

Jack Burns KM Global Wales,  
WI, USA Dominican Republic,  
Education

## **Education's Impact Goes Far Beyond the Classroom**

Going to school is something that a majority of those in the United States take for granted. Schools in the U.S are located in very close proximity to people's homes, and they possess many luxurious amenities such as a snack bar, laptops, and a variety of course options. However, this is not a given for a vast majority of the world's inhabitants, including those living in the Dominican Republic, who often lack any form of formal education. Providing Dominicans with better education opportunities is no simple task; however, by taking steps towards revitalising the country's education system, generations to come will have a more promising future.

While the quality of education in the Dominican Republic may differ from a wealthier country such as the United States, the economic disparity between the poorest and most affluent individuals is incredibly similar. This disparity between the bottom and top economic classes are evident in all facets of daily Dominican life. Those in the middle- and upper-class of society will find themselves enjoying much more enriching food, better shelter options, and easier access to healthcare (González & Wiarda, 2019). This disparity also stretches to education where the schools are geared towards middle- and upper- class students who are likely to attend university. The value of an education is often underestimated by lower-class Dominicans, as they have very few educated people in their lives. Additionally, for many Dominicans, the financial investment in education is too cost-prohibitive ("Learning," n.d.). Therefore, those who cannot afford to continue their education following the four-year secondary course tend to fail in receiving a diploma, thus continuing the cycle of poverty for these families as there is no viable way out.

The government of the Dominican Republic is also at fault for the economic disparity currently plaguing the country. President Danilo Medina and his administration have been accused of taking bribes of approximately \$92 million from the Brazilian engineering company Odebrecht (Pineda, 2017). While Medina has failed to meet his campaign promises, his public support continues to rise due to the country's seven percent rise in gross domestic product (GDP) in both 2014 and 2015 (Wallenfeldt, 2019). This economic boom may help the middle- and upper-class; however, those who are impoverished continue to stay there. While some families, especially those in rural settlements, struggle economically, morale within the family life has never faltered. Family members are very caring towards each other and make sure that everyone is supported, both emotionally and financially. This includes supporting the elderly (AFS-USA, n.d). No matter how financially disadvantaged a family is, they tend to stick together.

Historically, the education system in the Dominican Republic has struggled to keep strong enrollment numbers across the primary and secondary levels of their system. However, the education system has evolved for the better over the last twenty years, with net enrollment in primary school residing at 89.1

percent in 2012. This figure was up 6.1 percentage points from 1999. Additionally, net enrollment in secondary school rose significantly between 1999 and 2012, boasting an increase of 23 percentage points during that span with current enrollment at 62 percent (United Nations, n.d.). These respective increases in enrollment can be attributed to the increased presence of both local and international non-profit organizations that seek to provide students and their families with the resources necessary to attend school. Due to the dire financial situation of countless impoverished families throughout the country, many students are unable to access the materials necessary to attend school. These materials include school supplies, uniforms, and other necessities. This new access has provided unprivileged children in the Dominican Republic with the opportunity to attend school for the first time (United Nations, n.d.). First generation students are one of the first steps in lifting families and communities out of poverty,

While enrollment in the Dominican Republic has increased, proficiency in key skill areas has yet to follow suit. According to 2015 data from the World Bank, “on average 78 percent of third grade Dominican students did not achieve a basic level of competence in reading, and 90 percent of students performed below the basic math level” (The World Food Bank, 2015). This data certainly sounded the alarm on the lack of competence in core subject areas, and as a result, the National Pact for Education issued a \$50 million financing package to further back the efforts of the Government of the Dominican Republic in their quest to improve the learning environment for students in their primary schools (The World Food Bank, 2015). This financial package should help drive the aforementioned proficiency statistics in the right direction.

At present in the Dominican Republic, education is playing a key role in the food insecurity crisis. In a study at Clark Atlanta University in August 2008, the following discovery was made: Families in the Dominican Republic with literate members had a higher probability of being food secure. A 2003 study included in this same document states that 39.1 percent of the households surveyed had an illiterate head of the household (United States, 2008). This undoubtedly plays a role in the family's ability to get food, considering the fact that 76 percent of the households included in this survey had adults that were food insecure, and 72 percent had children that were food insecure. This survey was conducted in a region that is known to be economically disadvantaged. However, the high prevalence of food insecurity in this survey should raise some red flags regarding the stability of the rest of the country.

Additionally, researchers have found a correlation between the years of education a woman receives and the total fertility rate for the population. According to the ideation theory, women with a greater amount of education will likely learn about ideal family sizes through school, the community, and the internet (“Female Education,” n.d.). Also, more educated women may also know more regarding child health and therefore have an added confidence that their children will survive, thus decreasing fertility rates (“Female Education,” n.d.). Women having fewer children can be seen as a domino effect, as it means far fewer mouths to feed, which leads to fewer children being food insecure, which therefore propels a new generation into food security.

While many bandage solutions have been enacted in an effort to improve education in the Dominican Republic, such as a mandate that ensures four percent of the country's GDP be spent on education, only

approximately two percent is invested as of 2017 (Borgen Project, 2017). As it has been made clear, a wide range of problems still need to be addressed. A good starting point would be with the government of the Dominican Republic. By following through on their mandate requiring that a higher percentage of the country's GDP be invested in the education system of the country, the quality of education would certainly increase. This solution is backed by the success of countless countries throughout the globe. For example, in 2015, the U.S. spent 6.1 percent of its GDP on education. This percentage ranks third in the world ("Government," n.d.). As a result of their investment, the U.S. has the best education system in the world in 2020, according to U.S. News and World Report (n.d.). While a major increase in spending on education in the Dominican Republic is unlikely, a small increase in government spending on education will prove incredibly beneficial and work to stabilize their current education system.

This lack of funding has caused the salaries of teachers in the Dominican Republic to be incredibly low, usually not even enough to support their own family. Subsequently, very few choose to go into the profession, which leads to a very high student-to-teacher ratio and thus students fail to get the attention they need to be proficient in their studies. This renders education at most schools in the country incredibly ineffective (Borgen Project, 2017). However, by increasing the salaries for teachers to a livable wage, the government will have the ability to incentivise a much larger group of people, which will increase the amount of teachers. And as stated above, when there is a shortage of teachers, the quality of education tends to decrease. An increase in educational personnel via better wages will certainly boost the quality of education for students throughout the country.

A major problem taking a toll on enrollment in schools is the attrition of girls. According to the Borgen Project, a global organization combating poverty, one in four girls who drop out of school do so because of a pregnancy (Borgen Project, 2017). By promoting education regarding reproductive health, women will have fewer children, and teen pregnancy rates will also decrease. In doing so, girls will be able to stay in school longer, as they will no longer have the responsibility of taking care of a baby. Currently, men are expected to be the financial providers and decision-makers while women are considered caretakers. This remains true even though many women in the Dominican Republic are employed in various professions. By providing a strong education for women, the stigma that still stands to this day will most likely be reduced (Berkley, n.d.). This will increase the educated populace and thus prepare women to explore new career pathways that may have been previously unattainable. These women will be able to get a higher paying job, which enables them to better provide for their family.

Attrition of girls due to a pregnancy is not the only common form of attrition found in the Dominican Republic. Haitian migrants, as well as Haitian Dominicans, dropout of school at alarming rates due to the extreme poverty in which they are immersed (Inter-American, n.d.). Through grant funding, these high-risk populations have been provided with better access to supplemental education opportunities. Specifically, the Inter-American Foundation has stepped in to fund a program "supporting community-led solutions to enhance peace and security in the Dominican Republic" (Inter-American, n.d.). Grant funding is a great way to improve the disparities in a specific region. By targeting a specific at-risk population, this grant funding has the potential to pull children and their families out of poverty. Schools, government entities, and organized community groups are all eligible to apply for grant funding. This

funding can be used to fund other projects throughout the country that are aimed at providing additional education resources to those in need.

While all of the aforementioned solutions help to improve the quality and scope of education in the Dominican Republic, a holistic approach should be implemented in order to make a lasting impact.

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holistic approach should go beyond the classroom and the students that occupy them, keeping the focus on the community as a whole. Currently, an organization in the Dominican Republic is committed to this holistic approach. The organization, Makarios, is a faith-centered program that consists of three main pillars: the Makarios School, Family Empowerment, and Group Ministry. Makarios understands that a variety of factors play into a child's inability to attend school on a regular basis, with one of these factors being the child's role in helping their families. Makarios states that a large portion of the families they serve make a meager two to five dollars a day laboring in the sugarcane fields or the construction industry ("Makarios", n.d.). By involving the community as a whole, members will better understand the impact that an education and vocational training can have in lifting families out of poverty.

Makarios currently has limited financial resources, serving only 134 families in 2019 ("Makarios", n.d.). However, they have pioneered a new way of tackling the education process in the Dominican Republic, with early results looking incredibly promising. Their holistic approach has not only had a profound impact on the children enrolled in their school, but the parents as well. In 2019, Makarios taught five mothers how to read and counseled eleven couples ("Makarios", n.d.). This unique approach empowers families with the skills and resources to lift themselves out of poverty. By implementing the Makarios model on the macroscale, the Dominican Republic will be in a position to achieve long-term educational prosperity.

While tackling food insecurity in developing countries such as the Dominican Republic may seem like a daunting task, a variety of inexpensive remedies are right within reach. By taking the initiative to better fund their education department, the Dominican Republic would be looking at a much more prosperous future for generations to come. It only takes one falling domino to enact a lasting change that would lift Dominicans out of poverty and thus decrease food insecurity.

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