

June 05, 2012

IB's association with UNESCO is hardly a school takeover plot

by Jean M. Bernard

In the sometimes heated discussions over the last few weeks on the pros and cons of allowing communities to adopt the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum in New Hampshire schools, one of the charges frequently leveled against its parent organization (IBO) is that it has links to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Cast in such negative light, a misconstrued image of UNESCO as an 'anti-American' organization seeking to undermine the patriotism of New Hampshire's children has made its way into the public eye. From the point of view of an American educator who has been there, this image is not only outrageous, it is wrong.

To set the record straight on UNESCO, what it does, its priorities for education, and its association with the IBO, the facts speak for themselves: - As the UN agency committed since its founding in 1945 to the building of world peace, eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue, its 195 member states work together on issues that concern our common security, human rights, freedom of expression and freedom of the press. The United States is a full member and sits on UNESCO's Executive Board. A U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, currently made up of 84 members, meets regularly to advise the Department of State with regard to educational and other programs implemented in cooperation with UNESCO.

The work of UNESCO's Education Sector is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, which states that 'everyone has the right to education,' and further that 'parents have a prior right to the kind of education that shall be given their children. Since 1990, priorities for education have been framed by the global commitment to "Education for All," which works to assist nations in achieving such goals as universal access to primary education, literacy and gender equality by 2015. UNESCO's current emphasis on basic education in parts of the world devastated by poverty, conflict and natural disasters is not only a catalyst for economic and social development, but also a potent force against extremism.

Last May UNESCO and the U.S. State Department jointly launched the Global Partnership for Girls and Women's Education to take forward gender equality in secondary education and adult literacy. UNESCO works closely with American corporations and foundations on projects that are in our national interest. With Procter and Gamble, UNESCO supports girl's education in Senegal. With Microsoft and Intel, UNESCO and its partners are integrating new technologies into teacher training. With the Packard Foundation, UNESCO works to reduce girls' dropout rates in middle schools in Tanzania and Ethiopia.

The IB is one of 368 international NGOs (non-governmental organizations) with ties

to UNESCO. Since 1970, IB has enjoyed a consultative partnership which basically sets up a channel for the exchange of expertise and advice between the two organizations. Other NGOs with consultative partnerships include, Art Education for the Blind, B'nai B'rith International, the International Council of Museums, and the International Council of Women.

Constructive debate and dialogue is another defining characteristic of strong democratic societies that UNESCO promotes around the world. The belief is that when communities have the facts they can then come to reasonable conclusions and often find constructive solutions to the challenges they face. The plain truth is that UNESCO poses no threat to New Hampshire school children through its mandate to promote world peace, protect our common cultural heritage, ensure there is equal access to education, and that communities can access media to engage in civil discourse. The sum total of these efforts is the promotion of healthy communities that seek to engage globally and open up their markets to trade and the exchange of ideas. Such outcomes can only serve to benefit New Hampshire and the rest of the nation.

*Jean Bernard is a member of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. Previously, she served as one of five Americans appointed to UNESCO's Education Sector (2004-2009) and assisted in the Organization's efforts to improve the quality of education in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. She lives in Stratham, where she is the proprietor of Spectacle Learning Media.*