

TURKEY – EDUCATION SECTOR STUDY CONFERENCE

ANKARA, MARCH 17, 2006

Good morning. On behalf of the World Bank it is a pleasure to welcome you to this conference on preschool through secondary education. I would like to thank our co-host, the State Planning Organization, as well as the many contributors to the report on education being discussed today, including the Education Reform Initiative, the Ministry of National Education, the Board of Education, SPO, YÖK, the Ministry of Finance, the Treasury and the many academics and education specialists represented here today for their contributions and comments.

Education reform is the single most important reform facing Turkey today. Education of today's Turkish youth will determine the economic and social prospects of the Turkey of tomorrow. An educated Turkey is not only a more prosperous Turkey, it is a Turkey which will be ready for and be more attractive to enter into the European Union.

An educated Turkey will bring better living standards, better health indicators, better skills and better jobs. Education can help close the gap between rich and poor in Turkey, between east and west and between men and women in society and in the labor market. Without raising education levels in Turkey, the prospects for entering the EU will be less. Yet education reform in Turkey is not a requirement of the EU, the World Bank, the IMF or any external organization. It is a reform that must only come from within Turkey based on the willingness of Turkish citizens, organizations, the private sector and government to address the substantial challenges to raise educational standards in Turkey.

Over the past 10 years, Turkey has made major progress in many areas of education reform, such as near universal enrollment in basic education, improvements in equity, an increase in financing, having its top students performing at world class levels and modernizing its curriculum.

But as we will discuss today, huge challenges lie ahead in areas like low pre-school enrollments, attendance of girls, participation at secondary schools, making vocational and general secondary school graduates equipped to deal with a more competitive work environment, and bringing school quality, and teaching, up to international standards. In addition, Turkey faces major challenges on the opportunities for secondary school graduates to find places in post-secondary universities and professional schools, where the demand far exceeds the number of available spaces. This issue of post-secondary education is the subject of a separate study which I hope will be completed and discussed later this year.

Yes, there are enormous challenges ahead for Turkey. But there are enormous gains to be realized from education reforms, gains which are wanted by, demanded by the population. No matter where I travel in Turkey I hear two things citizens want, more jobs and better education for their children. But as we will discuss today, better education and better jobs are directly connected.

Yes, I have a passion for education in Turkey. I went to Orta Okul, Lise and Üniversite here and feel privileged to consider myself a product of Turkey's education system. But Turkey can do better – must do better – on education if it is to catch up with and pass Europe – which it definitely has the potential to do. This will not be easy nor without controversy. Already there is much debate in Turkey about highly emotional issues affecting the educational system. But I hope these debates will not drown out the recognition that education reform must continue and must accelerate, with the support of all institutions in Turkey as well as parents and students. Education reform is too important to be hijacked by emotional debates. I hope that through this report and the discussions of today on the study and how to implement its recommendations a national consensus can emerge to accelerate reforms. Parents and students look to all of us to take up this challenge. This they deserve and I hope they will not be disappointed. Through this conference, through this study, through these discussions, let us pledge to move education reform forward, not in three or five years' time, but now, today.

Thank you.