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## *Obama must keep promise on global education*

By Georgia Platts

I have a new hero, and I don't even know her name.

She's a 9-year-old Afghan girl whose father forbid her to go to school. Seeing her friends' excitement, she sneaked in anyway. She could have been publicly whipped for disobeying her father, but this was too important to her.

One day, her father received a letter from a relative in Pakistan, but he was illiterate. This little girl bravely told her father that she could read it for him. Instead of beating her, he embraced his daughter, feeling proud that she could read.

I heard this story from Julia Bolz,

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### **SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS**

a Seattle woman who started building schools in Afghanistan several years ago. In this poor, war-ravaged place, where only 30 percent of girls reach the fifth grade, Julia began to transform a society through education. Her organization, "Journey with an Afghan School," has built 15 schools and repaired 15 others destroyed by war. Today, 20,000 Afghan children are enrolled in these schools.

Unfortunately, there aren't enough Julias. Worldwide, 75 million children are unable to attend even primary school. They are denied access to education because they live in nations that charge school fees originally imposed by the International Monetary Fund

and the World Bank. Families that struggle to put food on the table can't afford these fees. If a family can afford to send some of their children to school, it is often girls who are left out.

It's a tremendous opportunity squandered. Education, especially for girls, is key to fighting poverty and disease, promoting democracy and improving economies. Education decreases the likelihood that children will be sold into marriage or slavery. In Afghanistan the going rate is about \$14.

On average, in poor countries where girls are educated, each year of education beyond grades three or four leads to 20 percent higher wages and a 10 percent decrease in the risk of children dying of preventable causes. Education is so strongly associated with avoiding HIV that it is known as the "social vaccine." Education also promotes

democracy by building respect for the rule of law while teaching leadership skills and civic responsibility. Good schools also keep kids out of extremist institutions that preach hate.

President Barack Obama, during his presidential campaign, stated his commitment to education by pledging at least \$2 billion annually for a Global Fund for Education. But we've heard nothing of that promise since he took office.

With a Global Fund for Education, nations struggling to remove educational barriers, like school fees, could submit national education plans and apply for the funding to help educate their children. Such a mechanism already exists with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, which has already saved more than 3.5 million lives.

In 2000, the nations of the world agreed, as part of the Millennium

Development Goals, that education would be available for all children by 2015. But that won't happen without bold action like a Global Fund for Education.

The G-8 summit in Italy last week missed an opportunity to launch this initiative. Respected moral leaders Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus and Queen Rania of Jordan appealed to the leaders of the world's richest countries to announce an agreement to launch a Global Fund for Education by year's end. They failed to rise to the occasion.

Millions of children, like that 9-year-old girl in Afghanistan, live their lives with quiet courage. It's time to reward that courage with hope for a better life through education. It's time for Obama to lead by initiating a Global Fund for Education.