

Supporting Government Technology Priorities in the Dominican Republic:

World Vision's Virtual Literacy & Reading Clubs using WhatsApp-based Monitoring

THE EDUCATION SECTOR in the Dominican Republic (DR) has seen significant improvements over the last decade. After 20 years with the lowest education investment in Latin America, in the mid-2000's the DR began investing in reforms to increase education access.^{1,2} As a result of these and other measures, the primary school completion rate increased from 92.69% in 2010 to 96.31% in 2020,³ advancing progress towards universal primary education. However, according to the results of a recent national education assessment, only 12% of third graders perform satisfactorily in basic language and literacy,⁴ showing that education quality continues to be a challenge. Understanding that the digital divide between rural and urban areas is a key factor underpinning unequal performance, the government (GoDR) also began to prioritize access to technology as a fundamental pillar of its national development strategy.⁵ When COVID-19 struck, the GoDR prioritised virtual learning, accelerating progress toward this goal.

WORLD VISION DOMINICAN REPUBLIC's education team supported this GoDR priority by shifting key components of its ECD and primary

school literacy programming - targeting 108 schools across eight districts -⁶ to online modalities. To maintain a sense of routine and to offset potential learning loss among children in WV target schools, WVDR focused its efforts on **ONLINE LITERACY CLUBS** for early primary grade children and **ONLINE READING CLUBS** for children in late primary grades. Both activities, part of WVDR's ongoing pre-pandemic education programming, seek to develop and increase early literacy skills/literacy for small groups of children using age-appropriate lesson plans and activities under the leadership of trained volunteers.

The WVDR team understood that this would represent logistics and planning challenges due to limited connectivity in the rural locations where WVDR operates. Although approximately 61 percent of households have some degree of access to mobile phone-based internet services nationally,⁷ a recent WVDR study showed significantly lower rates in WVDR target geographies, with only approximately 17% of HH having consistent internet access.

¹ Dominican Republic's Efforts to Improve Quality of Education Receive a New Boost, World Bank, Sept 15, 2015

² Diaz, Katia, COVID-19 and Digital Learning in the Dominican Republic: Implications for Marginalized Communities, *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (CICE), Volume 23, Issue 2, Special Issue 2021

³ World Bank Data bank, found at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.CMPT.ZS?locations=DO>

⁴ Evaluación Diagnóstica Nacional de Tercer Grado de Primaria, Ministerio de Educación de la República Dominicana, 2017

⁵ Agenda Digital 2030, Government of the Dominican Republic, found at: <https://agendadigital.gob.do/>

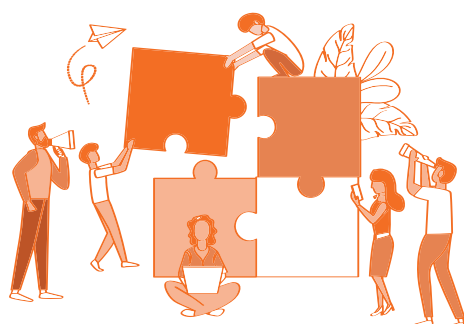
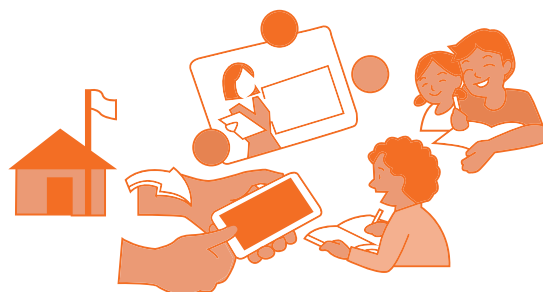
⁶ Four APs have subsequently closed, reducing WVDR coverage to 56 schools and eight districts

⁷ Latin American Economic Outlook 2020: Dominican Republic, OECD 2020, found at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/840cfa4-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/840cfa4-en>

TO ADAPT TO ONLINE LEARNING WV EFFORTS FOCUSED ON

Support to Increase Internet Access

Given internet access challenges, WDR provided families from its target school with pre-paid mobile internet, called paquetitos in DR. These efforts supported the GoDR's virtual learning priorities and were meant to bridge the digital divide between rural and urban areas. This provided families with the means to receive weekly lesson plans, to facilitate access to virtual meetings and to enable communication between families, teachers, volunteers and WDR staff.



Adaptation of Existing Materials

To support effective online and home-based learning, the local team adapted existing WDR literacy learning materials. This required modifying materials so that parents and caregivers could easily lead simple, home-based activities with the support of a volunteer.

Training for Parents and Volunteers

WDR's education team provided training for parents and volunteers to prepare them to access and use technology and to provide them with basic tips to support home-based learning. Training included orientation on online safety for children, in line with both WV and Ministry of Education standards.



Organization of WhatsApp Groups

The WDR team organized WhatsApp groups to facilitate communication and monitoring. Each WhatsApp group included the volunteer leader of each literacy or reading club, a WV education promoter and the parents/caregivers of the respective reading or literacy club members. WV promoters used WhatsApp to plan club activities, to share digital materials such as e-books and activities and to follow-up with families and volunteers regarding planning, progress, challenges, and gaps.

Distribution of Lessons, Activities and Materials

Based on agreed plans and timelines, WDR provided parents and caregivers with lessons and activities via WhatsApp. The team also distributed fungibles and supplementary learning materials to each family to ensure that they could effectively implement lessons and activities. For children in primary school, club volunteers also facilitated Zoom-based lessons and activities once a week to ensure a planned space for group interaction. Volunteers used Google forms to track attendance and thus facilitate follow-up with absentee children.



OBSERVED RESULTS

CAPACITY STRENGTHENED FOR KEY COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS.

WVDR TRAINED 175 TEACHERS, 279 VOLUNTEERS AND 1625 CAREGIVERS AND PARENTS.

Training enabled the different groups to assume important roles that ensured education access during COVID-19 lockdown.

EDUCATION ACCESS ENSURED FOR CHILDREN. WVDR reached **1,923 CHILDREN AGED 3 TO 6** and **4,356 CHILDREN AGED OF 7 TO 12** through online instruction, including at least two children with disabilities. The high level of coverage was pivotal in normalizing children's routines and keeping them in the habit of learning and instruction. Although no formal learning studies, assessments or evaluations have been conducted, the WVDR education team believes that children who participated in these processes have seen **FEWER DISRUPTIONS IN THEIR LEARNING** than their counterparts who did not have access to online learning processes.

INCREASED ENGAGEMENT OF PARENTS. The team has observed increases in meaningful parental engagement in comparison to pre-pandemic levels. Although the pandemic obliged parents to take a more active role in their children's education, parents rose to the challenge and have shown **EXCITEMENT ABOUT ONLINE LEARNING PROCESSES**. Since families were unfamiliar with online learning, the experience represented significant learning for them as well, which may have contributed to the high levels of engagement observed.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND USE OF ONLINE PLATFORMS HAVE INCREASED. The intervention has supported the GoDR's technology priorities by increasing children's familiarity with online platforms and tools. Only two years prior to COVID-19, most of the families in WVDR intervention areas did not have consistent internet access. Increasing children's ability to effectively engage with online tools represents an important **OPPORTUNITY TO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**. This will be particularly important if GoDR accelerate widespread internet access as planned. This experience has also demonstrated the potential of online resources to increase the participation of the most vulnerable children (MVC) by reducing traditional access barriers.



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