

## **Poor Kids Drop Out of School**

**Author:** [Perla Aragon-Choudhury](#)

Parents can't afford to pay for mandatory uniforms and fees charged by cash-strapped schools.

Pepe, 12, is busy helping his mother pack loose garlic cloves for sale. "Before I go to school," he said, "I put the cloves in plastic packs and staple them onto strips of cardboard. And when I get back home, I walk with my mother to the stores around Tandang Sora."

Working with his mother in this main thoroughfare of Quezon City, Pepe endures the fierce afternoon sun. But as he toils away, he looks forward to going back to school and is happy that his cousin Jeffrey, who dropped out last year, has decided to join him.

Pepe and Jeffrey are descended from tenant farmers who once worked the land here before it was turned over for housing development to accommodate the country's burgeoning population.

Their grandmother talks of a time when the family had enough for all their needs. But today they have no land and scrape a living as tricycle and jeepney drivers or sidewalk vendors.

Pepe is not the only poor student determined to stay in class. In a garbage pile near a big drugstore along Tandang Sora, Mac-Mac, 12, checks for plastic bottles to sell. "I can get a good price for the mineral water ones," he said, pointing to a junk shop along Visayas Avenue.

"I want to be a doctor and treat people even if they are too poor to pay."

But across the Philippines many children from poor backgrounds have dropped out of school because their families cannot afford the cost of uniforms, stationery etc.

A kindly meat vendor in the nearby market worries out loud about the future if children continue to work the streets instead of being in school. "Just like the gangs in *Oliver Twist*, they'll probably lack the proper values, character, discernment and life skills," said Francisco Mondragon, 60.

"By late afternoon they are here at the market, asking for what we will discard. How will they get the jobs that just might lift them out of poverty if they're out of school?"

Shirley too works in the market. Poverty forced her to quit high school after her second year and she is now married to a seasonal construction worker earning what she can buying and selling fish. She makes very little in the way of profit.

But she hopes at least her children will get a better chance of schooling than she ever did.

"I'm lucky that one of my sons impressed his teachers during the entrance interview at the rich pre-school in our area - and got a scholarship. I hope that he can still get one tomorrow when we enroll again in his

new school. If not, he might have to quit," she said.

The problem is education in the Philippines is free in principle – but not in practice, in contravention of Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UDHR, which states that "everyone has the right to education".

In 2000, close to 50 years after it ratified the UDHR in 1948, the Philippines became one of the signatories to the Millennium Declaration and committed to meet by 2015 eight goals that address development concerns worldwide.

Last year, marked the midpoint for the Millennium Development Goals, MDGs, but in its progress report last October, the Philippine government said there may be problems in achieving one of the targets – universal primary education.

Writing in the Philippine Center for Investigation, PCIJ, last month, Jaileen Jimeno described the state of education in the Philippines as dismal. "Since the Arroyo administration came to power in 2001, all key performance indicators in education in fact have floundered," she claimed.

"The percentage of schoolchildren who reach up to grade six, for instance, is down from a high of 75.9 per cent in 2001 to 69.9 per cent in 2006. Elementary dropout rate in 2001 was 5.75 per cent, but went up to 7.36 in 2006. Those who repeat a grade is also up, from 1.95 per cent in 2001 to 2.89 per cent in 2006."

In large part, she says, problems can largely be traced to a decline in per capita spending on education – which currently stands at 25 US dollars – and a booming population.

The result is that many schools and their teachers find creative ways of charging pupils in order to raise much needed funds.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo recently reminded teachers not to charge fees and accept those children who come to school without uniforms.

"We want to make it as small a burden as possible on parents to send their children to school. Just like in the United States and many parts of Europe, we should not require children to wear uniforms. We want to make sure that all our children go to school, especially our six-year-olds, because our statistics show that majority are at home," he said.

The scholarship for Shirley's son at Little Lamb Learning Center shows how private groups help lessen the number of school dropouts.

Other private initiatives to keep children in schools come from major television networks, which request viewers to donate bags, notebooks, pencils and other school supplies.

And under the department of education's Adopt-a-School Programme schools are built, repaired and maintained by the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce, the Coca-Cola Foundation, the

SM Foundation and other socially responsible organisations.

Still other groups like Child Hope Asia adopt a comprehensive approach supporting poor families in urban environments and helping keep their children in school as long as possible.

One step at a time admittedly – but when many people work together, school children are helped on the road to a better life.

Perla Aragon-Choudhury is a freelance reporter specialising in women, children, reproductive health and religious issues. The names of the minors interviewed in this story have been changed to protect their identities.

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