

## Review

# Menstruation as an education and gender indicator affecting girls dropping out of school

Anna Mugambi and Thomas Georgas\*

Institute of Education, University College London. UK

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**This paper examines the effect of menstruation on Kenyan girls' education with a particular emphasis on the connection between post-pubescent girls' menstrual management and education. We first look at the current situation as concerns education and gender indicators and then examine the current conditions that girls face in schools in the country. We use the Human Capital Approach to look at how the Kenya Government has tried to bridge the gaps between girls and boys in school over the years and then use a Public Health Approach to critically assess how the Kenya Government has addressed the issue of girls temporarily or permanently dropping out of school thereby affecting their education. Our conclusion is on a few recommendations on the need to address menstruation as a fundamental issue towards empowerment of girls in Kenya.**

**Key words:** Kenya, health education, menstruation, schooling.

## INTRODUCTION

Even now in the 21st century, all over the world, menstruation is seen as something private and secretive. Though the extent to which this is experienced differs in different countries, cultures and religious beliefs, menstruation is largely seen as something that should not be talked about in a polite society (Farage and Maibaich, 2006). In sub-Saharan Africa, the issue is compounded by high poverty levels that force millions of adolescent girls out of school, as a result of the fact that they cannot afford sanitary protection (Burrows and Johnson, 2005).

According to Muvea (2011) as cited by Ngugi and Nyaura (2014), studies conducted in Kenya have shown that menstruation causes the adolescent school girls to lose an average of 3.5 million learning days per month. This clearly has a negative effect on the girls' education as compared to the boys and is a real challenge that they face.

This paper examines the effect of menstruation on Kenyan girls' education with a particular emphasis on the connection between post-pubescent girls' menstrual management and education. We first look at the current situation as concerns education and gender indicators and then look at the current conditions that girls face in schools in the country. We use the Human Capital Approach to look at how the Kenya Government has tried to bridge the gaps between girls and boys in school over the years and then use a Public Health Approach to

critically assess how the Kenya Government has addressed the issue of girls temporarily or permanently dropping out of school thereby affecting their education. Our conclusion is on a few recommendations on the need to address menstruation as a fundamental issue towards empowerment of girls in Kenya.

## KENYA: GENDER AND EDUCATION

### Historical background

According to Onsongo (2009), Kenya has an education system where children have two years early childhood education, eight years of primary education, four years of secondary education and four or more years of university education otherwise referred to as the 8-4-4 system.

When Kenya gained independence in 1963 (Sheffield, 1971), the difference between the number of boys and girls in school was quite significant and girls' enrolment numbers to schools was very low (Kitetu, 2004). Aikman and Unterhalter (2005: 131) said that in 1963 just over 300,000 girls were attending primary school in Kenya and continue to say that this "represented just 34% of the total

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [tgeorgas@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:tgeorgas@ioe.ac.uk).

number of students enrolled". According to Kitetu (2004), in order to boost enrolment of girls in schools, some "pro-female initiatives by some African governments" were put in place during the 1970s and in the 1990s, and the low enrolment figures improved so much that in some African countries like Zambia, Kenya and Nigeria, girls constituted almost 50% of children who enrolled in grade one (Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), 1996).

Under colonial rule, access to education for Africans was very limited and UNESCO (2005) reports that Kenya, at independence, found itself with an education system that was not only racially segregated, its curricula did not suit the purposes of a newly independent African nation with different needs and aspirations than those of its former colonial master. Eshiwani (1990) reports that during this time, many of the African children of school age were not going to school and as a new nation, Kenya needed to change the racial and ethnic biases that had existed over the years with the new government pledging to build a cohesive, multiracial society using education to bring the communities together. The fact that under the colonial rule, many Africans were often denied education or given very few chances to go to school created a growing demand for schooling after independence (Eshiwani, 1993; Sheffield, 1973).

All over the country, the belief that education holds the key in promoting social and economic progress played an important role in the growth and spread of education in Kenya mainly as a means of providing qualified persons for the growing economic and administrative institutions left behind by the colonial government (Court and Ghai, 1974). Kenyans begun to see the life changing nature of education from those few Africans who had been given the chance to go to school and had finally been employed by the government in prestigious jobs.

The Kenyan Government has since independence committed itself to providing universal education to all primary school going age children (Republic of Kenya, 1998). This initially took the form of Free Primary Education (FPE), which was provided in the second decade after independence. FPE existed for more than 10 years and was later abolished under the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) (Bedi et al., 2002). The adoption of SAPs was aimed at restoring efficiency in all sectors of the economy and consequently raising the rate of economic growth (Central Bureau of Statistics CBS, 1997). What this meant for parents was that they had to contribute more towards the education of their children through the cost-sharing programme. Evidence from some research (Bedi et al., 2002; Kimalu et al., 2001) showed that one of the consequences of the cost sharing measure was a decline in school attendance and enrolment, since all parents were required to cover full costs, which included uniforms, textbooks and other instructional material for their children's education.

Under the first Kenyan President, Jomo Kenyatta, the government made several attempts to address the issues that affected the education system in general and started to reform education through the formation of various

education commissions, whose recommendations have shaped or changed the education system since independence to date (Bogonko, 1991).

In the 1970s, Kenya introduced the free and compulsory Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme for the first time and this brought about a dramatic rise in gross enrolment rate, as previously noted; from 47% in 1963 to 115% in 1980 (Mikiko et al., 2009). The reason behind the introduction of UPE, according to Kitetu (2004) was the declaration of Universal Human Rights by the United Nations and the announcement of UNESCO's Education Plan for Africa in 1961; in a conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a declaration of which Kenya is a signatory to. These statistics show a dramatic and impressive increase in the numbers of children going to school and this meant that more girls were going to school than before. Statistics available from UNESCO (2000), show that though the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) was high throughout the 1990s, regional and gender disparities still existed particularly in the North Eastern Province of Kenya where the GER was 32% for boys and 16.8% for girls as compared to the Western Province where the GER for boys was 102.6 and that for girls was 103.4.

#### **CURRENT SITUATION OF EDUCATION IN KENYA**

Education is highly valued in Kenya – it is seen as an important avenue towards economic opportunities and social mobility as well as an indicator of social status. According to Chuck (2009), when the first president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, encouraged self-help development in the form of the "Harambee" (Swahili for "pull together") Program, Kenyans responded by building primary and secondary schools and ignored other projects like health centres or roads. This high esteem of education is still held among most communities in Kenya today even though education equates to automatic employment (Kenya, 2008).

Formal schooling in Kenya currently comprises eight years of primary education, four years of secondary education and four years of university education, referred to as the 8-4-4 system and basic education is defined as 12 years of primary and secondary education (UNESCO, 2005). Education at all levels is provided by a partnership between the government, which runs the formal education system through the Ministry of Education, the communities, the private sector and the civil society, made up of various local and international non-governmental and religious organizations (UNESCO, 2010/2011). Many of the primary schools are co – educational, government run schools and few have boarding facilities (Mensch and Lloyd, 2008).

Kenya has received accolades on its management of her education sector and is seen as a country that is an example of significant improvements in access to high quality post primary schooling. Kenya is commended, according to Okuom et al. (2012) for the fact that through the years and even after the effects of falling enrolments in the 1990s because of the cost sharing program

introduced then, there has been a dramatic recovery of the education sector. With the realization that primary schooling is important for the achievement of national development, the Kenyan Government has made access to primary education a basic human right (Okuom et al., 2012).

Despite this, the 2012 Education For All Global Monitoring Report (EFA GMR) for Kenya states that one million children are still out of school in Kenya and that while this is almost half the number in 1999, it is still the ninth highest of any country in the world (UNESCO, 2012). The report also says that the poor, girls being the majority, have far less chance of making it to school; giving a percentage of 55% of poor girls living in the North-East region of the country as having never been to school as compared to 43% of poor boys in the region in the same situation.

The enrolment numbers are impressive, from a low of 892,000 pupils at independence in 1963 to an estimated 9.4 million pupils in 2010, whilst enrolment in secondary education has grown from around 30,000 students in 1963 to 1.7 million students in 2010 (MoE, 2012). The Kenyan Government attributes this significant increase to growth of population and the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) in 2003 and 2008 respectively (MoE, 2012).

According to MoE (2012), the Kenyan education system has eight goals: National Unity, Socio – Economic; Technology and Industry; Individual Development And Self-Fulfilment; Moral and Religious Values; Social Equity and Responsibility; Respect for and Development of Kenya's Rich and Varied Cultures; International Consciousness and Positive Attitudes towards other Nations; and Positive Attitudes towards Good Health and Environmental Protection.

It is however important to note that the Kenyan Government acknowledges the variation in equity in education. In its task force report on the re-alignment of the education sector to the Constitution of Kenya 2010 (MoE, 2012), the Government is very clear that “when considering Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) regions and urban slums vis-à-vis the rest of the country”; there is a significant variation in equity.

The introduction of FPE has also not tackled gender inequality in schools. Onsomu et al. (2006) note that even with the gender parity that has been realised nationally, there are still issues that need to be addressed for gender equality to be observed in schools all over the country showing the regional disparities with the example that whilst other provinces in Kenya have “recorded near gender parity”, North Eastern Province had the lowest number of girls enrolling into schools at almost 32%. The reasons for this are many and varied: cultural beliefs, lack of infrastructure and even a colonial hangover, but menstruation is also an important factor that needs to be analysed.

## **GIRLS, MENSTRUATION AND EDUCATION IN KENYA**

Adolescence is an obligatory transitional phase in life

from childhood to adulthood that comes with rapid biological changes as well as the development of reproductive capacity and changes in the sexual response system (Chebii, 2012). Adolescence is defined, by the United Nations, as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years numbering 1.2 billion in the world today. Both boys and girls as adolescents experience intense physical, psychological, emotional and economic changes as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood, though the effect on girls in schools is more intense than that of boys. Chebii (2012) points out that for many girls in school in Kenya and other parts of the continent, this period is characterised by challenges that not only negatively affect their education, but also cut into their school activities to such an extent that many temporarily or even permanently leave school thereby affecting their progression in school.

One of these challenges is menstruation which is a natural biological process that is experienced by girls from adolescence and in adulthood by women up to the time of menopause. Menstruation is one of the physical changes that occur in girls at the start of puberty and the average age of the onset of puberty for many girls is between 7 and 13 years (O'Grady, 2009). Menstruation is an important element in the restricting of school attendance and completion by girls and there are researchers and policy makers who have argued the same (Beyene, 1989; Herz et al., 1991; Mehrah, 1995; Mooijman et al., 2005; Sommer, 2010). A girl who misses 4 days of school every 4 weeks due to her monthly period misses 10 to 20% of her school days (Mooijman et al., 2005; Tjon and Ten, 2007; World Bank, 2005). Some studies that have been conducted in Kenya have shown that menstruation causes the adolescent girls to lose an average of 3.5 million learning days per month (Muvea, 2011).

Menstruation is unfortunately treated as a taboo subject in many countries and this has enabled a lot of myths and misconceptions from both the male and female populations. Girls are prone to feel a sense of shame and fear on the onset of menstruation (Oche et al., 2012) and the chances of boys teasing the girls because of a lack of understanding about the issue may cause even more challenges to the adolescent girls.

Poor sanitary facilities in schools, where girls are unable to access clean and safe toilets during their menstruation also affect girls and many opt to remain at home rather than face the shame of soiling themselves in the presence of their peers (Rembeck, 2008). A study done in a resource poor region in rural Kenya showed that the girls in some schools which did not have proper Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) management systems were forced to carry their used sanitary towels back home with them and as such preferred to stay at home during their menstruation period (McMahon et al., 2011).

The stigma surrounding menstruation may have significant physiological damage where the girls who are not properly educated about menstruation, have had no chance to completely understand what they are going

through or just because of poverty may use inadequate and sometimes dangerous materials such as dirty rags, straw, sand or newspaper (Kirk and Sommer, 2006). These can and do lead to external and internal infections and disability (Jewitt and Ryley, 2014).

Schools with poor sanitary facilities may also affect women teachers' experiences due to the inability of the school infrastructure to meet their health and hygiene needs as well as those of the girls (Kirk and Sommer, 2006) and the World Bank (2005) suggest that girls are likely to miss out on school work as the teachers tutoring time is reduced by 10 - 20%.

Besides facing problems at school, girls are also susceptible to intense physiological and symptomatic challenges during their menstrual cycle, another factor that hinders their access to education. Many of the girls may go through days of physical, psychological and behavioural changes; all symptoms of Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS), which has a wide variety of symptoms, including mood swings, tender breasts, food cravings, fatigue, irritability and depression (Reeder and Martin, 1987). Sharma et al. (2010) also point out that dysmenorrhea is one of the most common problems among girls between the ages of 15 and 25 and it necessitates periods of bed rest which may affect the girls' access to education and other social activities.

Beyond health issues, there are considerable cultural issues related to menstruation. In some communities in Kenya, particularly among the Somali and in the Rift Valley among the Kalenjin, female circumcision is practiced although it is illegal. Obuekwe and Egbagbe (2001) report that girls who have undergone circumcision, mostly those who have been "infibulated", will have additional health and hygiene problems whereby there may be blockages and build-up of blood clots created behind the infibulated area and can be a cause of long-drawn-out painful periods (dysmenorrhoea), odour, discomfort and the potential for additional infections.

Poor girls in rural or marginalized communities who receive minimal instruction on menstruation are bound to have experiences that are upsetting, bewildering and shame-inducing especially in patriarchal cultures where the men are the ones that define what is "good" or "bad" (Roberts et al., 2002). Women are thus, in such communities, seen as inferior, menstruation is the subject of derogation and what is normal for most women may be used as a tool for harassment.

The Kenya Government in 2011, as reported by Siringi (2011) and Jewitt and Ryley (2014), announced that they would step in and provide needy primary school students in public schools with free sanitary protection as part of the free education for all campaign. According to APHRC (2013), the Kenyan Ministry of Education launched the Sanitary Towels Program (STP) in public primary schools in 2012 with the aim of increasing opportunities for poor adolescent girls in order to reduce "absenteeism among girls, improving self-esteem and participation during instruction". The government, according to the report, took into consideration "the national poverty index, the gender parity index, ASAL characteristics and needy

areas based on Provincial Director of Education reports". But as Malusu and Zani (2014) reported, the government cut its 2013-2014 budget allocation to the programme by \$1 million, making the project unviable in the long run.

There are genuine gender concerns that are associated with menstruation and its management in schools that should encourage the government to help in making them not only accessible to girls all over the country but to make them more appropriate so that the girls are able to go about their daily routines with dignity.

### Human capital approach

*The notion of the right to education along with equal access and gender equality was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948).*

According to Crocker (2006), the "Human Capital Theory (HTC) holds that the well-being of a society is a function not only of the traditional stocks of financial capital, labour and natural resources but also of the knowledge and skills of individuals" and that an individual's education is an investment in their human capital; which in turn makes them more productive; benefiting not just him, but the society as a whole. Mulongo (2012) cites Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2004) and says that the HTC originated from the works of classical authors such as Adams (1776) and Alfred (1890) who talked about the fact that more education meant a higher return or investment. He explains that later authors like Mincer (1958), Schultz (1961) and Becker (1975) further built on this premise by reaffirming the importance of education in future benefits.

The human capital model is based upon that a person will spend a significant part of his lifetime to acquire skills that would enhance their productivity with the assumption that these skills gained will also have value in the labour market (Wambugu, 2003). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012), having more girls in education and ensuring equality in years spent in education between girls and boys accounts for about half of the economic growth in OECD countries in the last five decades.

Over the years, Kenya has made substantial progress in closing the gender gap in her education system (Shabaya and Konadu-Agyemang, 2004). Nevertheless, there still exist significant gaps between the numbers of girls in school as compared to those of boys and although the numbers of girls in school has risen dramatically, there are still regional disparities that have existed since independence and they have ensured consistent low school attendance of girls (Onyango, 2013). What this means is that the policies that have been implemented by the government with the aim of further narrowing the gender gap have not adequately addressed the girls who are marginalised, whether regionally or economically. This has not meant that the Kenya government has stopped in her quest to achieve equality in education as evidenced by the number of policies in place that address issues identified. Omwami and Keller (2010) say that the

reason behind the continued support of UPE is the economic concept of returns on investment using HCT.

When Kenya gained independence in 1963, there was a shortage of skilled labour to take over jobs that had previously been held by the whites (Kimenyi et al., 2006). The government took measures to counter this by dedicating a large portion of its budget to the expansion of education. Manda et al. (2004) say that in 1998, the education sector received 29% of the total government budget, which was at that time one of the highest in the African continent. The government still spends a huge amount of money on the education sector; according to EMR GR (2012), the increase of funding from 1999 is quite significant: in 1999, the government spent 5.4% of her GNP and this increased to 6.7% in 2010 which helped increase the primary net enrolment ratio from 62% in 1999 to 83% in 2009. The Kenya Education Sector continues to receive a substantial portion of the public spending allocations with the Kenya government hoping that an increase in the human capital of its citizens means an increase in its wealth (Ngware et al., 2007).

Kimenyi et al. (2006) say that where policy making is concerned, any returns to education are useful to policy makers in that they provide an indication of which sector of the education system the government should invest in and could also help in the monitoring and evaluating of policies that are too broad to serve the aim to which they were formed. An analysis is important in that a government may seek to implement policies that are consistent with human capital development if an analysis has shown that one policy does not serve any economic development.

Almost all major policy statements in education in Kenya begin with reference to the importance of education for individual and state prosperity. It is difficult to think of education, as much as emphasis is put on its intrinsic value, without observing the complete trust society has in its investment attributes to an individual (2006). The EMR GR (2012) report shows that there are huge disparities in access to education in Kenya. For example, there 55% of poor girls and 43% of poor boys in the North-Eastern part of Kenya who have never been to school and the chances of a child from a poor background to make it through to secondary school are much lower than a child from a well off family. Education performance is driven by policy guidelines and the disparities observed in Kenya could be because of the existence of some disconnection between what the government policy would like to achieve as opposed to the situation on the ground.

Some of the most important Kenya government education reports and commissions since independence include: The Omidia Report of 1964, The Gachathi Report of 1976, Mackay Report of 1981, Kamuge Report of 1988 and The Koech Report of 2000 (Kenya, 2008). These early reports, adopted from the colonial government, were the foundations upon which policies that fostered national unity and the creation of necessary human capital for the young nation. The then government implemented the Free Primary Education Policy, whose

aim was EFA, in 2003, as a campaign pledge and this policy had implications on access for girls in that it was concerned with "access, retention, equity, quality and relevance and internal and external efficiencies within the education system" (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) 2004: 3).

The introduction of FPE had the effect of huge enrolments in schools: from 5.9 million pupils in 2002 to 7.2 million in 2003, to 8.2 million pupils in 2007 (<http://www.washinschoolsmapping.com/projects/Kenya.html>) and though the government committed an estimated KSh. 50,000 for every primary school in the country, this commitment did not last one year.

The central foundation of the Human Capital Theory is that investment in education is a key promoter of economic growth (Schultz, 1961). Kenya has invested heavily on education since independence and this is clear by the fact that she has achieved gender parity in primary education enrolment and near parity at secondary level ([http://www.unesco.org/eri/cp/factsheets\\_ed/KE\\_EDFactSheet.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/eri/cp/factsheets_ed/KE_EDFactSheet.pdf)). There are still girls not in school, particularly those from marginalised communities all over the country. It is important to look at some of the likely reasons why this situation remains unaddressed.

### The public health approach

*"Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps girls and women to know their rights and to gain confidence to claim them. However, women's literacy rates are significantly lower than that of men in most developing countries" (UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund; <http://web.lb.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment2.htm>).*

A Public Health Approach is one that focuses on an organised effort to prevent health problems and prolong lives of the entire populations and not individuals (WHO <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story076/en/>). The definition of Public Health by Winslow (1920) and cited by Noland et al. (2004) describes it as the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infections, the education of the individual in principles of personal hygiene, the organization of medical and nursing services for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of disease, and the development of the social machinery which will ensure to every individual in the community a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health.

Public health aims to provide the maximum benefit for the largest number of people and it adopts a particular process for achieving this using four steps: defining the problem, identifying risk and protective factors, developing and testing prevention strategies and programs and ensuring widespread adoption by disseminating the information (Walden and Wall, 2014).

This paper uses the four steps to examine the efforts the Kenya Government made to address the issue of girls who drop out of school due to their monthly periods.

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Researchers are now beginning to look into the anecdotal evidence that seems to support the idea that girls are missing almost as much as 10 to 20% of school days due to lack of support during menstruation (The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) 2011). VicHealth (2007) says that a lack of gender equality, where there are rigid gender roles, for example, cultural norms around menstruation that look down at menstruation, as a taboo subject and a lack of access to resources and support systems which could support for the privacy of girls both at home and in school could be the reason as to why girls would rather drop out of school.

MoE (2012) states that “more pronounced disparities exist in arid, semi-arid and deprived areas in urban conglomerations” and also acknowledges “high levels of pupil absenteeism, ultimate drop-out and gender and regional disparities”. The plans that the MoE has put in its Policy Framework for Education (2012) to address this is to adopt and implement: the Policy Framework for Nomadic Education in Kenya and the Gender Policy in Education of 2007; expand and strengthen mobile primary schools and low cost boarding primary schools, where day schools are inappropriate, to improve access and retention and to operationalize the Nomadic Education Policy framework so as to address the challenges in the provision of education in ASALs among other interventions.

### Identifying risk and protective factors

The education of girls continues to be a challenge in some communities in Kenya. In particular, the cultural practice of early marriage and circumcision of girls because of cultural beliefs continues to be a problem. Achoka et al. (2007) conducted a survey on the intrinsic concerns of access to basic education in Kenya and they found that most disparities occurred in Nairobi and North Eastern provinces. The fact that there are obvious disparities in the access of education as mentioned above is also addressed by the Kenya government through its Policy Framework for Education (2012) through the Policy Framework for Nomadic Education in Kenya.

### Developing and testing prevention strategies and programs

In 2009, Ministry of Education (MoE) worked together with the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation (MoPHS) and other partners to develop a National School Health Policy and National School Health Guidelines; which would help the Government to utilize available resources in an effective and efficient manner towards child health ensuring that school age children, teachers, support staff

and community members access quality and equitable services for improved health. At present, an implementation plan is being developed (<http://www.washinschoolsmapping.com/projects/Kenya.html>).

Kenya lacks affordable sanitary towels for young poor girls and because the cost of sanitary ware and towels is beyond the reach of many girls potentially causing infections, the Kenya Finance Ministry in 2011 allocated \$3.4 million in the fiscal budget to provide free sanitary pads to school girls in an effort to remove a major barrier to education in the country (Bishnoi, 2011).

### Ensuring widespread adoption by disseminating the information

Because menstruation is such a taboo subject for many Kenyans, there is need to disseminate correct, current and concise information on how it affects both boys and girls. The government in its Policy Framework for Education (2012) says that it plans to review and disseminate both print and electronic appropriate teaching and learning materials to ensure equality and address gender issues.

## CONCLUSION

Gender equality is not just about economic empowerment. It is a moral need for any country to develop economically. It is about fairness and equity and includes many political, social and cultural dimensions. Gender equality nonetheless is also a key factor in self-reported well-being and happiness across the world.

There is need to recognize the importance of exploring the link between gender and education particularly girls' education and the overall national development. First, this is critical in order to empower both females and males through education and skills development so as to reduce the social and economic inequalities in society. Secondly, there is need globally, regionally and nationally to adopt specific strategies to ensure equity in opportunities including education.

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