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On the Ground
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Fighting for Literacy, Library by Library

By **NICHOLAS KRISTOF**

[My Sunday column](#) is about John Wood, the founder of Room to Read, and his efforts to build libraries around the world. And maybe an even more effective part of the program supports needy girls who might otherwise drop out — 13,500 of them at the moment. I've watched Wood's efforts grow over the years, partly because of his marketing savvy and his compelling marketing story, and I'm delighted that I could attend the ceremony in Vietnam where he handed out his 10 millionth book.

The story appealed to me because of the way it fits into the larger picture. Increasingly I've become convinced that education is an effective intervention partly because of the way it has an impact on health, on population growth, on bringing women into the mainstream, and even on reducing social conflict. This doesn't work in every place at every time — one study in Kenya by Edward Miguel found that education could increase tribal identification and didn't particularly help build democratic norms — but it works better than anything else I know. And, incidentally, it's also why I write about education in the U.S.: whether in Vietnam or in the United States, education is the most effective escalator out of poverty.

There's an effort now, led by Australia and the former British prime minister Gordon Brown to launch a Global Fund for Education, modeled on the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and I think it's a great idea — even if this is a moment when no government wants to take on new commitments.

I'd welcome your thoughts on Wood or on the larger question of changing society through literacy.