Sunny Varkey, Founder of the USD 1 MILLION Global Teacher Prize, Honoured With 2026 Eisenhower Global Transformation Award

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Renowned education pioneer and philanthropist Sunny Varkey, founder of GEMS Education, the **Varkey Foundation**, and the USD 1 million Global Teacher Prize, has been honoured with the prestigious 2026 Eisenhower Global Transformation Award for being a true trailblazer in education – continuing a remarkable legacy that he and his family have championed for nearly 70 years. Presented to him by celebrated broadcaster Gayle King at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Global Awards Gala on the evening of 9 November in New York, the award recognises his lifelong dedication to expanding access to quality

learning and elevating the vital role of teachers worldwide. The evening also featured video messages from former US President Bill Clinton and Bill Gates, Co-Founder of Microsoft and the Gates Foundation, praising Mr. Varkey and his family's enduring commitment to transforming global education.



Gayle King, award-winning journalist and co-host of CBS Mornings, awards Sunny Varkey the 2026 Eisenhower Global Transformation Award

Sunny Varkey has been singled out for the Award for his distinctive and far-reaching contribution to the field of education, driven by a singular belief in its power to transform lives. He has dedicated his entire career to reimagining how education is delivered and expanding opportunities for children from all backgrounds. Through GEMS Education, he has pioneered innovative approaches to learning, offering diverse curricula and a wide range of schooling options at different price points to meet the needs of

families across communities and income levels. Yet his commitment to education extends far beyond the schools he has built. Through the Varkey Foundation, he has championed teacher training, elevated the status of the teaching profession and brought global recognition to exceptional educators through the USD 1 million Global Teacher Prize. Together, these initiatives reflect a lifetime devoted not simply to building educational institutions, but to transforming lives through education and celebrating the teachers who make that transformation possible.

Launched in 1984, the Eisenhower Awards are an initiative of the Business Council for International Understanding (BCIU), a non-profit organisation founded by former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower and committed to furthering international understanding and advancing collaboration between business and government worldwide. The awards recognise individuals from business, government, and global agencies who demonstrate outstanding global leadership and the power of partnership to promote international trade and diplomacy. The theme of the 2026 edition is ‘Leading with Purpose: Investing in Tomorrow.’

Accepting the award, **Sunny Varkey, Founder of GEMS Education and the Varkey Foundation,** said, “*I am deeply honoured to receive the Eisenhower Global Transformation Award. I accept this recognition not just as a personal honour, but as a tribute to the extraordinary teachers, students and parents who inspire our work every day*.

I have always believed that education is the most powerful force for transforming lives and shaping a brighter future. This award strengthens my determination to ensure that every child, regardless of their background or circumstances, has

the opportunity to fulfil their potential and make a positive impact on the world."

Gayle King, award-winning journalist and co-host of CBS Mornings, said while presenting the award to Sunny Varkey, "*Sunny, your life's work reminds us that the true measure of success is not simply what we achieve for ourselves, but what we make possible for others. And that the most meaningful transformation begins with a simple yet powerful belief: every child deserves a great education*.

Sunny, the impact you have made is extraordinary. It can be measured in the countless young minds you have enlightened, the lives you have transformed, and the children you have helped shape into better human beings – all contributing to a more peaceful and better world. I think you will agree, there can be no greater impact than that.

I am absolutely thrilled that the visionary founder of the USD 1 million Global Teacher Prize is himself being honoured with the prestigious Eisenhower Global Transformation Award! What a wonderful moment, and what a truly well-deserved honour."

In a video message on the night, **former US President Bill Clinton** said, "*Sunny, I'm really proud to join everyone gathered in New York this evening in congratulating you as you receive the Eisenhower Global Transformation Award.*

You've dedicated your entire life to giving every child a good education and a better future. You haven't just talked about

it, you've done something about it. You've run schools, trained teachers in some of the most disadvantaged parts of the world. You've helped to shape global education policy through ground-breaking research and international forums. You've launched prizes that celebrate the extraordinary work of teachers, students, and schools.

Above all, you have really changed lives. The work you've done has opened doors for countless young people, and challenged all of us to think differently about education.

It's an honour to call you my friend, and to be able to congratulate you on this very well-deserved honour."

Also in a video message on the night, **Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft and the Gates Foundation,** said, "*Sunny, congratulations on the well-deserved Eisenhower Global Transformation Award. What you've been able to do, building on your parents' work, starting the school, to now the incredible GEMS Network, is really fantastic. You're committing to help with education all over the world, both through your business and as a philanthropist.*

You joined as one of the first education philanthropists way back in 2015. I've enjoyed working with you as we recruit more people to the cause, measure the impact, and make sure education is getting better for children everywhere. We've still got a lot to do.

I hope the spirit of this award will energise you to keep up

the fantastic work you do. Again, congratulations."

Sunny Varkey and his family have built a 65+ year legacy in education. He founded GEMS Education, one of the world's largest and longest-established private K-12 education providers, around a simple mission: "To put a quality education within the reach of every learner."

Mr. Varkey recognised early that families have different circumstances and children have different needs. He was able to create such an unparalleled global education business – that has educated more than 500,000 students over the decades and today teaches approximately 200,000 students through its global network of owned and managed schools. He was a pioneer in offering schools at a range of price points and providing multiple international curricula to serve diverse communities of students.

His broader vision is to ensure young people are equipped not only with the skills and opportunities to succeed, but also with the values, confidence and sense of responsibility to make a positive impact on the world. Central to this is his belief in the power of education to help build a more peaceful world, by giving children the virtues of understanding, empathy and respect that enable them to bridge differences and contribute positively to their families, communities, and wider society.

This vision led him to establish the Varkey Foundation and champion the critical role teachers play in shaping individual lives and society. In 2015, he launched the USD 1 million

Global Teacher Prize through the Foundation, establishing one of the world's most prestigious awards for the teaching profession. It was set up to recognise one exceptional teacher who has made an outstanding contribution to the profession as well as to shine a spotlight on the important role teachers play in society. In 2021, the Varkey Foundation launched the USD 100,000 Global Student Prize. In 2026, the Foundation launched the USD 1 million Global Schools Prize, completing a trilogy celebrating teachers, students and schools and encouraging a global conversation about the future of education.

The Varkey Foundation also collaborates with governments and organizations worldwide to implement programmes that enhance educational standards and teacher effectiveness. These initiatives include teacher training, education technology, girls' education, and refugee education. By utilising satellite technology, distance learning, and interactive methods, the foundation aims to reach underserved and remote communities, ensuring quality education for all. To date, their efforts have impacted over 40,000 teachers and 1.6 million children globally, promoting better learning outcomes and increased access to education.

Mr. Varkey was also the first education entrepreneur to sign the Giving Pledge, committing at least half of his wealth to philanthropy, and has supported major humanitarian and social initiatives worldwide.

His contributions to education and philanthropy have been recognized internationally. He was appointed a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Education Partnerships, awarded India's prestigious Padma Shri, and received The United Arab Emirates

Ministry of Education’s Award of Distinction.

