



Transforming Primary Schools in Jamaica

Ten years ago, no one wanted to go to the St. Peter Claver Primary School located in the inner city community of Waltham Park in Kingston, Jamaica. Student enrollment and attendance were low, student performance results were dismal, teachers were generally unmotivated, and parents expressed frustration.

A new principal was hired for the school based on the recommendation of a project called "Change From Within," run by the local university to improve the management of schools on the island. The school received a 'bolt' of energy with the appointment of a new principal, Margaret Bolt, and its selection to participate in USAID's New Horizons for Primary Schools project (NHP). The seven-year joint initiative between the Government of Jamaica and USAID became the catalyst in helping Principal Bolt accomplish significant changes in the school.

Implementers of the project emphasized that learning in the NHP schools is remarkably different compared to many other primary schools in Jamaica. Classrooms are arranged and rearranged to suit the lessons being taught. Children are empowered to assist in setting-up work teams to accomplish tasks, and deciding on the choice of educational tools to aid in their learning.



Photo: Futures Group

Students at a New Horizon Primary School get involved in their lessons using new audio-visual equipment.

USAID's NHP program strives to improve mathematics and language arts achievement among needy students in seventy-two schools across Jamaica. The program combines technical expertise with the common-sense principle of including parents and the community in a child's education process. The program focuses on forging a new type of learning environment that is child-centered, and reflects both better school management and effective teaching.

Many students at St. Peter Claver Primary School now use computer technology as a regular part of their learning process, including video editing computer software to create movies, keyboards to write and share stories, and digital cameras to produce pictures for their short stories. They also demonstrate class work using an overhead projector, use a boom box to assist in some creative exercises, and conduct research using the Internet.

St. Peter Claver also benefited from tools which help in more effective management including the Jamaica School Administrative System (JSAS) software which was developed for NHP schools. The JSAS software is being used daily to track attendance and improve the decision-making process at the school and classroom levels. In addition, the project has assisted Principal Bolt to strengthen her school management skills.

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Today, St. Peter Claver Primary is an entirely different school with student population exceeding 950. Supported by an enthusiastic staff of thirty-three teachers, students are excelling, and their academic achievements are surpassing that of their peers, not only in Kingston, but island-wide. Grades are much improved, with some students achieving over 90% on the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT) for math and language arts. Moreover, in 2003, twenty-two students at the school earned special awards for outstanding performance in the GSAT and received over twelve scholarships from private companies such as the Bank of Nova Scotia and the City of Kingston Credit Union.

