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**Unequal  
access to  
educational  
resources  
during COVID-  
19 deepens  
inequities in  
Jamaica**

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**ROI**

**"The only way to achieve equity and the level of success that we want to achieve is to establish mechanisms that will give every child, regardless of their station in life and the community from which they spring, an opportunity to start on an even basis."**

Karl Samuda, Acting Education Minister, Jamaica



## Dear Friends,

Similar to the experiences of many of you, 2020 has upended the lives of the children we serve in so many ways. We have been in frequent contact with our on-the-ground partners and the data creates an even greater sense of urgency for us to create an educational environment that can withstand pandemics and other global catastrophes such as COVID-19.

Recently, [Reading Owls](#) had the opportunity to participate in a series of conversations with several NGOs serving Jamaica, including [Sweetwater Blossom Foundation](#); [CaribEd](#) and [Authentic Caribbean Foundation](#), to look at the ways they were responding to the inequities exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as to figure out how we can harness our collective resources and collaborate on a response that is both impactful and long-lasting. From our discussions, as well as speaking with our local partners, we have gathered the following:

Because of the impact and recent increase in COVID cases all students in Jamaica are home without an opportunity for face-to-face learning. TV use by the government and Whatsapp are two of the main ways children are accessing learning, if they have the tools

Students are expected to participate in remote learning, but there are several challenges. Chief among them are:

- Lack of or limited access to technology. While the Ministry of Education through its “[one laptop or tablet per child](#)” program has tried to bridge the gap, the effort has largely served urban areas and many parents, especially the demographic we serve, [cannot afford tablets or computers](#).

- Poor infrastructure resulting in frequent power outages, even for those with technology, is a challenge and is impacting the quality of learning; so is slow or no internet service.
- In some cases students were being tasked with helping out with household or farm work, so they are completely removed from the learning environment.
- Limited parental support for some children as parents, especially low-income parents with a job, must juggle work outside the home, which makes their availability limited during the time when their kids most need their help. Some who are present do not have the capability to help their kids because of their limited education.

**Some kids without technology are not accessing printed materials either because of the distance from school - it costs money to travel - or non-participation.**

Two very recent and public cases that highlighted both the challenges and ingenuity came via the stories of the mother who had created a schedule for her three kids who were sharing her cellphone. The second story – [a video](#) - was shared by [UNICEF Jamaica](#), involved a [teacher using a community blackboard](#) (or walls) to write lessons so that children could come with their pencils and notebooks and write the lessons down to work on later. While these stories are remarkable and show the level of investment parents and educators are making in the lives of kids, we must all do our part to create the type of infrastructure that reimagine ways to instruct,

mentor and develop the bright minds of ALL kids, many of whom will become our future leaders. Like so many others, [Reading Owls](#) has had to pivot to meet our communities where they are. The primary needs of our students include technology and printed materials. A blended approach is needed because so many communities and homes lack technology or consistent internet and electricity. This pandemic has shown that we must reinvent ourselves and think carefully not just about the immediate, supplemental needs of our target populations, but strategies and tools that are replicable and sustainable. This approach will provide the following benefits.

- Less disruptions in the lives of the kids we serve, as schools need to close either because of this pandemic or some other catastrophe.
- Deeper engagement with all the constituencies and stakeholders, re how to best integrate learning at home.
- Working with local and international partners who are leaders in the virtual space who will help us think about the technology and educational tools needed to adapt to a fluid and rapidly developing global environment. Many of these discussions are already underway.
- Capacity building for us as an organization to quickly respond to the emerging needs of our partner schools

Currently, coronavirus cases continue to increase globally, suggesting an uncertain return to face-to-face learning. This increases the possibility of some kids not returning to school unless the right and immediate interventions occur.

We cannot do this work without you, our loyal supporters. **Would you join us by making a donation of any amount today to support our efforts to bring technology and other educational resources to kids who badly need them?** Your donation will help children in disadvantaged communities across Jamaica continue their education during COVID-19 school closures; keep the joy of reading intact; the sparkle in their eyes alive and the dream of a bright future a reality.

**With gratitude - The Reading Owls Team**



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