

OLQP SUPPORTS EDUCATION IN ST. JOSEPH PARISH, MEDOR, HAITI

Piti Zwazo Fè Nich Li. “Little by little the bird makes its nest.”

Education is the highest priority for the people of Medor’s St. Joseph parish. The community knows that a good education is a matter of justice, the way out of poverty, and a critical condition for social change in the remote and inaccessible rural area.

In 1997, when the OLQP - St. Joseph twinning relationship began, St. Joseph had only one primary school, with just 320 students – a small fraction of the area’s school age children. No one attended school beyond the 6th grade, because there were no secondary schools in the parish. Today, thanks to support from the OLQP community and the hard work of the St. Joseph parishioners, the parish educates about 3,100 students in grades K through 13 in Medor’s primary and secondary schools, as well as in primary schools in four outlying chapel areas. St. Joseph parish schools are open to every child in the parish’s 74-square-mile area, regardless of religion. Each student also receives a daily hot lunch at school.



Children in St. Joseph primary school in Medor



The twinning relationship between St. Joseph parish and OLQP made it possible to build Medor's secondary school, as well as a new primary school to replace the buildings destroyed in Haiti's 2010 earthquake. The new buildings were constructed to meet earthquake-resistant standards. Haitians carried out all the design work and construction. The majority of the funding for these new schools came from grants that OLQP obtained. The OLQP community's generous donations supplemented the grant funding.

Classroom buildings at the St. Joseph primary school in Medor were constructed after the 2010 earthquake destroyed the original buildings



Students carry rocks from the dry riverbed to the school construction site, helping to build their own school buildings

The secondary school has a solar-powered computer lab, and all secondary school students receive regular computer instruction. The lab's computers were donated and refurbished in Virginia, and brought to Medor by OLQP teams. (Team members hike or ride mules up a steep, rocky trail!). Students and teachers do computer-based research using "Haiti Internet in a Box," an offline learning tool containing educational material in French, Creole, English, and Spanish—ideal for isolated communities like Medor that have little access to the Internet.



Computer lab at the College of Our Lady, Medor's secondary school

Most of the teachers in the secondary school are university-educated. Others earned a secondary school diploma. Most live outside Medor and stay in a small teachers' dormitory during the week. Since the arduous walk up the mountain trail from the valley to Medor takes hours, most secondary school teachers return home only on weekends.

Secondary school students (grades 7-13) study French, Creole, English, Spanish, biology, chemistry, physics, math,



literature, philosophy, religion, computer science, social studies, sex education, and health

The secondary school graduated its first class in 2011. Dozens of Medor's graduates now attend university, majoring in such fields as medicine, business, law, nursing, agronomy, and veterinary medicine. Four students graduated from the University of Fondwa, as part of the 3Legs Program, which aims to create wealth in rural Haiti. Others attended public universities or the University of Notre Dame of Haiti. Six university graduates returned to Medor and are now employed in the parish agroforestry program, secondary school, parish clinic, and veterinary medicine program.

Medor's students excel on national exams. For example, in 2022, 100% of the Medor students who took the 9th grade exam passed, in comparison with an overall 83% pass rate for the Artibonite Department, where Medor is located. Medor's 13th graders had a 91% pass rate, in comparison to 58% in the Artibonite Department. The Baccalaureate (grade 13) exam is required for graduation, and those who score high enough can attend a state university at government expense.

Many families, among the poorest of the poor, live in remote outlying areas, too far for children to be able to attend school in Medor. With support from the OLQP community, St. Joseph parish established primary schools in four of the chapel areas: La Source, Guerin, Altary, and Marinette. Since each school is at least a three-hour walk from Medor on basic trails (there are no roads) these schools educate children from these communities for the first time.

Children at Our Lady of Perpetual Help chapel school in La Source





Our Lady of Perpetual Help chapel school in La Source

The chapel schools collectively enroll about 1,240 students. Graduates from the chapel schools can attend secondary school in Medor and stay in a student dormitory during the week and return to their families on weekends. The dormitory is very basic: Students sleep on mats on the floor, girls in one room and boys in another. The students' greatest desire is to have light so that they can study at night (more information about this is on the Solar Energy page).

Girls' room in the student dormitory



As is the case throughout Haiti, parents pay tuition for their children to attend school. Tuition is currently \$70 US per year for the secondary school, \$33 US for the primary school in Medor, and \$13 US for the chapel schools. Families pay what they can, and the children whose families cannot afford to pay receive scholarships. Farmers, whose incomes are increasing through work in our agro-forestry program, have been able to pay a greater share of the tuition, a source of great pride for them. Tuition from students' families in the two schools in Medor now covers 20% of the annual expenses of these schools.

Contributions from OLQP parishioners support most of the operating expenses for the two schools in Medor, including teacher salaries, educational materials and supplies, and teacher development. OLQP contributions also support the four chapel schools. The World Food Program supplies food for the school lunches for four primary schools. Food for the Poor provided food for one chapel school. OLQP has provided funds for the pastor to buy food for the school lunches of the secondary school. Recently he purchased beans from local farmers in the Smallholder Farmers Alliance.

Funding for the chapel schools was uneven in the early years. Until 2015, teachers were not paid regularly, and the schools were constantly in danger of closing. Since then, Père Luckson and (since late 2018) the new pastor, Père Frantz, have agreed on a joint fundraising plan with OLQP to support the three schools. Their efforts have been successful in obtaining funding from the bishop of Gonaives, the Haitian government (which provides tuition subsidies to a small number of students at the primary school in Medor), Our Lady of the Mountains Church in Cumberland, Maryland and food from the World Food Program as well as by increasing the tuition paid by the families.

Outside sources of funding obtained by OLQP Haiti Committee include religious orders of women and men in the US and other private foundations. Consequently, since September 2016, the chapel schoolteachers and all the staff have had their salaries paid on time and in full – a wonderful accomplishment in Haiti where teachers can go unpaid for months! Still, ongoing funding for the chapel schools remains a year-to-year challenge, especially since the extremely poor mountain communities where the schools are located lack the resources to pay teachers. For example, family tuition covers only 11% of the expenses of the chapel schools.

Women's education is one of the top goals of our partnership with St. Joseph parish. All involved continue to search for ways to keep more girls in school until graduation. Girls and boys attend in similar portions until the top two grades. The parish is trying to recruit more women to teach in the secondary school, to encourage girls to stay in school through high school graduation. One notable success story is Rismene Esteme, who attended primary and secondary school in Medor. She graduated in 2011, with Medor's first secondary school graduation class. Thanks to a scholarship sponsored by an OLQP parishioner, she attended the University of Notre Dame of Haiti, where she studied business management. After finishing her course work, Rismene



returned to Medor, where she has been teaching economics in the secondary school, while working on her thesis. She is a role model for other young women in Medor.

The schools continue to grow and improve, and education remains the highest priority for our twinning relationship, as we work toward the day when Medor's schools can become sustainable – and when better-educated Medor residents can apply what they have learned to bring prosperity to their community. St. Joseph parish and the OLQP community understand that providing adequate education to the impoverished communities is a big task, but we are inspired by the famous Haitian proverb *Piti Piti Zwazo Fè Nich Li*, “Little by little the bird makes its nest.”

