

# 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

**In spite of their rich cultural heritage and a worldwide impact as the only nation formed from a successful slave rebellion, today the vast majority of children in Haiti live in a fragile, inequitable, and crisis-affected context that significantly hinders their ability to learn and thrive. Strong Beginnings (“Baz Solid” in Haitian Creole) seeks to chart a pathway out of adversity for young children and families through whole child development.**

## Country context

Following a successful revolution led by enslaved African people against French colonial occupation, Haiti became the first independent nation in the Caribbean region, officially proclaimed as such in 1804, which at the time represented a ray of hope for all the colonized and/or enslaved people of the world. Since then, the new country has had to negotiate recognition of its existence and sovereignty with all military and economic powers, especially France and later the USA. One of these well known negotiations was marked by the imposition by France of a “reparation debt” (paid for during more than a century and a half) for the loss of its richest colony.

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>

Over the course of the following century, foreign occupations and control continued to constrain the new country’s growth and development, impeding investment in essential systems such as health, education, and infrastructure.

In addition to poverty induced by a loss of resources, Haiti’s post colonial society has faced diverse critical dynamics marked by a long history of diplomatic and economic isolation, political instability and social unrest. Class schisms (2 different cultural traditions – French v. African, 2 languages – Creole v. French, 2 religions – Voodoo v. Christian religions, different skin colors, different economic interests), power struggle between the two culture-classes, dominance of the capital city, centralization, emigration, brain drain and NGO invasion have hindered the global development of the nation.

This context and its challenges explain why today, Haiti is the nation in the Americas with the lowest level of economic development. Ranking 163rd out of 191 on the United Nations Human Development Index (UNDP 2020/2021), Haiti faces widespread extreme poverty and many of the associated challenges, including malnourishment, undernourishment, stunting, and insufficient developmental support to meet the holistic needs of children and families. The country is also extremely vulnerable to natural disasters and severe climate events—more than 96% of the population has been exposed to natural disasters such as hurricanes, flooding or earthquakes. While Haiti has been ranked 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, the worsening of the socio-political volatility leading to the internal displacement of thousands of individuals, massive internal and external migration, and more recently a resurgence of cholera, have aggravated the situation even further, leaving no time for recovery between crises.

Despite these challenges and in the midst of daily hardship, Haitians continue to invest in their children, whom they consider to be the guarantee for a better future.



**Families and school communities in Haiti contend with significant and multi-layered obstacles that prevent children from learning and thriving.**

## Barriers to learning in Haiti

Families and school communities in Haiti contend with significant and multi-layered obstacles that prevent most 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. In recent years, specific violence related to kidnapping, increased gang activity, and rape has consistently undermined the well-being of children and adults, causing emotional distress and extreme anxiety. This context of insecurity, interruption and inconsistent schooling impedes student progress; while few options for distance learning exist to fill the gap.



IMAGE: Courtesy of GC-DWC

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](#).

Most schools in Haiti receive minimal government funding or oversight, if any: more than 85% of primary schools are non-public, run by either faith-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, local communities or for-profit institutions. The burden of tuition fees, combined with the cost of transportation, books and uniforms, make education unaffordable for many families. In addition, wide disparities exist in educational access and quality between rural and urban locales as well as between urban schools themselves. According to the World Bank, 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 and even more non-public sector teachers lack basic qualifications, and nearly 80% of teachers have not received [pre-service training](#).

IMAGE: Courtesy of GC-DWC



**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.**

Another challenge faced by the school system is the destruction of many school buildings by the two earthquakes of 2010 and 2021 and the need to reconstruct. Besides, hurricanes, flooding, natural disasters in general, consistently devastates the physical structures of schools, meaning the existence of even less resources for quality and access.

While primary school enrollment rate is improving, (at [88% in Haiti in 2015<sup>1</sup>](#) compared to [96.05% in the neighboring Dominican Republic](#)) the above obstacles pose a challenge for the achievement of quality education and learning opportunities. Tuition fees also serve as a barrier for many families, so it is common for children to have inconsistent school access, ultimately contributing to high dropout rates.

The average Haitian, age 25 years or older, has less than five years of schooling, and just a little more than half of the [population is literate](#). 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 officially put access to quality education at the top of its policy agenda, including plans to promote the development of early childhood and [preschool education](#).

<sup>1</sup> 85% is the number used by the Ministry of Education of Haiti (MENFP)

# A faith-based approach to system strengthening

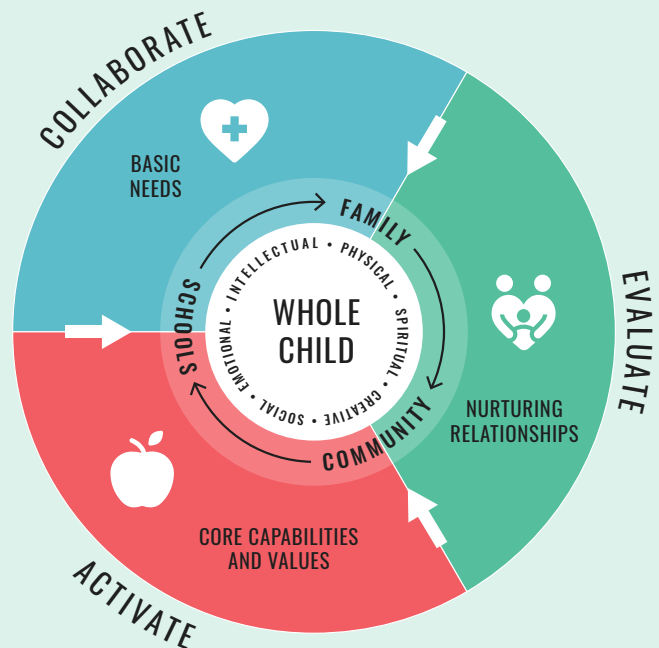
The Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child (GC-DWC), based at University of Notre Dame (UND) in South Bend, Indiana, USA, has worked in Haiti for 14 years, over time becoming a trusted global partner within the education system. Through this long-term engagement, the team has made an effort to develop a nuanced understanding of the richness and intricacies of Haitian culture, and the ways the nation's colonial past and history of racial prejudices have impacted education.

To generate sustainable improvements in Haitian society, all children would greatly benefit from 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 has sought to identify other functional and effective systems that could be leveraged to deliver a sustainable and effective solution to whole-child education (see box below). The presence of the Catholic Church in Haiti goes back to the Spanish and French colonies, and is today 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, as well as in the cities. With influence at the national, regional and local levels, the Catholic Church, which claims membership of around 55% of the total population of Haiti, is one of the most efficient and well-respected systems in the country, deeply embedded in local culture and home life. While formerly serving only Catholic families, Catholic schools today are open to all without membership requirement. However, while the Catholic system has filled critical gaps in public education, its quality remains low.

## 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.”



Recognizing the autonomy, experience and influence of the local Catholic Church, with *Strong Beginnings*, GC-DWC opted to work directly with parish leaders (clergy, sisters and other members of the Church community) to design interventions and programming that would meet pre-primary age 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: One of the nation’s most successful literacy interventions

With an adult literacy rate of 61.70 % in 2015 (compared to 91.99% in the neighboring Dominican Republic in 2015), low literacy is a major challenge for Haiti (USAID 2020). While often the language of instruction is French (by teachers who have not necessarily mastered this language), Haitian Creole is the mother tongue spoken and understood by all 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<sup>2</sup> targeting children from ages 7 to 9. As a scripted literacy intervention designed to improve children’s reading and writing in Haitian Creole as well as French, *Read to Learn* yielded a big improvement in most student’s outcomes. 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. At an informal level, Haitian staff members confirm significant improvement in all reading skills (letter recognition, phonemic knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension and 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 the national Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education (CEEC) curriculum and later validated by the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MENFP). 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.

Given the importance of the early years for cognitive and social and emotional 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.



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

Accordingly, the next phase of the program evolved to become *Strong Beginnings*, expanding the target age range to begin at age 3. With Phase II, new components were added to: 1) strengthen emergent literacy, social and emotional learning, and executive functioning skills of children between ages 3 and 6; and 2) 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 with the objective of ultimately creating a sustainable pathway out of adversity for children from ages 3 to 9:

<sup>2</sup> With funding from Porticus

### L3 Learning Lab (Lakay/home, Lekòl/school, Legliz/church)

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.

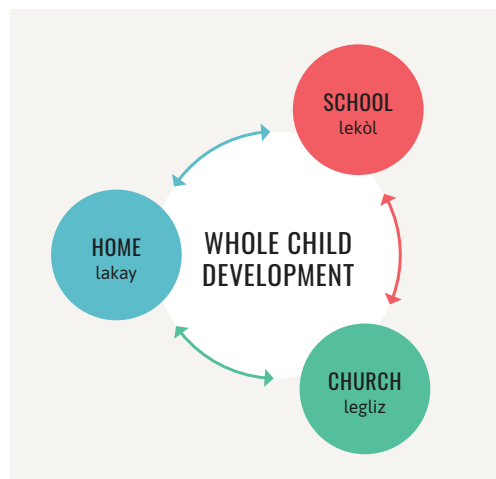
### Pre-K/Early childhood development (ECD) programming

To promote healthy development for children ages 3 to 6 by strengthening preschool access and quality.

### Parent and caregiver training and support

Covering topics such as early childhood development, responsive care, nutrition, 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,” GC-DWC uses an innovative rapid-cycle feedback methodology to iteratively develop, 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.” GC-DWC will then scale the most relevant and effective interventions to the wider network of communities across Haiti.

### Vision of the Haitian Child: Framework for Social and Emotional Learning

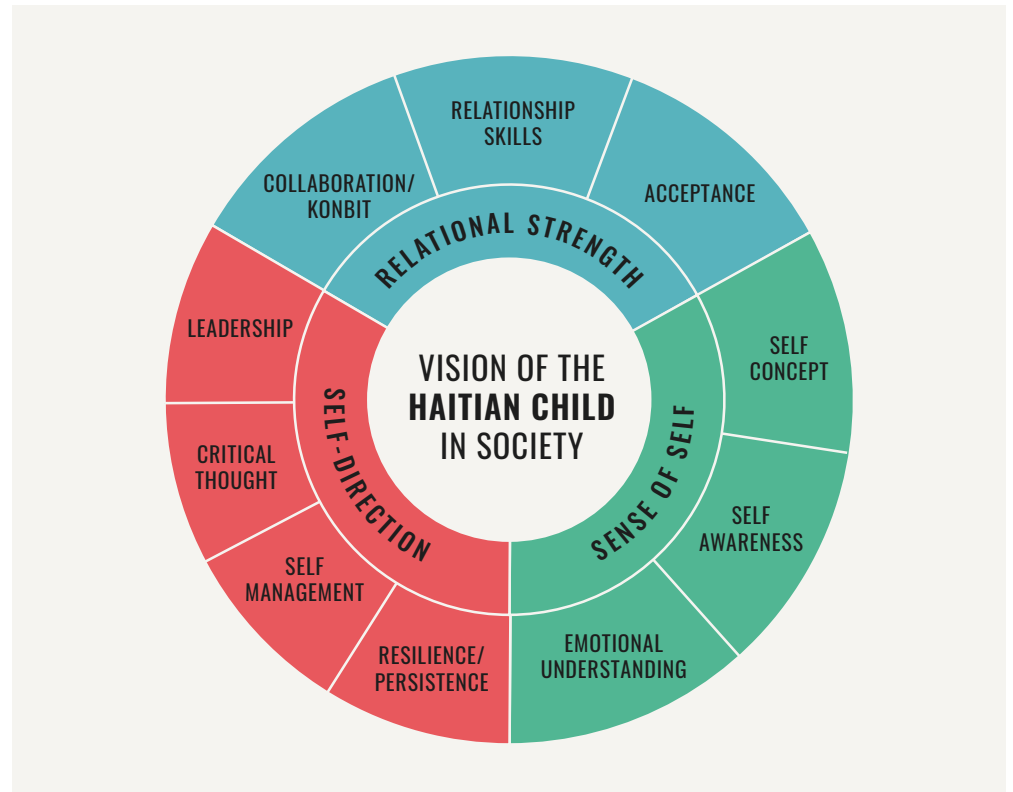
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) helps individuals learn and apply dispositions and practices to develop their personal identity, manage their emotions, maintain supportive relationships and make good decisions. The SEL framework for Haiti—*Vision of the Haitian Child*—was conceived in 2017-2018 by 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 core Haitian values, as identified by Haitian staff members and stakeholders, of personal liberation and the common good for all Haitian citizens.

Haitian staff explain how values and cultural identity are discussed between themselves and adult stakeholders. The program supports Haitian values such as respect for one another, family cohesion, voluntary community work, politeness, among others. It uses the mother tongue (Haitian Creole) and its reading materials use local, culturally-relevant images. New values are

promoted as well, such as gender equity, positive discipline and social and emotional learning, which do face some resistance by school staff, priests and families. But changes are occurring.

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 story books 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



### Pre-K/ECD programming

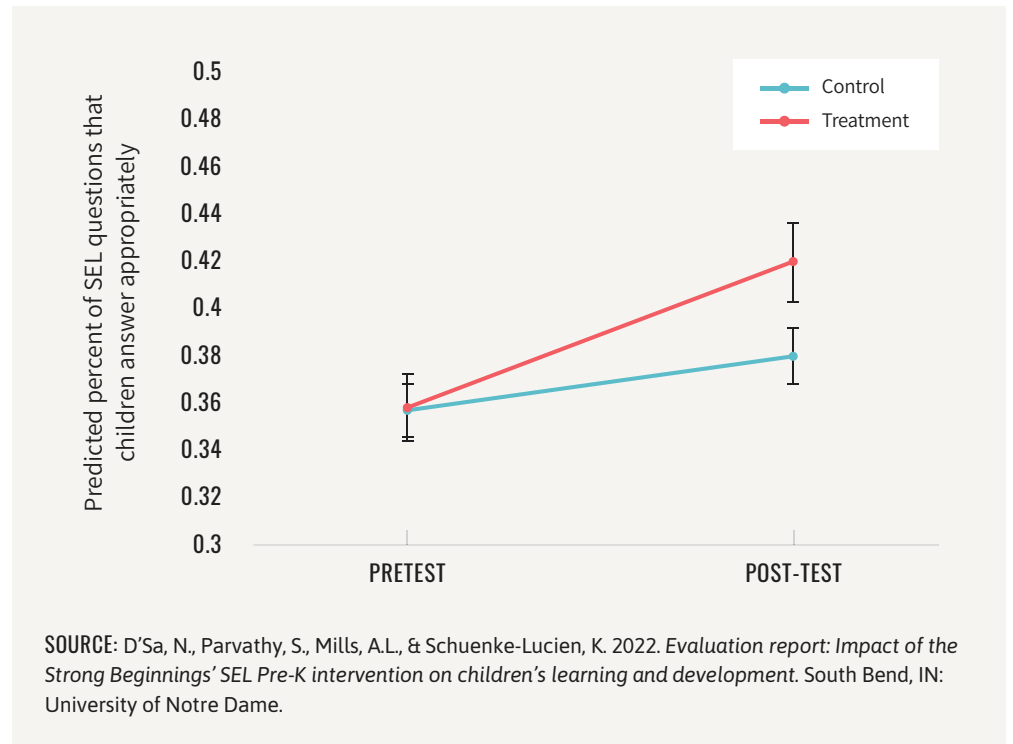
The *Strong Beginnings* SEL pre-K program includes a 10-month curriculum for daily Morning Meetings (*Sek Matine*) and ECD Program Synthesis Document that guides teachers in effectively delivering lessons designed to strengthen children’s emergent literacy and numeracy, motor development and SEL skills. 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.

### 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 scores, 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



## Parent and caregiver training and support

The [parent and caregiver training and empowerment program](#) consists of sessions held once a week over a ten-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](#) that 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 level of Archdiocese to the parish. ECD and positive parenting messages are incorporated into the counseling sessions parents receive before baptizing their children. Participating parents are told that 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.





## Radio programming: Adapting to COVID-19

In March of 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 an effective means of dissemination and an accessible one to most families to ensure continuity of learning, GC-DWC Haiti, in collaboration with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Haiti and the Episcopal Commission for Catholic Education (CEEC), created three radio programs: an integrated literacy and SEL 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).

While useful during Covid school closures, the efficiency of the radio programs decreased with the unavailability at any time of the adults back to work and the limitations of radio signals, while the intervention being costly. When schools reopened, GC-DWC adjusted its radio programming to a weekend schedule to provide access to additional learning opportunities for students at home. Content was also made available on USB drives for better accessibility at any time.

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.



**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*

# 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 relationship and partnership** with local actors, long term commitment, knowledge sharing and demonstrating improved outcomes for children, the team has emerged as a strong example of leadership 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 a very strong education network in Haiti, as recognized by local staff."



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 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>

## Acknowledgements

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