

Community Schools Bring About Change in Mali

Aminata is one of thousands of children attending community schools supported through aid. These children live in rural, sparsely populated areas of Mali, where the government has been unable financially to provide and equip schools. Community schools are not paid for through Mali's formal education system. Instead, the pupils' parents pay the teachers' salaries. To cover school costs, parents pay monthly fees or the communities create communal farms to help raise the funds.

In 1995, USAID started a program to help these schools, such as providing supplies and training teachers. Where there was interest, the program helped secure the long-term survival of the schools by helping parents organize associations following democratic principles. Parent associations were formed which are the equivalent to PTA's in the U.S. These parent associations were trained to manage the school, recruit and hire teachers, and advocate to local authorities for services and financial support.

After several years of economic hardship, contributions to the community school in Aminata's hometown of Sama Markala stopped. The parent association drew up a comprehensive funding request and presented it to their mayor, who agreed that a percentage of the local tax revenue would support their community school.

Parent associations in other villages have approached their mayors as well, and the results have been positive. In Mali, according to decentralization plans, public primary schools are becoming the domain of communes - equivalent of districts in the United States. As the tax base eventually becomes stronger, communes will be able to take better responsibility for primary schooling in both public and community schools.

USAID's programs have empowered communities to help improve their education. Similar programs have also been implemented by other donors, and today Mali has some 2,550 community schools. USAID has switched its strategic focus from building schools to improving the quality of education.

Sama Markala is one of the first communities to approach a commune for financial support with the commune responding in a positive manner by using local taxes. The commune has taken control using a new transparent tax system. USAID's support to the communes in developing transparent tax systems, and to the community schools in developing parent associations, encourages the sharing of resources in the community.

For children like Aminata and her friends in Sama Markala, Mali, a new tax plan assures this school year won't be their last. When 10-year-old Aminata left her classroom at the end of the school year in June, she gave Monsieur Sacko, the teacher at her community school, a hearty handshake. "A bientôt!" she said with a smile. "See you soon." Aminata's school in Sama Markala is one of 1,645 that USAID helped through a small grants program which ended in 2003.



Photo: Alexandra Huddleston