

In Mali, Top Students Get Vegetable Oil



Photo by CRS/Staff

Not long ago, Aminata Yattara sat at home on a stool in the dirt, pounding millet and dreaming about the day she could toss the pestle and pick up a pencil. School dominated her thoughts on her way to pull water from the well. She thought about it when she helped her mom wash dishes.

Aminata proudly shows the oil she received for attending school regularly.

But with four siblings and a poor family, Aminata's chances for school seemed slim. And in this hot, dusty district in Mali where only about a third of girls go to school, the deck was stacked against her.

So she pumped water and pounded millet, day after day, always jealous of her older brother who attended school.

But Aminata was lucky. Her father, a rice and millet farmer, had once been to school, but quit. Fortunately, this 40-something father of five remembered the value of education.

"Today, I regret that," Haba Yattara says. "At that time, I did not know the importance, and I didn't have someone behind me to make me go. So I dropped out. I want my girls to go to school so that they don't take the same path as me."

Aminata's father and the government of Mali share the same attitude. In this massive, landlocked country in West Africa — bigger than Texas and California combined — education has become a government priority in the last few years.

According to a December 2006 article in *The New York Times*, between 1994 and 2004, Mali more than doubled its spending on kids between ages 6 and 14. The Malian education ministry told *The Times* that in each of the last five years, the country has built on average 667 new first- through sixth-grade classrooms, and hired 1,962 first- through ninth-grade teachers.

Education Revival

CRS has played a key role in the revival of education in Mali. Through its Mopti School Education project, CRS works with 80 schools in Mali to enable them to access and effectively use resources provided by donors to the government of Mali. The program rewards primary-school girls with a jug of vegetable oil every three months if they attend school 80 percent of the quarter. Vegetable oil may seem an odd incentive, but in Mali, where it is a major part of the diet, two gallons of oil cost about \$16. And when the average per capita income is \$39 a month, the cost of oil quickly adds up.

Parents also like the fact that all their kids receive a hot lunch from the school's cafeteria. Every day, children like Aminata get a lunch of corn or millet mixed with vegetable oil. The cafeteria has become so popular that the school director, Allaye Sow, says he has to block the door from the throngs of village children who want in. "Because the food is

rationed, we can't feed everyone," he says, adding that the kids know that they can receive a meal at school. They tell him they will attend when they are old enough.

Word of the take-home rations and free-lunch program has spread. The school is now overflowing with kids. In 2003, only 48 students attended. That number has jumped to 181 today — with 110 of them girls. The school director says that the students stay in school now, whereas before the dropout rate was high.

Still, in remote areas, such as the village of Sampara where Aminata lives, parents often prefer to keep children — especially girls — at home to help with housework. Even now, as Aminata tells it, her mother sometimes falls back into old habits.

"My parents sent me to school, and I was glad," says the polite fourth-grader. "Sometimes when my father is not home, my mother tries to keep me at home to finish the housework before going to school, but I hide so I can go to school."

At school, she's become a leader. In fact, she's the Minister of Environment. Her first initiative: planting 15 trees in the courtyard of the school, a sun-scorched patch of land that often is seared by temperatures as high as 105 degrees. Aminata rallied her classmates into collecting money for the trees, and she oversees the watering.

Not only that, her father says she has become more aware of sanitation. She now admonishes the family for drinking dirty water.

Aminata is also in the top of her class, with a solid B average. Thanks to her grades, the school gave her a length of cloth, something that her father says convinced his wife of the value of school.

Aminata, the 11-year-old who was pounding millet just a few years ago, now wants to graduate. She wants her diploma. She wants to be a teacher.