

Church program keeps Peruvian students learning during pandemic

MOQUEGUA, Peru (CNS) – Graciela Torres has two developmentally challenged children. Getting them an education on the outskirts of Moquegua, a small city in southern Peru, was never easy. Arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic made it much harder.

In addition to being a mom and breadwinner, Torres has had to fill in as teacher and tech support for her children, Lady, 15, and Emmanuel, 11, since March 2020, when Peru canceled in-person schooling because of the pandemic.

Torres, 42, helps her children with lessons and homework from the state-run distance learning programs, “I Learn at Home,” even though she does not understand some of the content. She has them work at a small table tucked into a corner, one of the few spots where the sun has not burned through the thatched roof.

“It has been very difficult for us. The internet does not reach here so we have to climb to the top of the hill for access. I take the kids and the hogs I look after and we walk up. It can sometimes take 90 minutes before we get a signal,” she said.

Schools will remain closed for the rest of this academic year – until December – as the country struggles to get the virus under control. Peru is 12th internationally and second in the Americas, just behind Brazil, in per capita COVID-19 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University’s virus tracker.

The difficulties faced by Torres and the parents of more than 150 developmentally challenged students in Moquegua and a

second city, Ilo, have been made a little easier by a Catholic Church-run program that operated prior to the pandemic and has doubled down since it started, making sure its students receive attention.

“We have faced many limitations. We have parents who are illiterate and some families without a phone or TV for distance education. Some do not have enough money for food,” said Kelly Ramos, who runs the Education and Social Inclusion Program for Caritas-Moquegua.

Ramos and the other program staff member, Joissy Avendaño, have handed out food baskets, health supplies, and educational materials for the past 15 months. They coordinate with volunteers to visit families to make sure students continue to participate in the distance-learning program. They provide parents with an \$8 prepaid phone card each month to help with the cost of downloading lessons.

Ramos said that while the pandemic exposed many weaknesses in Peru, it has been particularly difficult for families with special needs children because of the care required. Caritas, working with other groups, has had to be creative to find ways to meet the litany of challenges.

In the case of hearing impaired students, for example, the state does not have enough sign language interpreters, and there are long waiting lists. Ramos said this was resolved by providing complete lessons in print format so deaf students can follow the classes and not fall behind.

Pedro Durán, whose 18-year old son, Alexander, has been in the Caritas program for several years, said it has made big difference.

“This program, which is about inclusion, is very important. It lets the kids know they are just as important as others. My son has been successful in this program. He is now a citizen, a citizen with a disability,” said Durán.

Alexander Durán will graduate this year. He works at a family-run hardware shop during school breaks. He is looking forward to the next step and does not skip a beat when asked what he wants to study.

“I am going to be a lawyer,” he said.