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RE: Letter of Support for ME to WE Volunteer Trips

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To Whom It May Concern,

As a professor with the University of Alberta, I have had the unique chance to experience firsthand the impact of WE's work linking Canadian student teachers with classrooms in rural Kenya. The result is an equitable partnership that makes a positive difference in the community and has a lifelong impact on the teacher. Truly, everyone benefits.

One of the steps that I was most impressed by was that before entering the classroom, our student teachers were required to first learn about the communities they would be working in. They had sessions with community elders and Maasai Warriors that gave them the appropriate cultural context for teaching young Kenyans. This was done to ensure the highest possible level of sensitivity and understanding, and it was highly successful at preparing our teachers for this unique service.

As mentioned above, both parties benefitted tremendously from this partnership. Teachers had the chance to learn and grow, gaining critical professional development they couldn't have received anywhere else. The experience makes them better educators, and ones that are able to pass on their global action mindset to students here in Canada, inspiring the next generation of young people and building a positive cycle of action.

In turn, the learners in these communities benefit from the chance to learn from some of Canada's best young educators. Canada's educational and teacher training systems are among the best in the world, and student teachers bring a wealth of knowledge to their classes, imparting a global perspective that is in high demand for the youth in these communities. It is quite powerful to see these young people, who have a deep and passionate desire to learn, get the chance to learn from an enthusiastic teacher with a background far different from their own. Students are told in advance that it is a shared learning experience, and are encouraged to ask questions of trainee teachers to help facilitate positive, informative dialogue.

This is a meeting of equals, and it would be a grave mischaracterization to refer to this as any sort of "white-saviour" situation. Local leaders are very much involved in the cultural exchange as partners in the learning experience. Furthermore, the assertion that the involvement of trainee teachers from Western cultures takes away from local jobs is wildly inaccurate. In fact, from my experience, I would say quite the opposite is true. As well as working with local teachers throughout every step of the learning journey, the presence of Western teachers also creates jobs in other industries such as tourism and translation.

It should also be noted that there is a strong framework in place to ensure safety protocols similar to those one would find here in Canada, and considering the important aspect of trust, these protocols are often further strengthened. For example, students and teachers are never left alone together. Additionally, there are controls and governance which maintain a professional learning environment at all times. This is done to avoid a situation where teachers might come in and bond with students on a

personal level then leave, betraying the trust and relationship they'd built. This program is fully accountable, and performed in partnership with the Kenyan government.

All of this is to say that ME to WE's programming goes far past what someone would usually imagine as "typical" development work. They are not just building schools, they are contributing to the overall development of the Kenyan pedagogy based on community needs, providing world-class teachers and shared learning experiences. These shared learning experiences go beyond traditional education – I was so impressed to see boarding schools in the community holding classes with local parents to teach life skills related to all aspects of rural life. WE's commitment to working with these community members is demonstrated throughout all of their actions. Their partnership with these communities goes to the very core of their organization, they have even published the story of two community leaders in the book *The Last Maasai Warriors*, showing a deep respect for their stories.

I can personally attest to the significant impact that this program has had on the many Canadian teachers who have gone to share their work in Kenya. It is an unparalleled opportunity for growth, both personally and professionally, encouraging many to share their passion for social justice with the young people they go on to teach throughout their careers. I have also seen firsthand the way this partnership inspires the learners who have the chance to learn from them. It is my sincere hope that more teachers will be able to take part. I also believe that it's a shame that some are kept away from this culturally sensitive program based on fears that it may line up with a negative perception of "voluntourism". Based on what I have experienced with WE, the issues implied in this label could not be further from the truth.

Sincerely,

Lucille Mandin

Lucille Mandin

Retired Professor

University of Alberta