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SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION PILOT PROGRAM

PREVENTING DROPOUT

Reaching At-Risk Students to Ensure
They Stay in School

Cambodia's Early Warning and Response System

Phin Ying, a 17-year-old student at Bay Damran Junior High School in a rural farming community in Battambang Province, found himself torn between going to school and working on his family' farm. Like all school-aged youth, Ying's recurring absences put him at risk of dropping out of school. As Phin fell further behind in his studies, he became discouraged about staying in school.

Phin was not alone. Research shows that 34 percent of children who have dropped out of lower secondary school have missed 15 consecutive days of school. High absenteeism can lead to dropout. In Cambodia, in-cycle dropout is most acute in Grades 7, 8 and 9, with an average dropout rate of about 20 percent.

USAID stepped in with the School Dropout Prevention Pilot (SDPP) Program, which works with government ministries, schools, students and parents to craft the appropriate solutions to mitigate drop out and rigorously measure the interventions' impact, using randomized control trials. USAID is testing interventions to reduce dropout in Cambodia, India, Tajikistan and Timor-Leste.

Creative Associates International partnered with Kampuchean Action for Primary Education in 2012 to implement the two-year program in 215 Cambodia schools across eight provinces. Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport is collaborating in the project.

One intervention is the Early Warning System, which uses the "A, B, Cs"—attendance, behavior and coursework—to identity and support children who are at risk of dropping out of school. Low attendance, problematic behavior and weak academic performance are global predictors of dropout. The EWS uses a "track and trigger" approach to track negative student behavior and trigger school- and home-based actions to address them. For example, the EWS flags students who have missed multiple days of school. When a child misses three or more days, the family is notified. "We write him a letter or give him a call or we visit his home," explains Din Yeath, director of Thkaul Andeth Junior High School, which has seen a decrease in school dropout since the program started.

Soeun Pheap, a teacher at Wat Cheng Junior High School, credits the success of the Early Warning System to the teachers' direct contact with parents. Before the intervention, schools would send letters to families if their children were absent but did not make home visits. "The significant change in their attitude resulted from our visits to their home," Pheap says.

Such home visits also enable school representatives to update parents on their children's academic performance and underscore the importance of education.

That interaction makes a difference, says Pheap. "Upon having been informed of this, they responded positively that they would do their best to encourage and persuade their children to return to school," he says of the typical reaction to home visits.

"There are students whose parents understand the importance of education and there are students whose parents don't. With the Early Warning System, we can identify vulnerability," advises Im Koch, Under Secretary at Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport.

For Phin, who was frequently absent from school to plow the fields, the program's Early Warning System helped him – and his family – prioritize his education. "Doing farming is hard labor," he says. "I would prefer being at school to working." Following a home visit to discuss Phin's schooling, his parents decided that he should no longer miss school. Now, Phin studies during the week and tries to work only on weekends.

Parents' attitudes toward education are changing. "They used to think that when their children left home for school, it was the teachers' task to teach them," says Yeath, who has observed that with the SDPP outreach, parents are more enlightened about the importance of education. "They help encourage and advise their children to have extra study times at home. They follow up their studies more regularly."

School administrator Pech Hoeu agrees.

Parents of students at Au Mal Junior High School in Battambang, Hoeu observes, are more involved because of the school's outreach. "They were pleased to be informed of their children's performance in school," which has spurred greater interest in their children's academic lives and improved parent-school relations.

"I think SDPP succeeded in changing the community's attitude toward schooling," says Chea Kosal, the program's director in Cambodia. He credits its success to the school's outreach to community members. "I believe that their determination convinced the communities of their genuine efforts to help them."

Between 2012 and 2014, more than 65,000 students in grades 7 through 9 benefited from the School Dropout Prevention Pilot Program in Cambodia's Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kampong Speu, Prey Veng, Pursat and Svay Rieng provinces. The Impact Assessment results show that dropout has been reduced in the schools where the SDPP EWS has been introduced. ∎

School Dropout Prevention Pilot Develops Technical Skills & Encourages Student Engagement Through Computer Labs

The bright light from the computers shine on the eager students' faces as they glance up to watch as their teacher writes instructions on a dry erase board. This scene plays out daily around the world in the classrooms of developed countries but is not typical for rural Cambodia, where access to modern technology is lacking.

The Wat Cheng Junior High School in Battambang Province was one such rural school that didn't have a computer lab for its students. Both students and their parents complained that they were not getting the skills that would help them advance their education or help them find employment

In an effort to improve the attractiveness and relevancy of schooling to reverse the high absenteeism rates that lead to dropout, the U.S. Agency for International Development-funded School Dropout Prevention (SDPP) Pilot Program provided the junior high with a computer literacy program, including a 15-computer laboratory, computer literacy curriculum, instructional materials and trained instructors.

Svay Chanya, the school's director, says the infusion of technology has been "very useful" for classroom instruction and has enticed students to return to and stay in school. "No matter how badly some students perform at school, they will want to continue coming to class. …They continue working hard to get skill trainings and computer technology skill."

Creative Associates International partnered with Kampuchean Action for Primary Education to implement the Program, targeting its dropout prevention efforts in grades 7, 8 and 9, which have the highest dropout rates in Cambodia. An Early Warning System was introduced in 215 Cambodian schools to identify students at risk of dropping out and trigger support actions; 108 of the schools received computer labs to increase the relevance of lower secondary education. The interventions were developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

The Ministry's strategic plan sought to prioritize teaching students technological skills, a goal the SDPP supported as a means of reducing dropout, says Chea

"Before the program, my son didn't study hard," says one mother. "After the program, he studied harder."

Kosal, country coordinator for the program. The computer labs, he explains help the ministry "achieve its objective in providing students with skills in technology" and at the same time encourage better participation in school.

From 2012 to 2014, more than 65,000 students in grades 7 through 9 benefited from the Early Warning System and Computer Lab interventions in Cambodia.

Sok Chanchay, a 9th grader at Au Mal Junior High School, is one such student.

"Before the program, my son didn't study hard," says Sok's mother, Sam Nary. Unable to afford the computer lessons Sok wanted to take, her son lost interest in school, attended fewer classes and considered dropping out. "After the program and with the computer lab," she saw a turn-around. "He studied harder."

Schools across Cambodia that received computer labs report seeing better attendance.

"Our students are very happy to be able to access the computer lab because they really want to understand modern technology," says Din Yeath, director of Thkaul Andeth Junior High School, one of the few schools in the area with a computer lab. "The computer lab is a good attraction to make students come to school more regularly."

Computer literacy will also better prepare Cambodian students to compete in a job market beyond the manual labor their parents know.

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>
> - Chea Kosal, SDPP Cambodia Program Director

"Students who have completed the computer skills will mostly likely find a decent job" and even "equip them well to run a small business," notes Lim Vuthy, Deputy Director of the Provincial Department of Education and Youth in Pursat.

Building on SDPP's experience with the low-cost computer labs, the government will continue the technology initiative even after the USAID program concludes, says Kosal, the SDPP Program Director in Cambodia. "It remains in the Ministry's objective to ensure that students in rural schools receive some computer skills."

The computer labs provide students with much needed technical skills that will benefit them not only in the immediate but in the long term.

"Investment in education is crucial for the future of Cambodia," states Oeng Hok, the Head of the Department of General Education. ∎

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Why Students Drop Out of School in Cambodia

Academic:

33% of dropouts and 20% of at-risk students said they would dropout/dropped out because they were unable to keep up with their lessons.

20% of at-risk students and dropouts cited poor academic performance.

50% of at-risk students and 30% of dropouts have missed more than 15 consecutive days of school. consecutive days of school.

Economic:

75% percent of at-risk students, dropouts and dropouts' parents and guardians cited the need to supplement income through household chores or domestic work.

50% of at-risk students and their parents/guardians and 33% of dropouts and parents/guardians cited school-related expenses.

Source: USAID Situational Analysis