



The DREAM Caraballo Montessori Preschool 2011 to 2012

Location: Caraballo, Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic

Primary Program: Montessori Preschool and Food Program

Number of children participating: The morning classes have approximately 50 children and the afternoon classes have approximately 45 children (total of 95)

DREAM Staff: 4 teachers and 1 cook

MISSION STATEMENT

We believe that quality, early and continuing education is the most effective way to break the cycle of poverty and change destinies. Our mission is to run inclusive, sustainable education programs for children and youth in the Dominican Republic that can be replicated throughout impoverished global communities.

STATEMENT OF NEED

The Caraballo Model Montessori Preschool introduces children living in extreme poverty to superior education and allows them to develop a foundation that better prepares them for the challenges awaiting them in life. In addition to these academic benefits, this unique program addresses the problem of malnourishment and basic health, a critical factor in the poor quality of education in the Dominican Republic.

The town of Caraballo is made up of Dominican, Haitian Dominican and Haitian residents living in conditions of poverty and extreme poverty. Caraballo is located on low-lying, overcrowded land, which is prone to flooding. In addition to these problems, the town is isolated geographically from the surrounding communities by extensive, abandoned sugar cane fields. This physical isolation is intensified by cultural barriers that make it virtually impossible for the former cane workers and their families to seek services or create the social networks that are so vital to their well being. These barriers have been further strengthened by racial conflicts between the Dominican community and Haitian Dominican segment of the population. There has been one powerful unifying point in this disadvantaged community over the last seven years: The DREAM Project.

HISTORY

In spite of these challenges, Caraballo has seen remarkable development since The DREAM Project began offering programs in 2004. This development is a direct result of a population dedicated to finding a way out of extreme poverty, bridging racial divisions and the support the DREAM Project has been able to offer. This has been accomplished through extensive work in education, human services and a sustainable system of community participation. Since 2004, DREAM has seen a small, modestly supplied and staffed school transform into a beacon for the people of Caraballo. The DREAM Project has been able to place 3 different Peace Corps volunteers and 4 full time DREAM volunteers to oversee these programs, but the key to this highly successful program are the 5 staff members from the local community that operate the school. Through extensive training over a 3-year period, they have developed the skills to operate this program without direct DREAM supervision, the first step on the road to sustainability. In a community where many children simply do not attend school, the Montessori Preschool introduces disadvantaged children to quality education and leads them into the system.

PROGRAM

The Montessori method is an educational approach created by Maria Montessori in the late 19th century that was specifically designed for children living in poverty. This methodology focuses on self-directed activity

on the part of the child and observation on the part of the teacher. One of the pillars of Montessori methodology is adapting the child's learning environment to his or her developmental level. This specific methodology is particularly effective in environments of poverty and extreme poverty, where many children simply fall through the cracks because of an inflexible and less individually focused education system. The Montessori method tailors lessons to individual strengths and emphasizes the role of physical activity in absorbing academic concepts and practical skills, highly effective for children living in poverty and the Dominican/Haitian cultures in general.

The Caraballo Montessori program offers morning and afternoon classes to 100 students and is run by 5 fulltime local Montessori trained teachers. These local teachers will continue to learn new methodologies and techniques guided by a certified Montessori teacher throughout the year, who will work side by side with them in the classroom and offer workshops to expand their skills. The families of enrolled students donate 2 weeks of volunteer hours per year to assist in the program's operations. These volunteer hours offset the cost of more staff and give the families an inside look into the program and the effects it has on their children. Through their participation in the model preschool, they become actively involved in the education of their children.

Apart from the academic benefits of this model preschool program, a nutritious meal program was established for both morning and afternoon sessions. The first step to quality education is general health. As mentioned, the majority of the children enrolled in the Montessori program live in poverty or extreme poverty and do not have access to a healthy daily diet. Without the proper nourishment, they are not able to focus and participate in the education system. If the student's health is not functional, the education process becomes irrelevant. According to a recent UNICEF Report, an estimated 11% of all Dominican children under the age of five suffer from chronic malnutrition: among rural children, this number rises to 16.5%. Through the Model Montessori program, DREAM has initiated numerous public health classes to ensure the practice of healthy habits at home. During preschool classes, children are provided basic hygiene lessons such as hand washing and tooth brushing. Parents are then invited into the classrooms to learn alongside their children in addition to health programs offered outside of school.

The Montessori Preschool is free to all members of Caraballo and they have embraced it as their own. The first step to eliminating conditions of extreme poverty and racial divide is to bring the community together through its most critical need: quality education for its children. This historic initiative has provided one of the poorest communities in the North Coast the opportunity to pull itself out of extreme poverty and create a higher quality of life for its children.

