

## **Confronting a Conundrum in Afghanistan**

### **Security Requires Better Schools: Better Schools Require Security**

Four persons, each with past associations to Teachers College, recently undertook a fact finding and planning mission, focused on schools, to Paktika Province in central eastern Afghanistan. Paktika, bordering Pakistan, is a major site for the ideological war in progress in Afghanistan. This report of the August mission illustrates the complexity of rebuilding education in places that are not safe.

#### **Background**

The Paktika project, though not supported by Teachers College, is an extension of a long and honored history of collaboration between Teachers College faculty and Afghan educators. From 1954 until shortly before the Soviet occupation in 1979, Teachers College faculty worked with Afghan educators to build a secular government-sponsored education system.

Knowing this history, Carol Bellamy as Executive Director of UNICEF asked TC faculty to return to Afghanistan in 2003 and assist with the reconstruction of the state school system; a system that had been altered by Russian educators during the occupation and then decimated by civil war and Taliban rule. From July, 2003, through February 2005, a faculty/student team headed by Barry Rosen, then Director of External Affairs at Teachers College, lived in Kabul and worked with Afghan educators to write new primary school textbooks and create a modern primary school teacher education curriculum.

From the start, UNICEF defined its role as ‘seeding’ these curriculum projects rather than funding them to completion. Near the end of the non-renewable UNICEF contract, members of the TCCU Team were invited to Bagram Air Force Base north of Kabul by US Army Major Michael R. Fenzel to discuss civilian/military collaboration in the curriculum/textbook project. The conversation stopped when funding could not be secured. The TCCU Afghan Education Project ended in December, 2005, following a seminar in New York for math educators from Afghanistan funded by the US State Department and two private foundations.

#### **LT. Colonel Fenzel asks, ‘Will You Come to Paktika?’**

The story continues, though. Mid-May 2007, Maj. Fenzel, now Lt. Colonel Fenzel, sent Mr. Rosen an e-mail asking members of the team he met in 2005 to help the Governor of Paktika develop education in his province. The request was appealing because the central Ministry of Education controls reform of the state system and reform designed and initiated in Kabul rarely reaches all provinces. This was an opportunity to work directly on reform at the provincial level and coordinate provincial reform with national educational policy. Colonel Fenzel’s invitation also created the opportunity to try

out an untested plan, developed by the TCCU Team in 2003, to address a critical teacher shortage by preparing ninth graders to teach while completing the ninth grade. After passing two competency tests as the plan requires, these ninth grade graduates would teach half day and continue their own education the other half of the school day.

The two senior members of the 2003-05 TCCU Team (Barry Rosen and Margaret Jo Shepherd) sent a prospectus to the Governor of Paktika via Colonel Fenzel describing a three year project wherein the ninth grade teacher preparation program would be implemented and evaluated in two provincial districts the first year, modified, as indicated, and extended, as feasible, to other provincial districts in years two and three. All primary school classrooms would be staffed by teachers with at least a ninth grade education and entry level teaching skill by 2011. The project staff would include a mix of Afghan and international educators with two of the international educators in residence in Paktika.

Within twenty-four hours of clicking 'send' for the prospectus, we had second thoughts about setting goals for an education project in a place we didn't know. (We knew a lot about education in Kabul but, as indicated previously, Kabul doesn't represent Afghanistan.) We sent a 'hold' message to Colonel Fenzel and prepared a second prospectus for a month long fact finding visit culminating, hopefully, in a Paktika version of the ninth grade plan approved by the Governor and the Minister of Education.

From this point on, 'we' refers to Paul Ackerman, a retired US Department of Education Senior Officer with significant international experience and a Columbia PhD, and Margaret Jo Shepherd, Hamid Alakozai, and Barry Rosen, members of the TCCU Afghan Education Team 2003-2005. Though we left with permission from President Susan Fuhrman to associate ourselves with Teachers College, we had individual contracts with the US Army.

### **Paktika; Facts, Figures, and a Few Opinions**

Located on the eastern border of Afghanistan adjacent to Pakistan, Paktika, ethnically Pashtun, is considered one of the more remote and conservative provinces in Afghanistan. It is also a relatively small province, both in population (approximately 350,000 residents) and area (approximately 19,500 square kilometers). The current Governor, Akram Khpalwak, appointed by President Karzai in 2006, is 35 years old and holds a medical degree from Kabul University. This is his first political appointment.

Because of deep snow accumulations in winter and deforestation, the province is subject to devastating flooding. This fact coupled with a forbidding terrain of rugged mountains and vast stretches of desert discourages infrastructure development. Consequently, Paktika is a particularly difficult place to live and people born there who have the means emigrate to more hospitable parts of the country, especially Kabul.

Literacy rates in Paktika are difficult to determine but are estimated at 10% for women and 30% for men. The number of students registered for school in 2007 is estimated at 40% of

eligible boys and 10% of eligible girls. (Notice that these percentages track the literacy estimates.) Most students, both boys and girls, leave school between grades four and six but the attrition rate is four to five times higher for girls than boys. There are 15 high schools in the province; none enroll girls. In 2005, 3,103 male and 274 female teachers were listed on the Ministry of Education payroll. Of these, 598 male teachers and 12 female teachers could claim an education of grade 12 or higher. After an exhaustive search, we concluded that neither the central government nor the international aid community is working on education development in the province. We found one small government-sponsored literacy program in Sharana and one tutoring program in Orgun-e funded by the German Government. (The German-sponsored program is scheduled to leave at the end of the current funding cycle.)

### **Reconstruction Requires Security**

The US military has seven Forward Operating Bases (and four combat outposts) in Paktika. These military installations wouldn't be there without cause so we knew before leaving the States that people were killing each other in Paktika. We assumed the conflict was confined to eastern provincial districts (near Pakistan) and planned to establish the ninth grade teacher education project in the northwestern corner of the province. We could extend the work, we thought, into other districts as armed conflict and the use of explosive devices decreased. It was a surprise to learn that our suppositions about confined conflict in the province were wrong. Though more frequent in some areas than others, there is insurgent activity throughout Paktika. And, more important, we soon learned how little we knew about security procedures necessary to live and work, protected, in a combat zone.

While we knew we were staying on military bases for the month, we didn't know a military base had to be a permanent residence for US citizens working in Paktika. We immediately saw that living on a military base would separate us from the teachers with whom we were working but that wasn't the most serious problem. Travel in an armored convoy isn't so easy to adjust to the work schedule we envisioned. First, the preparation (security briefings and putting on helmets and lead vests) takes time (and energy until you get used to it). More important, convoys are supposed to vary destinations and routes daily as an added security precaution. This is a problem if you need to be at the same school at the same time on a daily basis. And, a convoy for three civilians requires four armored humvees and sixteen soldiers. One convoy just for us, six days a week? We wondered about feasibility, including cost.

Finally, we needed escorts and guards when we weren't on a base or in a convoy. The image of soldiers with guns in schoolyards and classrooms is jarring, to say the least. It may be less problematic for children and teachers in Afghanistan than for us but we worried about the psychological impact on our Afghan colleagues and the students. Our most pressing and prominent concern, though, was the thought that we might be creating targets for insurgent violence. Yes, we had concerns for ourselves but we had equal or greater concern for the students and teachers. (According to a 2006 Human Rights Watch Report, Paktika ranks fifth among Afghan provinces in the number of acts of violence that occur against students, teachers and schools and the number of threats of harm [posted as

‘night letters’] to parents who send their children to school.)

Security procedures are essential in Paktika. We are grateful, without pause, for the care taken to assure our safety. And, reconstruction projects of all sorts, building schools, roads, irrigation channels, and staffing and stocking health clinics, for example, are in progress in Paktika. The ninth grade teacher education plan requires more continuous personal interaction between ‘outsiders’ and Afghan civilians than these projects, however, We concluded that security procedures and the ninth grade teacher education plan were at odds with each other.

### **Security Requires Reconstruction**

Colonel Fenzel says with conviction, ‘The war in Afghanistan won’t be won with bullets alone.’ The Department of Defense, the State Department, and the US Agency for International Development apparently agree with him. In 2002, responding to the need to accelerate reconstruction in Afghanistan, these agencies recommended the creation of unified civilian-military teams composed of 60 to 100 people (predominantly military) who would have joint responsibility for enhancing security and engaging in humanitarian aid and reconstruction. The civilians on these teams are usually representatives from government agencies but can also be Afghan citizens. Originally named Joint Regional Teams, President Karzai asked to re-name the units Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), perhaps wishing to emphasize the reconstruction dimension of their work. Twenty-five PRTs are functioning in Afghanistan; of these, 16 are US teams and 9 belong to NATO countries.

Paktika has an active Provincial Reconstruction Team. Security patrols and intervention in factional conflicts are routine. We arrived during the groundbreaking for a new school and also saw the framework of a school already under construction. A newly arrived USAID-sponsored physician was working on a plan to improve health care throughout the province. We were privileged to hear two soldiers share architectural plans for an agriculture/vocational center with Paktika’s Deputy Governor. Most important, we saw the support for and participation by the provincial government in the PRT’s work.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams are controversial. We know more about the civilian side of this controversy than about any reservations the military might have. Understandably, aid organizations fear that close association with soldiers increases security risks for aid workers. Additionally, aid workers want their work to be perceived as independent from armed conflict and politically impartial. They want to create and preserve ‘humanitarian space’ separate from the spaces in which conflict occurs. They claim this space exists both in peoples’ minds and on the ground and that linking aid and military action compromises that space.

We aren’t fond of this rhetoric because we believe the link between military responsibility for security and aid/reconstruction has to be more nuanced than the rhetoric allows. We see, though, that military security procedures and some reconstruction programs may be incompatible. But retreat is the consequence of refusing to work together. Paktika is a

primary example of this consequence. Aid organizations normally involved with education have either delayed programs in Paktika or have withdrawn from the province. The children in Paktika wait to attend school and their parents lose hope.

### Changing Course

Paktika needs more teachers immediately, hence the interest in preparing ninth graders to teach, but Paktika, which hasn't ever had a formal means for educating teachers, also needs professional training for practicing teachers. While security practices create obstacles to the education of new teachers, some of those obstacles can be circumvented to enable the education of practicing teachers.

Teacher educators worldwide have only recently learned what medical educators have long known: teachers (physicians) learn best through practice that is coached by a more experienced teacher (physician). In other words, competent local teachers are key to professional development for their less experienced colleagues. Think what this means with regard to the security issues previously described. A small group (one per district) of Paktika teachers, judged competent by peers, can be taken to a relatively safe place and educated to be teachers of other teachers. When they return to Paktika, they will resume their work as teachers but with other teachers as their students. 'Outsiders' won't be present; armored convoys won't be necessary; and the normal work of the school won't be interrupted or disrupted.

We propose, then, to educate a corps of teacher/coaches, called Mentor Teachers, who will be responsible for upgrading the professional skills of other experienced teachers in the province. The intensive professional preparation (eight weeks in Spring, 2008) that will jumpstart their transformation from competent teachers to Mentor Teachers will occur at Sayid Jamaluddin Pedagogical Institute near Kabul University and be led by an Afghan and an international teacher educator using the Ministry of Education's official inservice teacher education curriculum. To promote the creation of a relatively stable Mentor Teacher corps, candidates will sign a contract with Governor Khpalwak agreeing to teach in their districts for at least five years in exchange for certification as Mentor Teachers with all costs for earning the certification paid through the Governor's Office.

Competent teachers become competent Mentor Teachers through supervised practice. Consequently, two additional seminars will be held at Sayid Jamaluddin, one during the winter school holiday in 2009 and the second during the same holiday in 2010. Sixty teachers from Paktika and ten or eleven of the aspiring Mentor Teachers will participate in each seminar, the purpose of which is to use the teachers as students for the Mentor Teachers as they learn, under the supervision of the teacher educators, to teach teachers.

The outcome from these three seminars is significant. By the start of the school year in March 2010, Paktika will have twenty-one qualified Mentor Teachers and 120 classroom teachers who have received 200 hours of inservice education from the Mentor Teachers and can help provide professional education to other teachers in the districts in which they are

employed..

### **Security and Better Schools: Particulars Over Generalizations**

Speaking in Canada in October of this year, Rory Stewart, a former member of the British Foreign Office whose experience in countries in conflict (Indonesia, Montenegro, and Iraq as well as Afghanistan) is impressive, asserted that reconstruction in Afghanistan should ‘focus on parts of the country, namely the north, that actually support reform and development’. With deep respect for Mr. Stewart’s experience and his concern about unrealistic reconstruction goals, false hope, and dishonest claims of progress, it is defeating of efforts to support national unity in Afghanistan to withhold reconstruction from some regions in the country while developing other regions. This is the reason that security/reconstruction alliances, especially in insecure areas, are so important.

Using Paktika as the example, we believe that education development can’t occur in the neediest regions in Afghanistan without military assistance. We argue that military/development partnerships in these regions need to reject generalizations about what can/can’t or should/shouldn’t be done and focus on goals that are significant and attainable given local resources and security conditions. As the experience in Paktika indicates, these goals, though significant and attainable, will not be sufficient.

The Teacher Mentor plan we have settled on for Paktika is far from sufficient. Beside the obvious fact that it doesn’t educate new teachers, it also has internal limitations, the two most serious being the number of Mentor Teachers it produces relative to the need for such teachers and the absence of a plan to support the aspiring Mentor Teachers between the seminars. It’s a start, though, and with imagination and good luck, we expect to figure out, using the Provincial Reconstruction Team as the planning and implementation unit, how to expand teacher education in Paktika within the limits of security constraints.