



**Welcome Remarks by Ambassador Louise V. Oliver,
Permanent Delegate of the United States of America**

**AAAS/UNESCO International Experts Conference
on Science & Technology Education**

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UNESCO Headquarters
1 rue Miollis, Paris**

Thank you Dr. Omenn.

Mr. Director-General, Distinguished Colleagues,

I sit here this morning with the strains of the Star Spangled Banner and the Marseillaise still in my head. The celebrations commemorating the events of D-Day were glorious. Unlike the weather on D-Day sixty years ago, we had brilliant sunshine, which you can tell from the sunburn on my face. Fortunately, it hides the dark circles under my eyes. I had numerous opportunities to speak with the veterans during the weekend, and their stories were extraordinary. Veterans, many of whom were in their 90's, described how they accomplished the impossible. How different things might have been for them if they had had the benefits of today's advances in science and technology.

As the Director-General mentioned in his remarks, our First Lady, Laura Bush, visited UNESCO on Saturday to be briefed by the Director-General on UNESCO's initiatives in education. During that meeting, we discussed, among other things, the problem of illiteracy and the need to improve science education.

Therefore, it is a great pleasure for me to be with you this morning for the opening of this important meeting which will deal with that issue.

As the Director-General has mentioned, this is the first joint US-UNESCO meeting to be held in Paris since the US's return to UNESCO last fall. The opportunity to help organize and participate in meetings like this are an important aspect of our re-engagement with UNESCO, and I hope this is just the first of many such meetings.

Improving the quality of basic science and mathematics education is a goal of many countries around the globe. Indeed, new initiatives to teach math and science are being established around the world in an attempt to address not only the current shortage of science and engineering professionals, but also the level of science literacy in the general public.

Yet many of these programs seem to exist in a vacuum owing, in part, to a lack of communication among educators and policy-makers in different countries. This conference provides an opportunity to share information about effective teaching methods among practitioners from different countries, as well as develop coordinated research and evaluation strategies that can contribute to overall improvements in basic science and mathematics education for all.

As the Director-General has pointed out, we know that the number of students interested in studying math, science, and engineering at the secondary and tertiary levels has been declining in recent years. In order to reverse that trend, we must find ways to develop an appetite for these areas at an early age when young inquisitive minds are eager to learn.

Of course one never knows what will happen when children are introduced to science. A few years ago one of my children brought me a Mother's Day present home from school which turned out to be a fish that she had dissected, along with the various items that had been removed from the fish. Needless to say, I had a bit of a problem trying to figure out how to display that particular gift.

Several months ago UNESCO hosted an event to celebrate the achievements of five world-renowned women scientists who had been selected by the Women in Science Program, a program established by the French cosmetics company, l’Oreal, and UNESCO. After receiving their awards, each of the honorees spoke for several minutes about their careers. All five of them said that the main reason that they had succeeded in their respective fields was that they had an intense curiosity that constantly drove them in their pursuit of knowledge. In addition to teaching specific skills, programs in basic education must foster a spirit of inquiry and a desire to learn.

The five honorees also shared a desire to be mentors to young women interested in science. Encouraging scientists, engineers, and mathematicians to get involved in the educational process not only by working with students, but also by working with educators to improve curricula and teaching aids will help strengthen basic science and math education and inspire students of all ages to become interested in these areas. Since teachers are the key to quality education, we must also ensure that they themselves are well-educated, and that they have access to continuing professional development throughout their careers.

Learning, after all, is a life-long process for us all, and today, at this meeting, we hope to learn more about how other countries are working to accomplish the same ends. We hope to be able to share information on how to prepare teachers effectively, and how to maintain the enthusiasm of students through possible new teaching aids and interactive methods, and how to use technology productively to collect and share promising practices.

We also hope that this meeting is only the beginning of an international dialogue on how best to educate young people in the fields of science, engineering, and math. Given the need of all countries to develop their natural resources, protect their environments, strengthen their economies, and improve the quality of life for their citizens, we must work together to try to extend quality education for all, particularly in these critical areas.

I might add that I appreciate the Director-General’s comments about the transit of Venus across the sun that will take place tomorrow morning for the first time in 122 years. I chose to study astronomy during my freshman year in college, expecting that I would spend much of my time gazing at the stars and planets and discussing the possibility of life in other parts of the universe. Instead, I spent my entire time on massive equations trying to calculate the speed and distance of objects in space. Having had very poor preparation in math, the entire year was a nightmare, which may be one reason why I feel so strongly about math education for young people.

In any case, I would like to thank UNESCO and the American Association for the Advancement of Science for organizing this meeting, and the U.S. National Science Foundation for all its support. I wish you success in your discussions about education in science and technology, and if possible, I will try to join you every now and then as I know there is a great deal I can learn from you all.

Thank you.