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Phi Delta  
**Kappan**™

USPS 429-840 ISSN 0031-2717

March 2010 V91 N6

Published by Phi Delta Kappa Intl., Inc.,  
408 N. Union St., Bloomington, IN  
47405-3800, eight times per year,  
September to May with a combined  
December/January issue. Pricing  
information available at [www.pdkintl.org/  
kappan/subscribe.htm](http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/subscribe.htm). Periodicals  
postage paid at Bloomington, Ind., and  
additional mailing offices.

**Postmaster:** Send address changes to  
Phi Delta Kappan, 408 N. Union St.,  
Bloomington, IN 47405-3800.

## Printed in U.S.A.

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**Publications Mail Agreement**  
#PM40064709

Return undeliverable Canadian  
addresses to: P.O. Box 4332,  
Station Road, Toronto ON M5W 3J4.  
E-mail: NJUPM@pb.com

## Helping Haiti

The faces of the children of Haiti haunt me. Images of their broken bones and their broken hearts bring tears to my eyes. Stories of the homeless and orphaned children of Haiti disturb my sleep.

By the time this magazine reaches your homes and offices, relief workers will probably have figured out how to provide food and water to needy earthquake survivors. By that time, they may even have figured out how to get a hundred thousand tents to Haiti to provide temporary shelter for the homeless. They will be digging latrines, moving in portable water units, and distributing hygiene kits that enable the homeless the dignity of being clean.

But one place where they probably haven't made much, if any, progress yet is in Haiti's schools. Returning Haiti's education system to its pre-earthquake character will not be sufficient, just as returning New Orleans schools to their pre-Katrina status was deemed unacceptable.

Rebuilding Haiti will not be *re*-building. In many places, it will require starting from scratch. When it comes to education, that could even be a good thing.

Haiti's education system before the earthquake was hardly stellar. Of 10 million Haitians, 45% are under age 18. That should mean that education ought to rate pretty high in how the government spends its money. But it doesn't. Public education in Haiti is supposed to be free, but families must pay for textbooks, uniforms, and school supplies. And the Haitian government was so lax about building schools that today most schools in Haiti aren't even public schools — 90% of the primary schools are private. Haiti has the second-highest private school attendance rate in the world, an indication of the exceedingly poor job done by the public school system. When you consider that an estimated 49% of Haitians live on as little as \$1 U.S. a day, a situation that the World Bank calls “absolute poverty,” scraping together the dollars to acquire an education means that families sacrifice a great deal to provide an education for their children.

So, it's not surprising that only 65% of the nation's children are actually enrolled in either a public or private school. Less than 35% of

those children will complete primary school. A World Bank research paper published last year indicates that more than half of the 20-year-olds in Haiti never finished high school. Is it any wonder that Haiti has a literacy rate of only 53%?

That was the situation pre-earthquake, when Haiti still had buildings. Now, add to the calculation the loss of school buildings. UNICEF reported in January that nearly all of the schools in Port-au-Prince were damaged or destroyed in the earthquake. Education minister Joel Jean-Pierre reported that half of the nation's 15,000 primary schools and 1,500 secondary schools were damaged in the quake. Three universities in Port-au-Prince were “almost totally destroyed,” he said.

## What's Next?

Children need schools, not just for the education they provide, but for the sense of normalcy, comfort, and safety they afford, especially in times of crisis. As Jean-Pierre told Reuters in January, “Even in wartime, schools must function.”

Repairing Haiti's education infrastructure will be essential for its healthy survival. Numerous aid organizations were already operating in pre-earthquake Haiti, helping with buildings, running nutrition programs, operating schools, and providing school supplies. That assistance will be even more crucial if that nation's children are to recover and prosper.

And prosper is what we should all want for them. Those of us who live comfortable lives should strive to ensure that all children are able to experience the same opportunities we desire for our own children. We cannot afford to avert our eyes from the yawning gaps between the haves and the have-nots.

None of our lives will improve substantially until life improves for all of us. We are inextricably woven together as part of the human family. When the arm hurts, the entire body suffers. Right now, Haiti is the wounded arm of the global body.

My hope is that all educators will start today to consider how we can all make a difference in the lives of the children of Haiti. — JR

File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k1003ric.pdf**

**Joan Richardson, THE EDITOR'S NOTE: Helping Haiti, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 6, March 2010, p.4.**

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