

Making education a right

In Haiti, the poorest nation in our hemisphere, work is under way to make education available to more of its children living in abject poverty.



The call and response of roosters crowing fills the air at College Harry Brakeman School in Petit Goave, Haiti. A goat is tethered at the back of the schoolyard as boys on recess kick an empty plastic soda bottle across the concrete pad that serves as their soccer field. Acrid smells from the school's latrines compete with the aromas from the nearby outdoor kitchen where women cook over charcoal fires on days when the school can afford to provide a midday meal to students; on the days when it can't, many children go hungry.

Classrooms in the Brakeman school, a concrete block facility that serves 750 students in grades K-12, are sparse and drab. In some classrooms, as many as 50 children crowd alongside long benches. Each room has a chalkboard but few textbooks. The only light comes through spaces between concrete blocks. Virtually nothing hangs on the walls — no maps, no alphabet, no pictures of the subjects being studied. The school has a lab with 18 Dell laptops, but none of the classrooms have technology tools.

The Brakeman school is a sad, tangible example of Haiti's extreme poverty, where the national minimum wage is \$5US per day; most Haitians live on less than \$2US per day, and most can neither read nor write.

But the dream of education is

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what keeps many families in poverty as they pay high tuition fees to enroll their children in school. This also means that education has become more of a privilege than a right in Haiti.

The government funds only about 10% of the nation's schools; the rest are private and parochial schools where students must pay tuition. The Brakeman school, for example, is operated by the Methodist Church of Haiti and charges \$500US per year for each student, although it often reduces tuition for the poorest families. Methodist schools in more rural areas may charge as little as \$50US per student, but even that is often too much for families, said Rev. Jean Lesly Dorcelly, the local Methodist minister and superintendent of the Brakeman school.

"You might think that families don't have the money, but they make a good effort to do what they have to do to ensure that their children have the knowledge. They want their children to have opportunities they did not have," said Monice Wilson, principal of the secondary school at Brakeman.

Because the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training doesn't fund most of the schools in the country, the federal government has been able to exert little control over them. That may be changing, in part because of the devastating January 2010 earthquake that struck midway between the nation's capital, Port au Prince, and Petit Goave, killing more than 300,000 people.

The earthquake's devastation reawakened the development community's resolve to address Haiti's many woes. The Inter-

American Development Bank (IDP) has emerged as a leading adviser for education. IDP, in turn, tapped Paul Vallas — architect of the Recovery School District in Louisiana — to develop the specifics of a new national education plan.

The promise of education

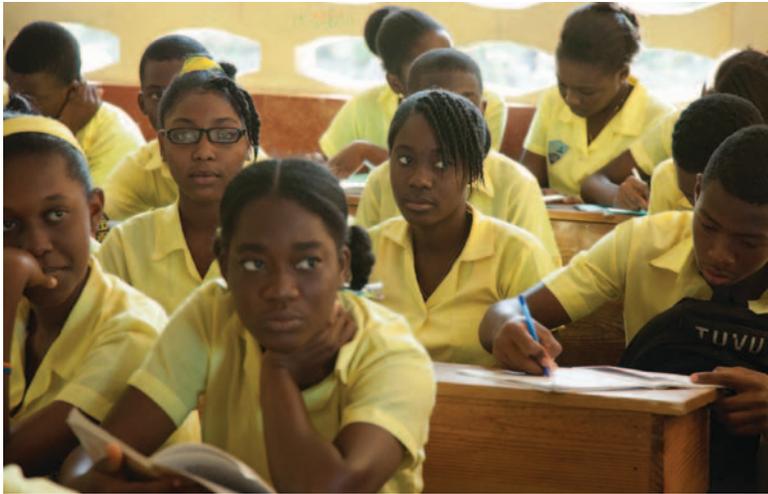
Haiti's 1987 constitution guarantees nine years of free public education, including books and other materials, to all children. But today only 20% of Haitians have any schooling beyond 6th grade, and only 1% ever attend college, either at home or abroad (Vallas, p.14).

Haiti now spends a piddling 2.5% of its GDP on education. President Michel Martelly has pledged to increase spending to 25% of the national budget over five years. But that enormous leap in funding requires new revenue. To achieve that, Martelly turned to the vast Haitian diaspora. Remittances from Haitian friends and relatives already account for 20% of the nation's GDP. "There is no source of foreign income as critical to Haiti as family remittances. The funds are literally of life and death importance to Haiti's poor, who have no other means of survival" (Vallas, 2014, p. 9).

To tap into this rich vein of support, the Martelly government levied a five-cent fee on all incoming international telephone calls and \$1.50 fee on all incoming wire transfers. Those new fees are expected to raise \$60US million to \$70US million annually once fully implemented (Vallas, p. 42). Those funds would be used, in part, to subsidize tuition at private schools.

Creating a widespread public

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school system in a country where one has never existed would be almost impossible and would be especially problematic in a country whose citizens are, with good reason, deeply distrustful of government officials.

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Building on his experience with New Orleans, Vallas envisions Haiti creating a “system of schools, not a school system” (p. 33). Since Haiti already has a deeply entrenched system of private and parochial schools, Vallas is recommending that the government pursue ways to infuse quality and accountability into that system rather than recreate it. He imagines a system in which parents receive tuition subsidies and can choose any school — confident that the government has fulfilled its role to ensure excellent teachers, consistent curriculum, and safe facilities.

Tuition, parents, and exams

For their part, Rev. Dorcelly and Wilson from the Brakeman school would welcome tuition support for their students, but they believe that the existing virtuous cycle of tuition, national exams, and private school competition has potential for raising the quality of education throughout the country.

Paying tuition is painful for



As many as 50 students crowd into some classrooms at College Harry Brakeman in Petit Goave, Haiti. When the school can afford to do so, it provides a midday meal to students; when it can't, many children go hungry. Photos by Robert Rossbach.

many families, but the benefit is that families take education very seriously and ensure that their children do as well. “The way parents behave about education, how they address education, that ensures that students are not playing around at school,” said principal Wilson through an interpreter.

“Because parents choose the school, they give more of themselves to the school and to the kids,” Dorcelly said.

The financial investment also means parents are watching to ensure that schools provide a good education so their child will pass the national exams. “If they do not pass the exams, they cannot move to the next step. They have to pass the final exam in order to go to a university in Haiti,” Wilson said.

“If you don't do well on the exams, parents won't send their children to your school,” Dorcelly said. “There is a lot of competition between the private schools. All of them want to be the best. Private schools are like businesses. You need students, and they need to do well. We will not accept teachers who come late or who don't come to school at all, and teachers will not accept students who do that.”

Unlike in the United States where many educators are resistant to common standards and common exams, Wilson sees Haiti's national exams as a cornerstone for improvement in his country. “The general exams are good for the student, good for the school, and good for the country,” Wilson said.

Reference

Vallas, P. (2014). *Education in the wake of natural disaster*. Princeton, NJ: Wilson Center Program on America and the Global Economy. www.wilsoncenter.org/page