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**TIMOR-LESTE**

SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION PILOT PROGRAM

## PREVENTING DROPOUT

# New Techniques to Ensure Students Stay in Class & Advance to the Next Grade





# Early Warning and Response System in Timor-Leste Raises the Alarm About Dropout

Gracilda da Costa, a mother living in Timor-Leste, received a notification one day that her fifth-grade son Nazario had been absent from school for multiple days and was now considered at risk of dropping out. That alert, she says, was a wake-up call and prompted her to take steps to ensure her son returned to school.

In Timor-Leste, school absenteeism is a problem that is particularly acute in Grades 4, 5 and 6, during which time 30 percent of students miss more than 15 days of school and dropout rates are at their highest. Students who miss school, like Nazario, fall behind in their lessons, become discouraged and disengaged from school and are at risk of dropping out.

The majority of parents, however, don't know if their child is attending – or missing – school.

The School Dropout Prevention Pilot (SDPP) Program, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, is helping to change that.

In partnership with Timor-Leste's Ministry of Education and local educators, Creative Associates International and CARE International introduced the SDDP Program into 97 Timorese schools in five districts with high dropout rates. An Early

Warning and Response System and an Extra-Curricular Activities (ECA) program address critical behaviors that predict dropout, such as low attendance, problematic behavior and weak academic performance.

The Early Warning and Response System helps teachers monitor students' daily attendance and, if a student misses two or more school days, the family is notified.

Such school to family outreach was effective in getting Nazario back into the classroom. Since he has been regularly attending classes, Nazario's grades have improved so much that he earned an award for being top in his class.

"We felt happy," Gracilda says of her son's new-found academic success.

"Before the implementation of the programs, it was bad," says teacher Anita de Araujo, a coordinator at the Basic Filial School in Lasau. "Before, our students came and went as they pleased and some of them dropped out of school."

With the Early Warning and Response System, the school dispatches community volunteers to deliver a postcard to the parents notifying them of their child's absence.

"The home visit gives the community volunteer an opportunity to try and con-





vince the parents about the importance of education, and why it is valuable for their children to attend school,” says SDPP Country Coordinator Nicole Seibel.

Home visits not only alert the parents to the problem, but they enable schools to better understand why a student has been absent and address the underlying cause. In Grades 4-6, students drop out of school primarily because of economic reasons, but school factors also figure prominently. The notification system also works with families to reduce late school arrivals and early school departures.

The impact of the program is palpable, say community leaders involved in outreach to parents and guardians.

“Last year, there was no change at all, but now it has changed,” reports Calisto Brites, a volunteer in Kusbouk, who notes that now students are no longer absent for

long stretches of time. “But if they are absent, even for one day, we will immediately bring the letter.”

Luis Lemos de Araujo, a monitoring and evaluation officer, echoes the positive impact of the SDPP Program. The monitoring results in Kusbouk in 2014, he cites as an example, showed improved attendance and higher test scores than the previous year.

Parents are encouraged to become actively involved in their children’s school lives. Some serve as parent counselors, reaching out to fellow parents on behalf of the school to encourage continued school attendance.

That outreach, says parent counselor Florindo Soares, will continue even after the USAID-funded program ends. “We will continue... so then our children can continue to have better schooling.”

Program sustainability is important, says Alfredo de Araujo, National Director of Basic Education for the Ministry of Education, who notes that an evaluation of both the program’s successes and challenges will help inform future application. Once that study is complete, he says, the ministry “will be able to extend the program to all schools throughout the territory.” The Early Warning and Response System not only reaches out to families to support student attendance but also works with community leaders and community members to become involved in ensuring local children stay in school.

“If he/she is not at school, we will follow up with the parents” says Mateus dos Santos, a village head, who adds that parents have been receptive to such outreach. Parents, he said, have told him “We have to listen to this and send our children to

**Community investment in children's education is an investment in Timor-Leste's Future.**



school” and when there is any doubt, the parents seek clarification and ultimately “they accept it.”

Dos Santos, the village head, recognizes that lack of education holds people back from achieving success. As an advocate for continuing education, he wants more Timorese to become educated so that they can assume roles of responsibility and leadership. “They are the future of the country.”

Community investment in children’s education is an investment in Timor-Leste’s future. “Without the right skills and education,” youth in Timor-Leste will find job opportunities scarce, a challenge that will have lasting repercussions on the overall economic health and stability of the Southeast Asian nation, notes John Seong, Timor-Leste Mission Director for the U.S. Agency for International Development. ■

*With reporting by Michael J. Zamba in Timor-Leste.*





## Songs & Games Enhance Learning and Motivate Attendance

Sixth grader Novia was honest about why she was missing so many school days. She thought the teachers were too strict and the classes were not interesting.

Today, however, the student in rural Timor-Leste says she likes going to school. That turnaround, she explains, is because her school now offers organized extra-curricular activities before or after school.

Viewed simply as fun and games by the students, these extra-curricular activities

are really additional learning opportunities, requiring pupils to work together and solve problems. The activities also promote leadership skills as students take turns leading the activities.

“They think it is all fun and games, but they’re actually learning some very important social skills,” says Nicole Seibel, who is part of a unique program that incorporates learning through play to increase student engagement and reduce absences.

The Extra-Curricular Activities program is part of the U.S. Agency for International Development’s School Dropout Prevention Pilot (SDPP) Program in Timor-Leste and is especially targeted at students in Grades 4, 5 and 6, when dropout is highest and nearly one in five students in Grade 6 will never reach Grade 7. SDPP is being implemented by Creative Associates International with local partner CARE International.





In close cooperation with Timor-Leste's Ministry of Education, SDPP is implementing an Extra-Curricular Activities program and an Early Warning and Response System in 97 rural schools. Over the course of three academic years, it has reached 30,000 fourth, fifth and sixth graders and 900 teachers across five districts.

Classrooms in Timor-Leste typically rely on what educators call "chalk and talk," where students are passive listeners as

instructors provide formal lessons. Some classroom and school environments can be threatening—students report high levels of corporal punishment by teachers and often violent behavior among students. SDPP worked with principals and teachers to introduce extra-curricular activities to transform the atmosphere at the school from one of strict discipline to one that is more welcoming and friendly, an environment that motivates children to come to school regularly.

"We've managed to change some of those attitudes," says education specialist Martin Canter of the School Dropout Prevent Pilot Program in Timor-Leste, who has observed children learning through play. "We all learn through play, and we all enjoy play," he notes. Teachers in the program are encouraged to engage with their students more and to foster a collaborative learning atmosphere that uses songs and games.

Teacher Herminia Alves dos Santos says the new approach has changed her first grade classroom for the better. Participation in the Extra-Curricular Activities program has built students' confidence.

"When we ask them questions, they are not afraid to respond," she says.

Teachers have integrated some of the extra-curricular activity methods into their own classes. Songs and games are used to reinforce lessons. Alves dos Santos says she found that "teaching using music and games will make them remember, attract them, and help them understand what we are teaching them."

Florinda dos Santos Gonçalves, a teacher in the community of Bazartete, appreciates how the games can help her students stay engaged throughout the day.

"When they are in class, when they feel bored or sleepy," she says, "we have... ways to wake them up and get them excited about their classwork," referring to the energizers included in the Extra-Curricular

Activities.

The activities help teachers energize their students, especially in larger classes, and help them stay more focused on their academics.

Luis Lemos de Araujo, a monitoring and evaluation officer for the SDPP Program in Timor-Leste, has observed how children motivate other children to return to class by word of mouth.

"When a student goes home and tells their friend that there is a very good program in the school, 'we write, making drawings, we ask questions to each other, we sing and play...' other students who [were] normally absent would begin to think of coming to school," he says.

Novia, the sixth grader who used to miss school but now dreams of becoming a police officer, cites the "variety of activities" that are "fun and entertaining" as the reason she started attending class more regularly at her school in the community of Lasaun.

Engagement of students, teachers and parents is at the heart of USAID's School Dropout Prevention Pilot Program. The more positively students and the community view school, the more likely children will stay in school and reap the benefits of their education. In Timor-Leste, the Impact Assessment, which used randomized control trial, found a statistically significant increase in student attendance in the schools where the Extra-Curricular Activities and Early Warning and Response System were introduced.

The School Dropout Prevention Pilot is implemented in Timor-Leste by Creative Associates International and CARE International. ■

*Produced for USAID by Creative Associates International. Written by JC Finley with reporting by Michael J. Zamba in Timor-Leste. Photos by David Snyder.*



# Why Students Drop Out of School in Timor-Leste

## Academic:

**19%** of at-risk students and 16% of dropouts cited poor academic performance.

**16%** of at-risk students and 11% of dropouts said they would dropout/dropped out because of grade repetition.

**30%** of at-risk students and 42% of dropouts have missed more than 15 consecutive days of school.

**43%** of child respondents report teachers use physical punishment.

## Economic:

**33%** of the at-risk students, dropouts and dropouts' parents/guardians cited the need to supplement income through household chores or domestic work.

**60%** of at-risk students and parents/guardians and nearly 40% of dropouts and parents/guardians cited school-related expenses

Source: USAID Situational Analysis



Chronic absenteeism is a major contributor to dropout.