Bridge school for free - the 10% are on full sponsorships. All Bridge pupils in Liberia attend a Bridge-managed public school for free.

Bridge locates its schools in poor communities in developing countries. Bridge’s affordable fees mean that the vast majority of the families near our schools can afford to send their children to Bridge.

The global average fee for Bridge is approximately \$7 USD per month per child. In country fees are clearly and transparently displayed at every Bridge Academy. In countries such as Liberia, where Bridge is part of Government Public Private Partnership, parents don’t pay fees. Of course, despite the very low fees there will always be those who struggle. As such, Bridge runs an extensive scholarship programme. 10% of our pupils are on full scholarships and attend Bridge for free. We welcome additional scholarship support.

It is important to note that many public schools in the countries in which Bridge operates are not actually free – they often charge a wide range of fees for “admissions,” “teacher motivation fees,” “PTA fees,” etc. As such, Bridge is sometimes less expensive than so-called “free” public schools.

Parents have the right to choose whether or not to send their children to Bridge and decide for themselves whether they wish to invest in education. Parents always know what our low fees are before they decide to enrol a child, and we defend their right to make choices. Our fees are affordable to the vast majority of families that live where Bridge establishes schools, which is why Bridge is popular.

6. All pupils are welcome at Bridge, we do not have a selective entrance policy, and we do not “cherry pick” pupils to sit national exams.

Bridge admits children without regard to their previous mastery of material within a wide age-range for each grade. This is necessary since many children arrive at Bridge after having been out of school for months or years, or not yet enrolled in school. Given that children come to Bridge often years below grade level, to support a child’s mastery of foundational concepts, we may advise a parent that it will serve the interests of the child to repeat a grade. This decision is at the discretion of the parent.

At the end of the academic year, during the parent-teacher conference, a child’s teacher may have a conversation with parents whose children(s) assessments have demonstrated that the child is unprepared for the challenges of the next grade. Our policy is the same for Class 1 students and Class 7 students alike. Whether a child remains in the same grade level for another year or moves on to the next grade level is entirely the decision of the parent.

7. Bridge is actively partnering with governments on developing and improving regulatory frameworks and delivering improved education systems

We are helping the Kenyan government, and other governments, to improve the way they regulate the many thousands of independent school operators.

In Kenya, Bridge has participated in government-led stakeholder dialogues and conferences on both national education reform and on the guidelines for non-formal schools, now called Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training (APBET). These guidelines were designed to enable the Ministry of Education to register the thousands of non-formal schools serving 2 million children.

Bridge is also part of the Kenya Institute for Curriculum Developments’ piloting of the new national syllabus, with our school in the rural village of Kinna, Isiolo County being selected for participation amongst the 470 schools in the pilot nation-wide.

Bridge pupils shine in various government school competitions, from athletics to choral and drama performances. At the 91st National Music Competition, 170 Bridge pupils performed, 26 scored in the top 3 nationally in their category of performance, and one pupil placed 1st in the nation.

In Liberia, Bridge is one of 8 government partners delivering the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) initiative, enabling the improvement of the primary education system across the country. Government partnerships in both [Lagos, Nigeria](#) and in Andhra Pradesh also evidence the productive relationships that Bridge enjoys with governments across Africa and Asia.

Bridge believes investment capital deployed toward addressing one of the world's most pressing problems is a positive force in development. By demonstrating that high performing schools are possible even on a developing country's limited budget, Bridge has enabled governments to make informed decisions on how to improve learning.

8. Bridge is fully transparent in Liberia and elsewhere.

The Government of Liberia and Ministry of Education (MOE) asked the world to contribute to improving its public schools through bringing in new donor support. This is an effort to be applauded – and those donors who have come forward to support Liberia are to be celebrated for their commitment to creating a strong, high-performing school system and future for Liberian children. Specifically, PSL and its revolutionary aspirations for education have attracted and enabled new philanthropic money to come into the country. As part of this, Bridge PSL has been able to attract philanthropic support that has enabled us to create visible and measured change in learning for children across the public schools we serve and provided over 29,673 textbooks, 16,000 teacher guides and 3,500+ desks.

PSL was never envisaged as a single operator program. Bridge was the inaugural partner within the PSL initiative, after having undergone vetting by various offices and Ministries in Liberia. After PSL was inaugurated, the Ministry rightly sought additional partners to grow the program so that more children could benefit from greater spending on education by donors, and greater attention and support to public schools.

Contrary to the claims, this was [a transparent process](#). President Sirleaf and the Ministry hosted a national education meeting in January 2016, seeking input from all stakeholders in education which informed the creation of the PSL program. An additional national education meeting was hosted in April 2016, and then halfway through the first year of the program, a third major national education meeting was hosted in February 2017. We believe this is demonstrative of the Government of Liberia's commitment to good governance and inclusive policy making. PSL is a government program, as such teachers are on the government pay roll and class sizes are determined by the Government framework.

The MOE has also commissioned two essential bodies of research to inform policy on PSL. The first is a study comparing the differences in learning over time at six Bridge PSL public schools and six independently selected traditional public schools. The second study is a randomised control trial comparing all the partners in PSL with 94 other traditional public schools that is due in August 2017.

Bridge PSL is proud to be a partner in Liberia and happy to engage in meaningful debate but will rightly seek to correct misinformation about the program. Every day we remember that we are here in

service of the needs of Liberia’s children. We stand ready to continue our support for, and work with, the Ministry’s bold and visionary reforms.

9. A UK Parliamentary committee recommended more learning gains evidence about Bridge be considered prior to further government investment, which we welcome.

Of course, investors must weigh up the evidence before investing in any organisation that claims to be helping children in developing countries. We encourage all donors to continue to make their investment decisions based upon learning gains and to look at the amazing results being achieved by Bridge pupils across Africa.

We need to take a step back from this argument and see the bigger picture.

In many developing countries, millions of children are not in school, and many of those who are, receive inadequate education. Specifically, the Education Commission estimates there are 263 million children and young people not in school and a further 330 million in school but not learning. In addition, UNESCO states that an extra 69 million teachers are needed to achieve the [UN education goals](#) for 2030. There is a real need that must be addressed urgently.

Bridge believes there should be truly great, truly free public schools. However, in reality, this is far from being the case, so Bridge seeks to help address the huge education imbalance between what is available and what is needed right now.

By demonstrating that high-performing schools are possible even on a developing country’s limited budget, Bridge has empowered governments and others to make informed decisions on how to improve learning. Far from acting separately from government or taking government “off the hook,” Bridge is already an education partner in many countries, helping governments to address educational shortfalls and improve learning outcomes.

We trust that with the evidence in hand, organisations that may have had false information will now work with Bridge and other schools in partnership to ensure that all children have access to attend a transformational school. We look forward to working with partners across the globe to close the achievement gap for children in the developing world. Let us all focus our efforts and attention on how to improve the lives of hundreds of millions of children.

Sincerely,



Dr Shannon May
Co-founder of Bridge International Academies