

Strong Beginnings: Leveraging school, home and church for whole child development



IMAGE: Courtesy of the Global Center for Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC), University of Notre Dame

The vast majority of Haitian children live in high-poverty, inequitable and crisis-affected contexts that significantly hinder their ability to learn and thrive. *Strong Beginnings* charts a pathway out of adversity for young children and families through whole child development.

Country context

Having won its independence from France through a slave revolt in 1804, Haiti holds the proud distinction of being the first independent nation in the Caribbean and the first sovereign nation in the world to be led to independence by former slaves. Over the century that followed, colonial occupation and taxation continued to constrain the new country's growth and development, impeding investment in essential systems such as health, education and infrastructure.

Today, Haiti is the poorest nation in the Americas and one of the least developed countries in the world. Ranking 163rd out of 191 on the United Nations Human Development Index ([UNDP 2020/1](https://data.unhcr.org/en/indicators/SDG1701)), Haiti faces widespread extreme poverty and many of the associated challenges, including malnourishment, undernourishment, stunting, and insufficient developmental supports to meet the holistic needs of children and families. The country is also extremely

NOTE: Unless otherwise indicated, the information for this case study is drawn from interviews with the GC-DWC program team and resources available on their website: <https://iei.nd.edu/gc-dwc>

vulnerable to disasters and severe climate events — more than 96% of the population has been exposed to humanitarian disasters such as hurricanes, flooding or earthquakes. While Haiti has been classified among the 15 most fragile countries in the world over the last 10 years, recent events such as the COVID-19 health crisis beginning in March 2020, an increase in socio-political volatility leading to internal displacement of more than 113,000 individuals, and most recently a resurgence of cholera have aggravated the situation even further, leaving no time for recovery between crises.



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Barriers to learning in Haiti

Families and school communities in Haiti contend with significant and multi-layered obstacles that prevent children from learning and thriving. Due to bouts of socio-political instability and violence, compounded by catastrophic disasters and public health crises, schools in Haiti are forced to close frequently. The context of insecurity, interruption and inconsistent schooling impedes student progress; however, few options for distance learning exist to fill the gap.

Children's well-being also suffers, as young students learn in rigid, authoritarian classroom environments that too often include corporal punishment, fear and shaming. An estimated two out of every three children in Haiti are victims of physical violence, most often originating in the home but also quite often in schools (Flynn-O'Brien et al. 2016).

Most schools in Haiti receive minimal government funding or oversight: more than 85% of primary schools are privately run by either faith-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, or for-profit institutions (USAID 2020). The burden of tuition fees combined with the cost of transport, books and uniforms make education unaffordable for many families. In addition, wide disparities exist in educational access and quality between rural and urban locales — according to the International Monetary Fund, extreme poverty is more than three times higher in rural areas of the country.

Teachers are not paid a living wage and often work in overcrowded and underfunded classrooms. Schools are regularly forced to withhold teacher salaries or shut down completely due to insufficient funds. Half of public sector teachers lack basic qualifications, and nearly 80% of teachers have not received pre-service training (USAID 2020).



IMAGE: Courtesy of GC-DWC

As a result of these compounding obstacles, the majority of Haitians lack access to quality education and learning opportunities. Primary school enrollment is currently 85% — an improvement from earlier years but still too low. The average Haitian, age 25 years or older, has less than five years of schooling, and more than half of the adult population is illiterate (USAID 2020). Still, education has the potential to be a catalyst for change in Haiti and a powerful equalizer to counteract the brutal legacy of colonial rule and racial inequality. Education is highly valued in Haitian culture, and families make significant sacrifices for their children to attend school. The Haitian government has put access to quality education at the top of its policy agenda, including plans to promote the development of early childhood and preschool education (Global Partnership for Education 2014).

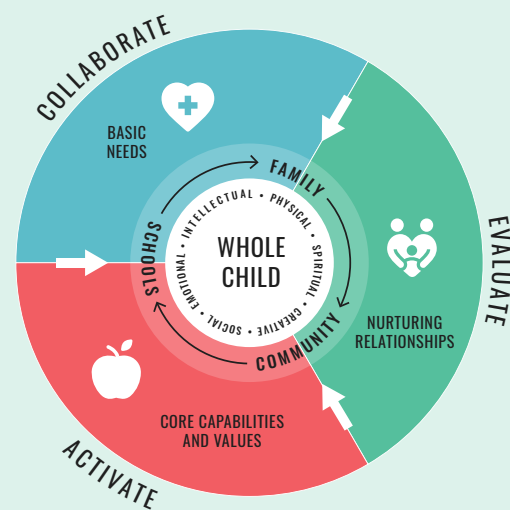
A faith-based approach to system strengthening

The Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC) based at University of Notre Dame (UND) has worked in Haiti for 14 years, over time becoming a trusted partner within the education system. Through this long-term engagement, the team has developed a nuanced understanding of the richness and intricacies of Haitian culture, and the ways the nation’s colonial past and history of racial exclusion have impacted education.

What is “Whole Child Development”?

As defined by GC-DWC: “A whole-child approach to development and learning is one that engages a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, school and community, to ensure children and youth reach their full potential.

It equally values all aspects of a child’s well-being—social, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual, and creative—to ensure they become active citizens and life-long learners.”



To generate sustainable improvements in Haitian society, all children must have access to a high-quality education that addresses the cumulative adversities they face and provides them with the skills to cope and learn essential skills. Given the relative frailty of Haiti’s education system, GC-DWC sought to identify other functioning, effective systems that could be leveraged to deliver a sustainable and effective solution to whole-child education (see box above). The presence of the Catholic Church in Haiti goes back many centuries, and today the Church is the single largest education provider in the country, responsible for nearly 20% of schools. Throughout all regions of the country, each parish runs a school, delivering education to some of the most underserved students in rural and poor areas. With influence at the national, regional and local levels, the Catholic Church of Haiti stood out as one of the most efficient and well-respected systems in the country, deeply embedded in local culture and home life. However, while the Catholic system has filled critical gaps in public education, access and quality remain low.

Recognizing the autonomy, experience and influence of the local Catholic Church, with *Strong Beginnings* UND opted to work directly with parish leaders (clergy, sisters and other members of the Church community) to design interventions and programming that would meet children’s holistic needs at all three levels of their social ecology: home, school and church. Sustainability is built into the program by being community led—parishes are empowered to address the most pertinent needs they identify within their own community.



Phase I – Read Haiti: The nation’s most successful literacy intervention

With an adult literacy rate of only 61%, low literacy is a major challenge for Haiti (USAID 2020). While the language of instruction is French, Creole is the mother-tongue spoken and understood by most Haitians. A deficiency of first-language reading instruction in the early grades led GC-DWC to develop and implement *Read to Learn* in 52 Catholic schools from 2014 to 2016 with funding from Porticus. A scripted literacy intervention designed to improve children’s reading and writing in Creole as well as French, *Read to Learn* yielded the biggest improvement in student outcomes of any literacy program in Haiti to date. A randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted in 2016 showed statistically significant gains in seven of the eight Early Grade Reading Assessment indicators, including a 143% increase in letter recognition and a 49% increase in reading fluency.

Building on the success of *Read to Learn*, and with support from additional donors, the program was next scaled up to 340 schools throughout the country as *Read Haiti*, reaching approximately 100,000 students in first and second grades between 2017 and 2020. Based on the RCT evidence of significant positive impact, *Read Haiti* was embedded into national Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education (CEEC) curriculum and later validated by the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training. However, while *Read Haiti* yielded statistically significant gains, the challenges and learnings from Phase I implementation revealed the need to intervene earlier than first grade, and to engage caregivers and the wider community in addition to schools.



First grade students lacked not only foundational academic skills, but also crucial social and emotional skills that would enable them to thrive in the classroom environment.

Phase II – Strong Beginnings: Activating ecosystems for whole child development

Given the importance of the early years for cognitive and social development, and based on partner experience, GC-DWC recognized that Haitian children were entering first grade without the preparation they needed to benefit fully from the in-school literacy intervention. First grade students lacked not only foundational academic skills, but also crucial social and emotional skills that would enable them to thrive in the classroom environment.

Accordingly, the next phase of the program evolved to become *Strong Beginnings*, expanding the target age range to begin at birth. With Phase II, new components were added to 1) strengthen emergent literacy, social and emotional learning, and executive functioning of children between birth and age 6; and 2) to mobilize the broader school-parish-family network to support whole child development.

Currently being implemented in 270 schools from 2020-2024, *Strong Beginnings* strives to activate communities to meet the holistic needs of 60,000 children by working across three levels of their social ecology—home, school, and church. The program also seeks to strengthen the Catholic parish system to make education more accessible, equitable and effective.

Building on the success of *Read Haiti*, *Strong Beginnings* incorporates the following additional components to create a sustainable pathway out of adversity for children from birth to age 8:

L3 Learning Lab

A community-based innovation model to identify promising practices, accelerate decision-making, and test co-created solutions for long-term success.

Social and emotional learning (SEL)

To foster positive and nurturing relationships within and outside of schools, including opportunities for families to learn together at home.

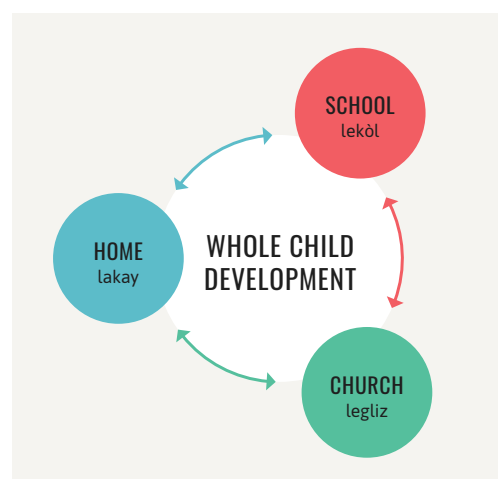
Pre-K programming

To promote healthy development for children ages 0-5 by strengthening preschool access and quality.

Parent and caregiver training and support

Covering topics such as early childhood development (ECD), responsive care and positive parenting.

FIGURE 1: *Strong Beginnings* L3 Ecosystem: social emotional framework



L3 Learning Lab

Strong Beginnings leverages the most central networks in a child’s life — “lakay, lekòl and legliz” (L3) or home, school and church — to identify the complex spectrum of issues that impede whole child development and create effective interventions. Working with stakeholders in five “innovation communities,” UND uses an innovative rapid-cycle feedback methodology to iteratively test and refine solutions identified by the community. “By feeding learning back into the community and to local stakeholders during program

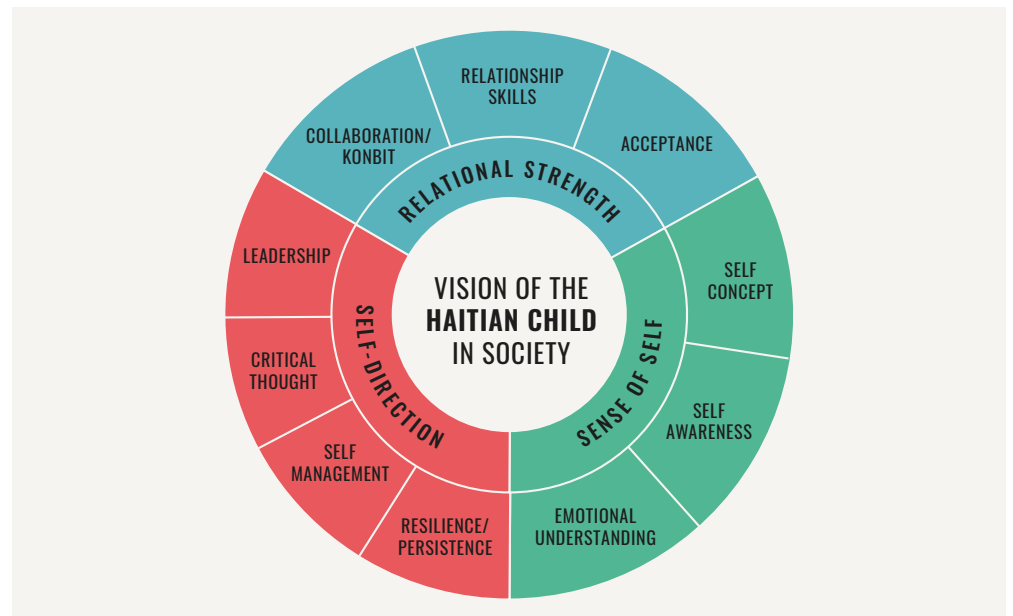
implementation, on-the-ground practitioners are able to refine and make adjustments to programming in the moment, ensuring maximum impact and efficacy.” UND will then scale the most relevant and effective interventions to the wider network of communities across Haiti.

Vision of the Haitian Child: Framework for Socio-Emotional Learning

Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) helps individuals learn and apply dispositions and practices to develop their personal identity, manage their emotions, maintain supportive relationships and make good decisions. The SEL framework for Haiti—*Vision of the Haitian Child*—was conceived in 2017-2018 by a task force of thought partners including local educators, historians, academics, and practitioners, as well as the GC-DWC Haiti team. Using an assets-based approach and contextualized to Haitian culture and the historical context, *Vision of the Haitian Child* is based on the core Haitian values of personal liberation and the common good for all Haitian citizens.

The SEL framework is intended to serve as a resource and guide to foster children’s SEL in classrooms and school environments, establishing a continuity of skills and values across the age ranges. It has further served as a basis for pre-K and primary grade curriculum development and interventions within *Strong Beginnings*, including school climate and culture training for school leaders, and professional development for teachers on SEL. The framework also inspired a collection of Haitian Creole storybooks by local authors and artists, drawing from Haiti’s rich culture while integrating key elements of SEL. The *Ana ak Tiga* series covers topics such as self-confidence, identifying and managing emotions, and positive interpersonal interactions. Freely available online, the books also include activities that teachers and parents can do together with their children after reading the stories.

FIGURE 2: Vision of the Haitian child in society: social emotional framework

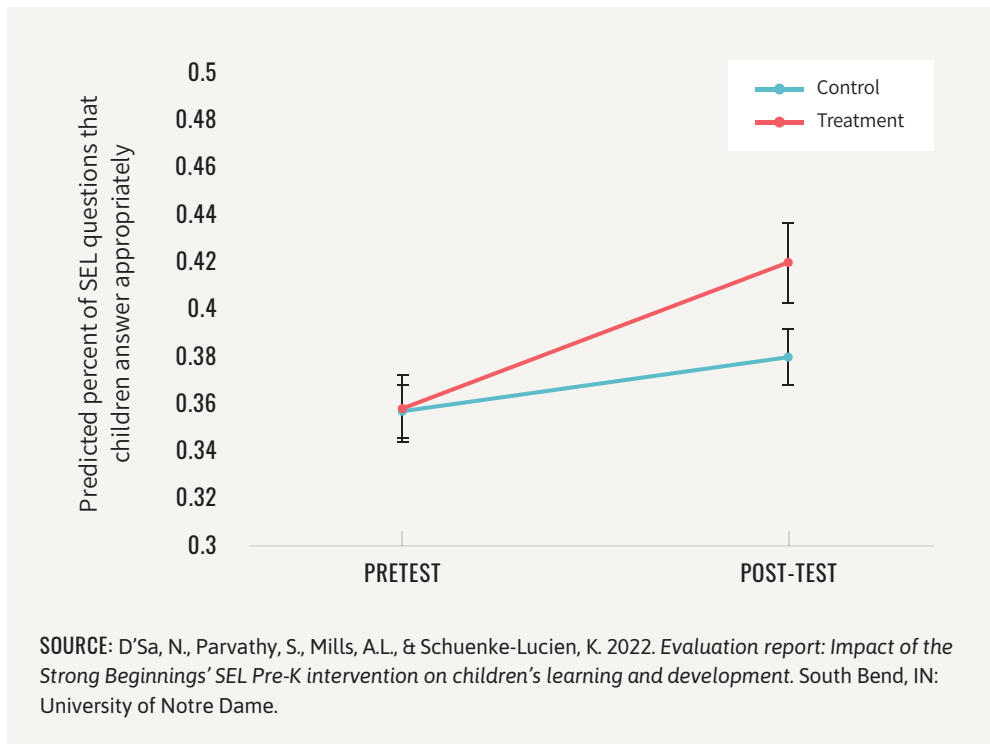


Evidence of impact

GC-DWC Haiti piloted the Strong Beginnings SEL pre-K intervention in the five incubator communities and refined the program based on the results of an impact evaluation before scaling to additional communities. The evaluation was conducted in 2021-2022 using a cluster randomized control trial (cRCT) approach to provide rigorous, empirical evidence on the impact of the intervention on children’s social and emotional development in Catholic preschools in two departments—Sud and Grand’Anse.

After controlling for the differential effect of child age, gender, department, and pretest SEL score, the team found that the SEL pre-K intervention had a positive and statistically significant impact on the SEL skills of children in the treatment group over 4.5 months, with an effect size of 0.23 (see Figure 3 below). The positive impact was similar for female and male children in the treatment group.

FIGURE 3: Predicted percent of SEL items that the prototypical child in the control and treatment group answers correctly at pretest and post-test



Pre-K programming

The *Strong Beginnings* SEL pre-K program includes a 10-month curriculum for daily Morning Meetings (*Sèk Matine*) that guides teachers in effectively delivering lessons designed to strengthen children's emergent literacy and numeracy, motor development and SEL skills. Teachers and school directors receive foundational training on reading, SEL instruction and pre-K pedagogy, as well as follow-up coaching and supervision visits to ensure continuity and consistency. Students are encouraged to engage in play-based learning and Read Aloud activities.

Parent and caregiver training and support

The parent and caregiver training program consists of sessions held once a week over a six-week period. Led by community facilitators, the sessions cover key topics such as the importance of the parent-child relationship; providing consistent and responsive care; the connection between social and emotional and cognitive development; self-regulation and discipline; well-being and self-care; and nutrition. The modules integrate interactive games and songs that parents can use with their children, and a series of context-specific videos in Haitian Creole highlight approaches to positive parenting. To ensure that busy parents are able to attend and participate fully, childcare is provided with activities for children that link directly back to the parent workshop themes.

Key messages in the parenting program are reinforced in church by working closely with church leaders, from the Archdiocese to the parish levels, to integrate science with theology. ECD and positive parenting messages are incorporated into the counselling sessions parents receive before baptizing their children. Participating parents learn how promoting healthy brain development through parental love and care aligns with the core belief that we are all beloved children of God called to care for one another. In addition, parish priests are encouraged to embed ECD and positive parenting messaging into their liturgical sermons to the whole congregation, emphasizing the great responsibility parents bear to care for and nurture their children.



Not only does [the radio program] help the students but also us parents. We have learned a lot about establishing strong relationships with our children especially if we want them to become independent.

– STRONG BEGINNINGS PARENT



Many of our neighborhood kids come to listen to the program every morning. Thanks to this radio program, I have a better rapport with my students.

– STRONG BEGINNINGS TEACHER

Radio programming: Adapting to COVID-19

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to close in Haiti, educators and actors had to work quickly to maintain learning during the crisis. Haiti's existing remote learning program was primarily available online, but only 40% of Haitian households have access to a power source let alone a reliable internet connection that would enable them to use the program. In contrast, 52% of households have access to a radio.

Recognizing radio as the most democratic and effective means of dissemination to ensure continuity of learning, GC-DWC Haiti, in collaboration with Catholic Relief Services (CRC) Haiti and the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education (CEEC), created three radio programs: a literacy program supplemented with a reading hour program, and a pre-K SEL and parent engagement program. The programs incorporate health and psychosocial messages related to COVID-19; learning opportunities in both Haitian Creole and French; SEL themed lessons; interactive activities for younger students; and strategies for parents to support young learners at home.

GC-DWC Haiti partnered with 12 community-run and Catholic radio stations to broadcast the programs widely, enabling a reach far beyond partner schools participating in *Strong Beginnings*. To facilitate access to the programming, 15,200 radios and solar panels were distributed to students in the five participating departments. Students, parents, and teachers alike welcomed the radio shows (see testimonials to the left).

When schools reopened, UND adjusted its radio programming to a weekend schedule to provide access to additional learning opportunities for students at home. Given the frequency of school closures due to political, natural and health crises, no doubt distance learning through radio and other modalities will be an ongoing necessity. Partners, government and other local actors such as the private sector will continue building on these pioneering efforts.

Key lessons learned

The eight-year evolution from a mother-tongue literacy program into a whole-child approach with *Strong Beginnings* offers many lessons for future work in Haiti and beyond. A key aspect of the program's success and sustainability has been the **long-term commitment** of GC-DWC in Haiti, going as far back as 2006. By forging **sustained partnership** with local actors and demonstrating improved outcomes for children, the team has emerged as leaders in educational reform, research and programmatic change in the Haitian context, especially in the field of early grade literacy. In the words of Dr. Neil Boothby, the center's director: "The GC-DWC's partnership with the CEEC and CRS over the last eight years has resulted in the strongest education network in Haiti."



A key aspect of the program's success and sustainability has been the long-term commitment of GC-DWC in Haiti, going as far back as 2006.

Another critical aspect of the GC-DWC approach is a focus on **system strengthening** and leveraging the most active levels of a child's social ecology for whole child development. In particular, the success of *Read Haiti* and *Strong Beginnings* demonstrates the value of recognizing **local faith communities as existing systems** that can be leveraged and strengthened to support learning and whole child development. Often, local faith communities already serve hard-to-reach areas, providing care for young children, physical infrastructure, as well as material, financial, spiritual and psychosocial support. The considerable influence, trust and moral authority wielded by faith leaders can make them powerful champions for children in communities, especially in matters of the family and child-rearing practices. While it is important to mitigate against potential risks, future interventions should consider optimizing opportunities to work closely with faith communities to achieve community buy-in, scale and long-term sustainability.

Finally, an emphasis on **engaging community-level actors in developing and testing sustainable innovations** has proven invaluable in formulating effective responses to the complex challenges facing young children and families in Haiti. The unique L3 Learning Lab approach including collaboration with five incubator communities has led to innovative interventions addressing a wide range of developmental needs, from integrating child development and positive parenting messages into sermons and baptismal preparation courses, to introducing nutrition education and resources to combat stunting within schools. By building regular feedback loops into data collection cycles, parish communities are empowered to make their own timely, evidence-informed decisions and adaptations, ensuring maximum impact and efficacy while ultimately creating opportunities for independence and sustainability.

Future efforts in this space will be focused on 1) incorporating science-based ECD curricula and practical, parish-based ECD programming into the pre-service training of priests, sisters and brothers in Haiti; and 2) deploying equipped resource centers from refurbished shipping containers to provide education when schools are closed due to natural disasters or political disruptions.

Learn more

Learn more about the Rapid Evaluation, Assessment, and Learning Methodology (REALM):

<https://iei.nd.edu/gc-dwc/realm>

Learn more about GC-DWC's work in Haiti: <https://iei.nd.edu/gc-dwc-haiti>

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