

Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 8 April 2011 – Reconstructing damaged or destroyed schools has been a UNICEF priority since last year's earthquake. It's one of the most effective ways of reintroducing normalcy to the shattered lives of children in this small Caribbean nation.

Classes resumed at St. Gerard School last April with students crowding on to the stairs of an amphitheatre-like ad-hoc structure in one part of the schoolyard.

"That situation lasted for about a month until after all the rubble had been removed and we could move the students into temporary school tents provided by UNICEF," says Sister Yola Norelus, the school's headmistress.

Brick by brick

Now, 11 months on, students are huddling together in small make-shift areas once again as they make way for the construction of 13 new classrooms.

St. Gerard School is one of 110 semi-permanent schools since the earthquake being reconstructed by UNICEF in Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince. UNICEF is also preparing to rebuild another 37 schools in the city. It's part of a countrywide plan.

"We are also focusing our efforts to rebuild schools in Haiti's provinces and will begin with the construction of 28 schools across the country in one or two weeks," says Ginette Mathurin, an engineer with UNICEF's school construction unit.

Each school costs an average of \$175,000 and takes roughly three weeks to build using a combination of tents, steel structures, and concrete foundations.

It is hoped 200 semi-permanent schools across the country will be reconstructed by the end of

June 2011.

A group effort

Chanaika, 11, is one of many students now cramped into a single container classroom in the middle of the construction site where the old school building once stood. A pencil in hand, she observes the workers mixing cement and putting up the steel roof structure of the new school.

Chanaika knows she's lucky to be receiving an education – and lucky to be alive. Last year's earthquake destroyed her school and also took the lives of 27 fellow students and three of the school's teachers.

"I know many children in my neighbourhood who can't go to school," says Chanaika, who lives in squalid conditions in a Port-au-Prince neighbourhood.

Most of the country's schools are private and receive little or no public funding. "School should be free and there should be one in every neighbourhood," she says. In cooperation with Haiti's Ministry of Education, UNICEF is exploring strategies to implement a free school system for Haiti's children. The right to an education is vital for every child, and especially in Haiti following the earthquake. Not only does school allow children to escape from otherwise bleak living conditions, but it also helps introduce stability into children's lives, strengthen their self-esteem and ability to guide their own futures.

Building hopes

"We want our children to learn here, and give them the attention they often lack at home," says Sister Norelus.

Overseeing the St. Gerard School reconstruction, Ms. Mathurin is pleased with the steady progress but says much more still needs to be done.

"Roughly 80 per cent of the Haitian population is illiterate, and only 50 per cent of school-aged children go to school," says Ms. Mathurin. "We have to continue to invest heavily in building schools, so that at least these 50 per cent can continue to go to school and get the education Haiti will need to build a better future."

Source: [ReliefWeb](#)