

# Strong Schools and Communities Initiative: Working Together to Build Safe Schools and Protective Learning Environments

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GLOBAL BUSINESS  
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A World at School

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## Acknowledgements

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The Global Business Coalition for Education (GBC-Education) brings the business community together to accelerate progress in delivering quality education for all of the world's children and youth. We believe that education is the birthright of every child and the key to expanded opportunity and future employment. For companies, investing in education promotes economic growth, leads to more stable societies, fosters healthy communities and makes it easier to do business. Education spurs innovation and increases the skills of employees, the income potential of consumers and the prosperity of communities where business operates.



The UNICEF Latin America and the Caribbean Office (LAC-RO) works in 36 countries from 24 country programmes across the region in education issues as: early childhood development, secondary education, urban and rural areas, indigenous education, inclusion of children with disabilities, government support and community and children and adolescents participation.



**A World at School** people from more than 250 civil society, teacher, faiths, youth, business, international and non-governmental organisations. A World at School has over 580 youth ambassadors campaigning in more than 88 countries across the globe. We believe education is the key to opportunity and the right of every child.

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# Introduction

## Working Together to Build Safe Schools and Protective Learning Environments

Education is a human right. In order for this right to be realized all children and adolescents require a safe place to play and learn. Around the world, crises, emergencies and violence jeopardize this right and the safety of students, teachers and school personnel. In Latin American and the Caribbean, violence in and around schools is negatively impacting the education of millions of children, threatening their immediate safety as well as their ability to build productive lives and meaningful contributions to their families, communities and economies. Violence is exacerbated by and contributes to high poverty rates, inequality, unemployment, corruption, social conflicts, abuse and drug trafficking.

Latin America and the Caribbean has the highest rate of armed violence of any region in the world and is the only region where lethal violence increased between 2000 and 2010. In the last two decades, homicide rates have increased 5-8 times faster than in Europe and Asia.<sup>1</sup> The youth homicide rate is more than double the global average — 70 per 100,000.<sup>2</sup> While this violence affects everyone, the most lethal violence disproportionately affects young males both as perpetrators and victims. Central America alone has four times more male victims between 15 and 29 than any other region.<sup>3</sup>

The most significant causes of violence in education settings are the presence of criminal groups, gang members and weapons in and around schools which create a sense of insecurity, increasing absenteeism, and in many cases can lead to permanent dropouts. Nearly 60% of students in Guatemala fear attending school, and at least 23% of students and nearly 30% of teachers have been victims of violence or know someone who has been besieged by local gangs known as maras when entering or leaving school.<sup>4</sup>

The extortion of teachers and students by criminal groups and gang members and the theft and destruction of school facilities not only impede access to school, they create fear and other negative psychological consequences, diminishing the quality of teaching and learning. Violence can be extreme, resulting in forced displacement or even death. Millions of girls, boys and adolescents wonder every day if they will even be able to reach their schools, if they will be safe during their school day, and if these efforts are worth the considerable risks they take.

Preliminary (and growing) evidence shows that among the main impacts of violence on education are restricted access to schools, and continued risks and threats to teachers and students. Increasing dropout rates, forced recruitment of children and adolescents in armed groups as well as dangerous routes to and from school, known as invisible borders, further erode the right to education.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), criminality is also correlated with low educational attainment. Most of the inmates in Peru (87.1%), Chile (84.4%), México (85.9%) and El Salvador (87.3%) did not finish 12 years of education.<sup>5</sup> The cycle of violence that makes children victims and pushes them out of classrooms may also make them more likely to commit violent acts later.

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## Protecting Children and Building Safe, Strong Schools

Achieving safe learning environments requires active participation across society, including; school administrators, teachers, local and national governments, communities, civil society and the private sector. Especially important are consultation and participation of children, adolescents and their families. Understanding the learning environment as an integrated whole of cognitive, social and emotional environment is key in the search for solutions to the problem of violence.

The UNICEF Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office and the Global Business Coalition for Education invite all stakeholders and business leaders to join a Strong Schools and Communities Initiative, which will:

- Identify and strengthen policies and programs that effectively create safe schools and protective learning environments.
- Support governments to improve their capacity to fulfill the educational rights of children and adolescents, which include ensuring that schools are safe.
- Promote an open dialogue among families, children and adolescents, authorities, the private sector and communities for immediate action as well as building long-standing responses.

It would be a mistake to understate the complexity of violence in the region or to assert that solutions are simple. There are no easy answers and what works in one context may not work in another. There are however interventions and approaches that have shown results that should be supported, improved and expanded.

School staff, youth, communities, local and national authorities and the private sector should work together to promote the development of effective solutions to improve learning and reduce the negative impacts of violence by:

- 1) Engaging with education actors and other stakeholders in the research and dissemination of innovative and alternative education responses that encourage learning in a safe environment and that protect students, teachers and families from violence
- 2) Supporting training, mentoring and capacity building mechanisms and technologies that improve the capacity of the education system to cope and respond to education needs despite violence
- 3) Working with key actors, adolescents and youth to increase job opportunities
- 4) Promoting dialogue among adolescents and business leaders to identify solutions to structural problems that cause violence as well as ways to reduce existing violence in and around schools and communities

# School-based Interventions

5) Strengthening community-private sector partnerships to identify, support and finance national efforts to improve school security measures, especially in high-risk areas

6) Engaging local and national authorities in support of a digital campaign across the region to raise awareness of the impact of armed violence on education and to promote a collaborative approach to the development of policies to protect the right to education.

We invite partners to support this work with their expertise, resources and commitment to the children and youth of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## School-based Interventions

In violent environments, creating safe and effective learning centers is a complex challenge for schools. Schools must be supported to keep the best staff and develop flexible operational rules and tools convened with the school community that respond to the needs of students, their families and school staff.

### Provide an integral response to prevent arms in schools.

Avoiding arms in schools is key to the development of a safe learning environment. Teacher and family involvement in prevention actions, strong communication with local authorities and local community leaders, and safe “S.O.S call centers” that allow anonymous reporting of incidents or threats, are some of the actions that may be taken in this regard. *In Costa Rica UNICEF helped to create the “Integral protocols for violence*



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*situations in educational centers,” these protocols are a simple and practical tool to support the school community, especially students, so they can better address the physical, psychological and sexual violence, harassment, bullying and cyberbullying, use of weapons, abuse and drug trafficking.<sup>6</sup>*

**Develop conflict resolution and peaceful coexistence programs.** The creation of these programs can help children develop a greater capacity to dealing with differences in a non-violent manner, and can facilitate reintegration for children out of school. *UNICEF Argentina collaborated with Buenos Aires Province to train 10,000 secondary school teachers and school authorities to develop a provincial plan for peaceful coexistence in schools. Around 15,000 schools in the province now have school co-existence centers.*

**Strengthen safety awareness.** The creation of safe learning environments starts by training staff and students on security measures, such as identifying threats, communicating with security officials and building positive responses to actual violence situations. *UNICEF Nicaragua has incorporated armed violence prevention in the education sector by working with school counselors to update their methodology on themes of violence prevention. UNICEF also supports the creation of protocols to prohibit the carrying of arms in schools. Education and Child Protection sections have strengthened their inter-sectorial work to allow a comprehensive approach to violence prevention including family and community, and sharing of resources across sectors (both internally and at the government level).*



**Encourage innovative and flexible education learning models.** Planning, teaching and evaluation should be aimed to respond to children's needs. All administrative policies and procedures to encourage children and adolescents to attend school must be reinforced. Innovative pedagogies facilitating coping skills and conflict-resolution knowledge should be fostered. *UNICEF Colombia supported the Government in developing innovative platforms, methodologies and content for adolescents and young people to acquire relevant knowledge on peace and conflict processes and create local peace initiatives. The Paz a Tiempo "Peace in Time" virtual diploma now has 3,145 adolescents and young people who have been trained and certified as peace builders.*<sup>7</sup>

**Provide structured psychological support to those who have experienced crises.** Victims of violence need specialized support in safe environments. School community members (Children, adolescents, teachers and their families) should have access to structured support responses. *UNICEF collaborates with governments using "Return to Happiness" methods that integrate education and protection issues to provide psychological and emotional support in the school settings for children that have experienced social crisis and/or have been affected by natural disasters.*<sup>8</sup>

**Identify students at-risk of dropout and take preventative measures.** Ensure the quick return of those students who have already dropped out of school. Evidence shows that those at risk of dropout can be identified before they leave. Students with academic challenges, constant absences, and problems with gangs, community or family members are dangerously at risk. In many contexts, early pregnancy might be another situation for which girls may also abandon school. Identifying these students and providing alternatives to stay at school might contribute to reduce the risk of dropout. *In the municipality of Santo Tomas in El Salvador, the project "Educational access, permanence and insertion for the prevention of the recruitment of girls, boys and adolescents by gangs" provides academic reinforcement and life skills in safe environments to children and adolescents of vulnerable communities to improve their life quality and keep them out of gangs.*<sup>9</sup>

# Community-based Interventions

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Communities play a key role in creating a protective environment for children and schools. Building on specific challenges in the local context, programs and policies can have a greater and more positive impact. Community-based interventions are most effective when supported by a wide range of actors, including local organizations, civil society and the private sector.

**Encourage dialogue between youth and community leaders to advocate for the development of policies to protect the right to education.** Open dialogue between leaders and children and adolescents helps improve the capacity of youth to define important rights issues, find relevant solutions, work to create a more trusting environment, and reduce the stigmatization of youth. *UNICEF Haiti, through the Protection Section, has been working in Cité Soleil and Martissant, two poor communities located in the areas of Port-au-Prince where violence remains a big challenge. These two areas have the highest rate of armed gangs and armed violence in the country with great impact on the lives of children and their education. The aim of the project is to promote spaces for community dialogue among families, gangs and young people for nonviolent conflict resolution.*<sup>10</sup>

**Support the creation of after school programs, as well as sport and cultural opportunities.** Creating sports or cultural activities enables children to meet children from other communities that are experiencing similar challenges and work together to reduce tensions and find innovative solutions. *In Ecuador, implementing a “Nation of Peace and Street Football” enabled 4,000 adolescents to be sensitized and trained around a culture of peace. Partnership was established with the Catholic University of Esmeraldas, the local government and the UNHCR.*<sup>11</sup>

**Create community prevention strategies.** Working with the community to prevent violence is an important step towards creating education without fear. Local communities can encourage children to attend school, become informed about the consequences of violence and develop coping skills. *In the Eastern Caribbean Countries, Back-to-School campaigns and advocacy initiatives have led other partners, including Kiwanis and Crime Stoppers, to play a greater role in raising awareness of children’s rights, especially their rights to be protected from harm and violence.*

**Create linkages between the business community and schools.** There are several ways in which the children, adolescents and the school systems can be strengthened and youth supported. The private sector can provide technical education opportunities that increase the general employability and job prospects of youth. *In Guatemala Grupo Ceiba created the program “Empresa Educativa” (Educational Enterprise) to teach vulnerable young people in English, technological and entrepreneurial skills that facilitate their employability.*<sup>12</sup>

# National/Local Authority-based Interventions

National and local authorities must work together with schools, local communities, civil society organizations and the private sector to enforce measures to prevent violence and guarantee the right to education. The creation of inclusive public policy processes can enhance the involvement of the wider community and increase the efficacy in programmes designed to prevent violence in their own communities.

**Develop expertise among teachers, directors and supervisors to deliver education and prevent, cope and respond to potential violence.** Developing the leadership and management capacity of staff is key to improving the learning opportunities despite violent or changing environments. *In Ecuador, UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education to include a holistic approach to prevent violence and promote a culture of peace through training of teachers and schools' student welfare departments.*<sup>13</sup>



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**Improve systemic capacity to track functioning schools and develop innovative feedback mechanisms.**

Improving supervision and support to schools, on-time monitoring and data gathering are important ways to track progress, detect alerts and create a deeper understanding of the situation in and around schools. This evidence-based approach is critical to the development of targeted improvement plans. *In Peru, the Ministries of Education in two provinces are piloting a new tool, EduTrack, with*

*UNICEF support. Among other things, the tool reports student and teacher attendance, as well as potential and/or unexpected trends in attendance changes, allowing officials to identify targeted areas for improvement.*

**Identify out-of-school children and adolescents and provide adapted alternative education services.** Well-structured second-chance opportunities including accelerated learning programs and flexible or individual based schooling are important mechanisms to foster learning for those at greatest risk of never completing their education. *In Colombia, UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Education to increase the coverage and effectiveness of the national program “La escuela busca al niño”(The Schools Seeks the Child), aimed at identifying children and adolescents who are out of school, or at high risk of dropping out, and guaranteeing their right to quality education. As a result, in the departments of Nariño, Putumayo, Cauca, Córdoba and Norte de Santander, in 2014, 9,679 children and adolescents were found to be outside of the education system, of whom 5,536 were subsequently enrolled and 4,143 are in the process of enrolling.*<sup>14</sup>

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**Develop strong partnerships with local authorities and partners.** While the engagement of global and national stakeholders is necessary, developing strong partnerships at the local level is critical to the realization of a child's right to an education free of violence. Municipalities are often best placed to support the implementation of short and long term programs because of their knowledge of the local context. *In 24 priority municipalities of Nicaragua, the Ministry of Education, with UNICEF's support, developed six "Good Living Plans," which outline a plan of action for prevention of violence in schools and communities. The plans that were created among the above-mentioned actors are part of the national strategy to prevent violence and are based on a model of dialogue and cooperation.*<sup>15</sup>

*In Ecuador the Inclusion in Education project of the Ministry of Education supported by UNICEF includes detection of dropout and exclusion due to violence in schools, families and communities. The evidence and detailed data enables stronger coordination at local and national levels between education and child protection systems and rights holder based monitoring to ensure the right to education and protection.*

**Support social mobilization and data collection to create new evidence-based campaigns.** Supporting local campaigns and data collection is key to understanding the roots of violence and its impact. Evidence about gender-based violence and prevention is needed, as is the creation of advocacy campaigns to promote the right to an education free of violence. *In El Salvador the anti-violence and multi-media campaign ¿No te indigna? (Doesn't it disturb you?) is growing daily with additional alliances and followers, solidifying the communication and the participation of youth to reject violence.*<sup>16</sup>

*In Cuba, a wide range of press articles, radio and TV programs analyze education, gender equality, and violence prevention, efforts to sustain gains achieved and new challenges that require action.*

**Make safety in schools a high priority at the national level.** Education (and protecting education from violence) must be at the top of the agenda of governments, the private sector communities and families in order to support local and regional initiatives *In Guatemala, UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Education (MoE) to include school safety issues in the government agenda. After establishing a Protection Unit within the MoE at central and regional levels, the Ministry of Education began to implement actions to build safe school settings for children and adolescents, including teacher training, schooling for parents, sensitizing of education staff and violence prevention protocols. With the support of grassroots organizations, the Ministry of Education will also soon launch a radio campaign and information platform to provide advice to school and community members on identifying and responding to risks and working to build safe learning environments and continue to raise awareness at all levels.*

# Conclusion

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The challenges are great, but the experiences and best practices above show the many specific ways that action can be taken to work together to build strong safe schools and protective learning environments. Long-term strategies with immediate next steps are critical to realize the human right to education for all children.

School staff, youth, communities, local and national authorities and the private sector should work together to promote the development of effective solutions to improve learning and reduce the negative impacts of violence by:

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- 5) Strengthening community-private sector partnerships to identify, support and finance national efforts to improve school security measures, especially in high-risk areas
- 6) Engaging local and national authorities in support of a digital campaign across the region to raise awareness of the impact of armed violence on education and to promote a collaborative approach to the development of policies to protect the right to education.

Through this important work to 1) Identify and strengthen policies and programs that effectively create safe schools and protective learning environments; 2) Support governments to improve their capacity to fulfill the educational rights of children and adolescents, which include ensuring that schools are safe, and; 3) Promote an open dialogue among families, children and adolescents, authorities, the private sector and communities for immediate action as well as building long-standing responses, the Strong Schools and Communities Initiative will work to build long-lasting responses to guarantee the right to education and learning in a healthy and protective environment. This Initiative seeks to transform children's experiences in school into an extraordinary lifetime opportunity to start building a culture of peace in schools.

We invite partners to support this work with their expertise, resources and commitment to the children and youth of Latin America and the Caribbean.

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