SDG4—Education for All

What are the effects of the pandemic on primary and secondary education, why addressing these issues are important, and why these effects are significant to Christians.

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Introduction

To preface this document, I start off by stating the fact that in the aspect of education, I am extremely privileged. My name is Rebecca Bang, a seventeen year old rising senior in the United States at a well-established public school called Pomperaug Regional High School in Southbury, CT, an upper-middle class, suburban town. Both of my parents graduated with Master degrees in Divinity, Social Work, and Business Management, and with their support I have access to tutors, stable internet, and books. And yet, the COVID-19 pandemic struck a toll on my education.

In March 2020, emergency quarantine due to the Covid-19 pandemic terminated my ninth grade year and resulted in remote learning for all of my tenth grade year. When eleventh grade came around with in-person learning, the transition was overwhelming, most notably for two reasons.

First, the expectation of educational skill level was the same as prior to the pandemic while many students were far behind this expectation. I felt as if I was still a ninth grader inside the body of an eleventh grader as I had never got to experience knowledge such as how to study for a final, how to take effective notes, or how to approach a teacher for extra help. Such skills were not necessary during quarantine or remote learning but would have been inevitable in pre-pandemic school years. Fundamental skills that naturally develop over the course of primary and secondary education did not progress for myself or children around the globe, resulting in the gaping divide between where children are physically versus developmentally in 2022.

Secondly, the path to “catch up” seemed impossible. The cliche “learning is stepping stones” became evident when the pandemic removed many of the developmental steps and required children to make the difficult “jump” to their learning expectation. The success of a child’s “jump” solely depended on the child’s privilege. I had to move onto the Chemistry II curriculum but ineffectively learned the prerequisite Chemistry I during remote learning. Private tutoring caught me up to the “expectation” of my educational level, whereas many of my peers had to repeat grade levels because they couldn’t afford or access resources to make the “jump”. These two reasons I’ve stated were globally experienced by children aged between six to eighteen currently in primary and secondary education.

If I as an individual who was supported through privilege struggled to first catch up and secondly continue to move forward through education, what chance do the children who do not have educational resources have in combating the effects of the pandemic and moving forward in their education?
This is the reality of education in 2022. Children from families with higher income and with greater access to resources and technology will continue to move forward while underprivileged children won’t even “catch up” to where the others started.

Through my short experience at the International Social Justice Commission, I’ve learned how to apply the humanitarian and faith-focused lenses together. As Christians, we not only help our neighbors for the sake of ourselves but rather help our neighbors for the sake of our God, as stated in John 15:12: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Although I grew up in a Christian household, my eyes recently opened to how my faith can be applied to humanitarian issues for the kingdom of God. I believe that my recent enlightenment will serve as a voice for the millions of kids facing the pandemic’s effects on their education and lives. I hope that this report is an easy-to-follow thought process that connects both humanitarian and faith lenses under one scope of why education is critical for the glorification of God.

Through the guidance of Faith- Based Facilitation¹, this document will explore how the pandemic traumatically affected global primary and secondary students beyond the statistical numbers, why addressing these issues is critically important, and why this “educational crisis” negatively impacts the kingdom of God.

¹ https://www.salvationarmy.org/fbf
n 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly created the “2030 Agenda” with seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote progress for a better world. SDG4 is “Quality Education” with targets* that aim to “ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

According to the 2022 UN High Level Political Forum discussions, countries were already off track to achieving SDG #4 in 2019, but now in 2022 the progress is moving backwards as a result of the pandemic, notably for two reasons.

Based on UN Statistical Division’s pre-pandemic data from 2015 to 2019, children meeting the minimum required proficiency in reading at the end of lower-secondary education was between 70 and 90 percent in most high-income countries whereas that proportion fell below 60 percent in almost all middle- and low-income countries. Even pre-pandemic we saw that children’s education is in direct relationship with the wealth gap between high- and low-income countries.

In 2019, 17 percent of global children were out of primary and secondary education. According to the 2022 SDG report, the pandemic kept 90 percent of children globally out of school for an average of 41 weeks, with 147 million children missing over half of in-person instruction in 2020-2021.

Fortunately, technology allowed the classroom to come to the children during the time when children couldn’t come into the classroom. Although remote learning bridged many children back into their education, unfortunately for some this bridge was burned altogether. According to the 2022 SDG Report, 50 percent of global primary schools lacked computers and internet access in 2019, meaning that when remote learning was the only option after 2020, underprivileged children did not have access to necessary technology to continue their education. As a result of the current digital divide between rich and poor and urban and rural, remote learning still remains out of reach for at least 500 million students, indicating that these children have been away from education and cognitive development for more than two years.

It is clear that the issue of quality education was not a mere product of the pandemic, but rather an existing societal wound that was cut deeper and opened wider. With the wealth gap and digital divide posing as two major threats in the educational crisis, the privileged can recover and continue ahead while underprivileged children still lag behind. The biggest concern remains how to provide equal and quality education for underprivileged children to get “caught up” and continue momentum forward not only in their cognitive education but also in their God-given potential.

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4 Ibid.
Much of this document’s statistical evidence is drawn from my attendance at the 2022 High Level Political Forum (HLPF) and from the SDG Progress Report, both of which reviewed the yearly progress towards the 2030 Agenda goals. Based on my observations of the HLPF, although the pandemic greatly affected both primary and secondary education, it’s worth noting that for at least three reasons the pandemic has greater long-term effects on students in secondary education.

1. No opportunities for college or career

In the United States, children in secondary education range from ages twelve to eighteen, which is the developmental period of adolescence. Adolescence is the time when children reflect on who they are and who they want to be. An important development during adolescence is reflection on their future and how they will live independently. Such pathways include higher education in college or working a job.

The pandemic struck a toll on both pathways. With underprivileged teens lagging behind their privileged peers, not only did the wealth gap and digital divide widen but also the opportunity for higher education diminished. If the student can’t catch up to their pandemic-affected secondary education, how will they move onto higher education?

Additionally, work opportunities for the impoverished and uneducated are rapidly declining as technology displaces unskilled workers in assembly lines. This trend stabilises the job market for skilled workers in forms of technicians and leadership positions, and most often requires higher education. When the pandemic restricted in-person contact, companies had to find alternate ways of continuing business with limited people. Now that businesses have survived the early pandemic with limited workers, it is unlikely that they will rehire because less workers means less company expenses for worker’s compensation.

We see here how underprivileged children are faced with a double-edged sword. Without work, an individual cannot independently provide for themselves and their family, which cycles full circle back into generational uneducated poverty. In our pandemic-affected world, unskilled and uneducated people face difficulty finding work but lack the wealth and resources to become educated. Underprivileged children in our educational crisis face devastating long-term effects on their future.

It’s clear that education opens doors to opportunities for a child’s future, while lack of education is the root of children’s inescapable generational poverty. Even before a child grows out of adolescence their fate is sealed by their inherited poverty and underprivileged life.
Why are the negative effects on children’s future stability significant to God’s kingdom? Scripture states in Ephesians 2:10 that, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them”. God created every individual with great potential and talent to glorify His kingdom. The restriction of higher education and job stability severely limits an individual’s ability to grow into their potential and perform “good works” for God’s kingdom. Education is a significant tool to completely “walk in” God’s plans with no worldly obstacles standing in our way. In order to ensure the fulfillment of every child’s potential and to ensure future generations’ capability to glorify God’s kingdom, prioritising education is critically important.

2. Health

School provides support that goes beyond education; it also encompasses physical, mental, and emotional support to low-income students who cannot receive this type of support at home.

Physical

For low-income children, a wide range of physical support is supplied through school resources. According to UNICEF, more than 39 billion in-school meals have been missed globally since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Children mature physically between ages thirteen to eighteen; consequently, disadvantaged secondary education students relying on school meals are more likely to be physically underdeveloped with a limited window to develop physically, which will impact their future health. Additionally, some girls rely on schools for feminine hygiene products while others rely on schools for sanitation, indicating that the pandemic restricted healthy hygiene and sanitation for millions of children. The lack of proper hygiene and sanitation can be harmful for an individual’s health and future health. Schools provide the physical support of nutrition and hygiene to children, and the pandemic restricted and continues to limit access to this physical support, creating lasting physical effects on children.

Mental

Attending school gives children routine and structure to their lives. Everyday a child must wake up at the same time to attend school. Routine provides stability and balance to a child’s lifestyle.

According to UNICEF, the pandemic disrupted the daily routine of over 168 million children globally for almost a full year. The pandemic not only disrupted daily routine but also forced children to face social isolation, personal grief, and chronic fear.

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These emotions and experiences not only heighten uncertainty in a child’s personal life, but also heighten mental disorders. According to the World Health Organisation, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a 25 percent increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. The developmental phase of adolescence is critically dependent on the development of social interaction and free will. The pandemic oppressed both of these developments, weighing its mental strain heaviest on teenagers. Uncertainty from the lack of school routine and heightened negative emotions created a mental health crisis amongst global teenagers that could have harmful long-term effects.

**Emotional**

With the pandemic taking away the physical and mental support provided by schools, teenagers particularly find themselves emotionally vulnerable. At school there are teachers, guidance counselors and other trusted adults who provide emotional support for students. Especially for children who cannot receive emotional support from their parents or lack of parents, the lockdown of school was the final straw in the health crisis that followed the educational crisis. Without help from a trusted adult, children can bottle up negative emotions and struggle to grow out of their hurt and confusion, which can prevent them from reaching emotional maturity and trap them in their emotional damage even as adults.

**Development of Critical Thinking**

The pandemic’s effects on physical, mental and emotional health will have lasting effects, more notably on underprivileged children because they cannot access resources to improve these three aspects of health. Privileged children who have access to personal daily meals, organised guardians, and therapists will recover, but those who depend on the school environment will most likely not grow past their health trauma from the pandemic.

Why are the negative effects on children’s wellbeing significant to God’s kingdom? As 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 states, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body”, it is clear that our physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing is not a reflection of ourselves but rather a reflection of the Holy Spirit within us. This verse clarifies that, because Jesus paid the ultimate price of dying on the cross for our sins, “we are not our own” but rather physical stewards of the Holy Spirit. As the stewards of a holy temple, we must understand that all aspects of health are critical to God’s kingdom. In turn, to expand this understanding we must prioritise the health and wellbeing of children to ensure the health of God’s kingdom.

The development of critical thinking in the classroom goes beyond memorising the multiplication tables or all of the world’s countries. The skill of critical thinking is practiced when a child faces an issue such as an upcoming test, essay, or assignment that stimulates the thoughts, “What can I do to get the best result? How can I fix this situation?”
The ability to maneuver these two questions through critical thinking is a crucial skill for a child’s life success. The classroom is an excellent place to practice this life skill with minimal negative consequences.

When children practice identifying a problem and then independently figure out a solution, they are developing for the time when they face more serious life problems such as physical illnesses, financial troubles, or relationship issues.

Individuals who face these life problems and critically think of a solution can proactively solve the issue, but those who cannot think critically will be disadvantaged throughout life because they merely react to their surrounding situations.

Although there is no school curriculum titled “How to think critically”, the school environment stimulates critical thinking practice. With the understanding that school is the first place (and for some the only place) where children practice critical thinking, it can be understood why the educational crisis is a deeper issue than 70% of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries being illiterate (although this fact is urgently concerning).

The pandemic posed a threat to the development of classroom critical thinking, not only by closing schools that eliminated the school environment but also by creating a dependent rather than an independent environment of remote learning. Children with the privilege of access to remote learning also had immediate access to the internet, where teachers couldn’t hold students accountable for their academic integrity. Based on my experience, many students used the internet for undeserving accomplishments to the point where honest students were at a severe disadvantage in their course grade and grade point average (GPA) because they couldn’t compete with the internet. With this reality, privileged children became dependent on the internet to get high-achieving grades easily, eliminating any practice of independent critical thinking. The pandemic created environments for both underprivileged and privileged children that eliminated classroom critical thinking.
A fundamental purpose of primary and secondary education is the stimulation of critical thinking.

The book of Proverbs was written by the wise King Solomon, who shared his God-given wisdom for life application. From Proverbs, we see Scripture that supports three reasons why critical thinking is important:

**1. Escape from poverty equation**

Without quality education, the opportunity for children to practice how to think critically is eliminated; if a child cannot think then they cannot live independently; and if an individual cannot live independently then they are doomed to poverty.

With this cycle in mind, the following equation is the key to escaping the globally urgent issue of poverty:

**Classroom critical thinking x Life Application = Escape from poverty**

The biggest picture of education as the escape from poverty comes down to the idea that the classroom practice of critical thinking allows future adults to think of a solution out of poverty for themselves and their families.

According to UNICEF, one billion children are multidimensionally poor. Children are not born into poverty through any fault of their own, but education has proved through millions of success stories to be a major path out of poverty.

Scripture states in Proverbs 14:15 that “The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps”. The thoughtless continue to react to their surrounding situations, whereas the thoughtful actually think about their “steps”, which refers to the path of an individual’s life. Individuals who critically think about their “steps” are those who can think about how to escape poverty, which is why the experience of primary and secondary education is absolutely necessary to escape poverty.
2. Safety

Children are victims of countless evils, and as the result of the pandemic, the victimisation of children has skyrocketed.

Quarantine lockdown not only shut down the world but also shut abused children behind the door with their abusers. According to UNICEF, before the pandemic more than 100 million girls were expected to marry as child brides in the next decade. In 2022, as a result of the pandemic, 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides. Similarly, cases of domestic abuse and teen pregnancies have increased as the result of the pandemic, according to the 2022 SDG4-focused High Level Political Forum meeting. Domestic abuse damages children physically and emotionally, while teen pregnancies and child marriages severely limit girls’ childhood and potential.

As the world is opening up again, we see that children have been disproportionately victimised. Although we can’t change the exploitation of the past, education is key to shaping children’s future safety.

The fact that education develops critical thinking has already been established. Critical thinking is key not only to escaping poverty, but also for an individual’s physical, mental, and emotional safety.

Knowledge is the shield to what is wrong and the acceptance to what is right, as Proverbs 2:10-12 states: “Wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil”. Similarly to how Scripture explains that knowing Scripture in your heart and mind will protect you from Satan’s evil, victimised children can protect themselves through awareness that their abusive situation is wrong. School is a place where trusted adults can educate children not only academically, but also morally by teaching on different types of abuse and where to find help. Only by recognising their abuse will children be able to protect themselves by seeking help or standing up for themselves.

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8 https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage
9 Official meeting title: SDG 4 ad interlinkages with other SDGs- Quality Education
3. Education shapes leaders who shape our world

During my attendance of the 2022 High Level Political Forum, I observed an interesting common trait among the hundreds of global excellencies, representatives and leaders. Even from different countries, the leaders all had backgrounds of high education.

It is no coincidence that our local, national and international leaders rise from higher education. This observation brings more urgency to the educational crisis, because as children are becoming deprived of pandemic-affected education, the world is becoming deprived of leaders for future generations.

Proverbs 11:14 states that “Where there is no guidance, people fall, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety”. Scripture illustrates how people are in “safety” in guidance and counselors, that the safety of individuals and countries as a whole depends on leaders, and that without educated citizens or leaders, people will fall. Children are our future; the less they are educated means that there is no guarantee of leaders. Investing in quality education will guarantee the safety of our future society under intelligent leaders.
The educational crisis is an overwhelming issue. To progress towards true quality education, everyone must work together on both a personal and government level. As Christians, if we truly believe that everyone must live to their God-given potential and that Scripture is our ultimate truth, then we need to take proactive action in prioritising quality education. There are three key aspects that require immediate action:

1. Get Kids Back to School

According to the 2022 HLPF, 24 million learners in all grade levels may never return to school, and children with more disadvantaged backgrounds who are absent for a long time are less likely to return to school. These alarming statistics demonstrate that in order to prevent the continuation of the educational crisis, the first step is to bring children back into the school routine.

On a government level, leaders must prioritise mandates that require children of primary and secondary education age to attend school. Mandates such as the compulsory education laws in the United States hold parents and governments lawfully accountable for children’s school attendance. Without firm government accountability, students from disadvantaged backgrounds will inevitably not attend school due to lack of personal finances, finding work, or parental discouragement.

On a personal level, family and friends must understand education’s importance and consequences, as outlined previously in this document. Awareness of the severe consequences of lack of education could be enough for adults to encourage their children to attend school. In underprivileged families, school absenteeism is primarily due to a lack of personal finances, finding work, or parental discouragement that affect attendance. Parental prioritisation of education is the first step towards getting kids back into school. As Christians, encouraging involvement in education on the parental and student level is a crucial step towards achieving SDG 4.

2. Re-evaluate Students

As previously explored in this report, there is a gap between where children are physically versus developmentally in education. Re-evaluating students to establish a starting point is critical to move forward out of the educational crisis. Continuing to advance children into upper grade levels as if the pandemic didn’t happen will not only be discouraging to the child but also detrimental for our future society.

Accurately assessing where a child is, rather than where they should be, will provide the start to catching up and eventually advancing forward.

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On a government level, educational mandates for standardised testing can be an effective way to evaluate children to gauge where they are individually and where children are nationally. Then, temporarily adjusting standards and expectations with the understanding that the pandemic has had many negative effects on children can allow students to adjust and feel encouraged back into school.

On a personal level, it is critical for both parents and students to understand that being behind is not something to feel embarrassed about. Many parents and students feel uncomfortable admitting that a child is educationally behind when in reality children around the globe are in the same boat. Understanding that the first step to progress is acceptance will allow families to embrace re-evaluation of children to fit what is best for the child. Christians must spread the truth about quality education - that education is not just for the betterment of an individual but for the glorification of Christ - so that parents understand that prioritising appropriate education is the right thing not only for themselves but also for God. In order to move forward, we must look back to ensure that no child is left behind.

3. Invest in Teachers

Throughout the pandemic, teachers felt unsafe, underpaid, and undertrained to the point where many quit their profession. Teachers were along the frontlines during the pandemic and continue to be the shapers of children’s education, which is why investing in teachers is extremely important.

On a government level, investing in teachers’ safety, compensation, and training will help our world out of the educational crisis. Personal protection equipment (PPE), including masks, sanitisation, and proper guidelines to ensure safety from the COVID-19 virus, will be a worthy investment for teacher’s safety.

Additionally, assessing teacher’s compensation so that teachers feel that their responsibility as educators and frontline workers is properly accounted for will be encouraging to their work. Finally, investing in teacher training in both continued education and in education around teaching in a pandemic will provide assurance and confidence for teachers to handle a similar crisis in the future.

On a personal level, it is extremely important to share encouragement and appreciation for local teachers. Throughout the pandemic, teachers have notably been affected, so continued appreciation can encourage teachers in their work in shaping our children. As Christians, taking it upon ourselves to mentor and teach children valuable God-given skills - whether that be instruments, arithmetic, or athletics - can provide another pathway of education for disadvantaged children.
Implementing these progressive steps will put our world not only one step closer to leaving no one behind but also one step closer to glorifying God’s kingdom. As we’ve explored, it is important for Christians to prioritise education because God cares about the embodiment of education. Investing in attendance, evaluation and teachers is an immediate action we can take in order to renovate children’s education and therefore help to renovate the kingdom of God. A theme we see across Scripture is that Jesus’s heart is with the poor and with children because he cares for the vulnerable. Likewise, as Christians with a desire to become more like God we must also prioritise support for poor and vulnerable children. When left with the obstacles of poverty, danger, and no leadership (as explored in Step 3), a child faces significant difficulty reaching their God-given potential. Privileged children don’t have poverty standing in their way of success and even have aid to guide them there. This is not the case for disadvantaged children, as we’ve learned. To truly fulfill our Christian duties to become more like Jesus, we must take action to ensure these progressive actions happen in their local and national lives so that education can glorify God by enhancing the opportunity for all children to reach their God-given potential of success.
My town of Southbury, CT is a pretty, suburban area that is both aesthetically pleasing and comfortingly safe, while the adjacent city of Waterbury drowns in the tides of poverty and violence.

My parents are the Corps Officers for the Waterbury Salvation Army corps, and I have witnessed the drastic difference between the educational and developmental level of the children in Waterbury versus Southbury. Only 10 minutes apart, the high school graduation rate in Waterbury is 79 percent whereas Southbury’s is 98 percent. With these differences in mind, my father, Captain James Bang, and I started an initiative in the summer of 2022 to help ten Salvation Army kids under the age of fourteen with their math skills.

For context, within our corps everyone shares a love for BJ’s store chocolate chip muffins, and a few months prior I had expressed to my dad that Khan Academy was an excellent online educational resource that was the only reason why I survived my AP Chemistry and AP Biology class.

We first used the “Skills Proficiency Test“ on Khan Academy to evaluate each child’s math skill level. Many kids could not proficiently calculate basic addition or subtraction, even at age thirteen. In other words, as a result of underlying poverty and the pandemic, these kids were nowhere close to their grade level expectation.

After finding the appropriate skill level of the child (which was on average three grade levels below the child’s actual grade level), my dad made a deal with ten kids that if they practiced 20 minutes of math twice a day then at Sunday worship they would be rewarded a BJ’s chocolate muffin. Each night, I logged into each child’s account to check on their progress and texted daily reminders to each child’s parents.

The results were astounding. Within a month, the children got into a daily routine and their math skills began to develop through their practice. Some children began bargaining with my dad and me, stating that if they completed double the required practice time then they should receive two muffins, indicating development of critical thinking.
One fourteen year old was failing his Algebra class with a 13 percent, but within a month of encouragement his grade significantly increased to a 50 percent score. Just by having someone believe in him, this student’s grade is “catching up” and continuing to improve.

Our initiative proved that although the global education crisis is an overwhelming issue, the solutions may be simpler than we’ve imagined. Underprivileged children not only have inadequate wealth or resources, but many also don’t have trusted people who believe in them. Underprivileged children live in environments that are against their odds. Showing children that we believe in them and their future through our God is the key to their beating the odds. Creatively encouraging students to invest in their education and future is the key to overcoming the educational crisis and bringing glory to the kingdom of God. The most crucial place to recover quality education and glorifying God is at home.
The SDG 4 targets are the following:

**4.1 Universal primary and secondary education**
By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

**4.2 Early childhood development and universal pre-primary education**
By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

**4.3 Equal access to technical/vocational and higher education**
By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university.

**4.4 Relevant skills for decent work**
By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship.

**4.5 Gender equality and inclusion**
By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

**4.6 Universal youth literacy**
By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.

**4.7 Education for sustainable development and global citizenship**
By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.
https://www.salvationarmy.org/fbf
https://www.sdg4education2030.org/the-goal
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https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/secondary-education/

Scripture from English Standard Version