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A Marshall Plan for Education to Restore America's Prestige in the World

By Stephen Shames, founder of LEAD Uganda.org.

Within hours of Sen. Barack Obama winning the presidency of the United States, photographs began circulating on the Internet of people watching and rejoicing from around the globe -- from Jakarta to Joliet, from Johannesburg to Juneau. For many, an Obama presidency signals the possible beginning of America's restored standing in the world.

In his acceptance speech, Obama addressed the issue directly when he said, "To all those who have wondered if America's beacon still burns as bright -- tonight we proved once more that the true strength of our nation comes not from our the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals."

A sure-fire way President-elect Obama can immediately restore America's place and moral authority in the world and spur our economic recovery during his first term in office is to export one of our most powerful assets: education. Specifically, we need a Marshall Plan for Education that will help seed the ideals of democracy, liberty and opportunity that Obama described in his speech.

After World War II, Truman's Marshall Plan re-built infrastructure so Europe could withstand Communism. Today, infrastructure is intellectual. Knowledge is the pathway to economic growth. Education will also enable the world's youth to resist radical fundamentalism. The battle over the hearts and minds of the world's future leaders and future armies is being fought in classrooms. Al Queda and other terrorist forces educate orphans.

It's in our national security interest to provide an excellent education to children in Africa, Asia, and the Americas -- an education that gives them world class skills and trains them to be leaders. Education will transform their lives, build economic self-sufficiency, create hope from despair. Because the challenges we face can not be solved by military intervention or nation to nation diplomacy alone. We must build partnerships to confront the threats we face and to repair our economy. Partnering with the peoples of the world to educate their children is a good place to start.

Providing children with marketable 21st Century skills, will restore America as a visionary leader. And it will help our economy. President-elect Obama said, "Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything, it's that we cannot have a thriving Wall Street while Main Street suffers....we rise or fall as one nation; as one people."

The financial crisis taught us something else: that America's fortunes are inseparable from Main Streets of other countries as well in today's global economy. We've seen a domino effect in the world's markets after the U.S. economy started spiraling downward. Today's flat world will rise or fall as one.

A Marshall Plan for Education wouldn't require starting from scratch. There are already models, led by partnership between local governments and nongovernmental organizations on the ground in countries like Uganda and South Africa that are getting results. My organization, LEAD Uganda, a US-Ugandan partnership, molds leaders from motivated AIDS orphans, former-child soldiers, working children, and youth in refugee camps. We place them into top schools and imbue them with a strong work ethic, a devotion to democratic values, and a desire to serve. It works. Last term, one-fifth of our scholars were first, second, or third in their class. One child, who had been working in a rock quarry, received a \$20,000 scholarship to attend the African Leadership Academy, possibly the best high school on the continent.

There are thousands of young Barack Obamas out there. They must be sent to the best universities if they are to obtain the skills needed to lead others to a better future. We've learned that the most important principle that helps young people get there is to not to set limits on what they can achieve. Universal primary education, while laudable, is not enough to provide the change we need. We need to train leaders, which requires mentoring the best and brightest children so they can attend university.

Another key principle is to keep the footprint local. Most international aid is run top down from the West. We need to forge partnerships with teachers, and community leaders and train local staff and turn the program over to them. A bottom up approach creates strong partners and loyal friends.

Compared to the vast potential for international goodwill at stake, the cost of educating children in these countries is low. The equivalent of what we spend daily in Iraq -- \$329 million dollars -- could educate nearly a quarter million children at the best schools and universities in their countries.

President-elect Obama's historic ascendance to the White House has the potential to be a new dawn of American leadership. A signature policy would be a Marshall Plan for Education that trains smart, dedicated children affected by war, AIDS, and poverty to be leaders. Let's bring America's best principle — equal opportunity — to the disenfranchised youth of the world. When we help the world's outsiders realize their dreams, they will stand with us to create a safer world.

America used to be seen as the beacon of the world. We can become that again.