

School-in-a-Box

An Instant Classroom for Children in Crisis

The idea is very simple: School-in-a-Box is a portable container stuffed to the brim with over 1,500 school implements and supplies that enable 80 children and a teacher to create an instant classroom — no matter where they are. Originally developed by education experts from UNICEF and UNESCO, School-in-a-Box has helped children to learn in the toughest circumstances and the farthest corners of the globe.

1. Box and blackboard paint

The large suitcase-shaped box is constructed from a sturdy (though lightweight) metal in order to withstand the roughest travel conditions. The design also makes for easy stacking, which saves space on trucks and airplanes as well as at UNICEF's central warehouse in Copenhagen, where a supply of School-in-a-Box kits is always ready and waiting for fast deployment to children in need anywhere in the world. UNICEF knows that quickly re-establishing schooling after a disaster is essential to children's well-being. A brush and special paint transform the large box lid into that valuable teacher tool — the blackboard. Voilà, class is in session.

2. Wooden blocks

One hundred colorful wooden blocks can be used for counting or for playing. UNICEF knows that children desperately need to be able to play, laugh, and just be children after they've lived through a world-shattering experience. The success of the School-in-a-Box kit inspired the creation of the UNICEF recreation kit, which comes in a similar metal suitcase but contains a whole array of sports equipment and games for boys and girls, including volleyballs, soccer balls, handballs, ball inflating kits, Frisbees, jump ropes, and more. The kits are (unsurprisingly) incredibly popular and have been happily used by children in crisis areas as well as to help schools develop sports programs and to encourage girls' leagues.

3. Slates and exercise books

Slates are especially good for young children who need to feel free to make mistakes without worrying about wasting precious paper. The exercise books are lined, but there are no margins, making them friendly to young spellers who compose right to left as well as left to right. The contents of the kit in general are designed to be culturally non-specific so that they can be used anywhere in the world — including right here in the U.S. After Hurricane Katrina, UNICEF sent hundreds of much-needed School-in-a-Box kits to the ravaged Gulf Coast area.



4. Plastic tote bags and pencils

Children who have suddenly lost their homes and possessions because, say, a flood washed away their village, or their family was forced to flee a plundering militia, desperately crave a sense of normalcy. A plastic tote bag and a pencil — new possessions that are their very own — can be profoundly meaningful and soothing to children whose lives have been turned upside down. Each box contains 80 tote bags, 144 pencils, 120 erasers, 100 pencil sharpeners, and 200 notebooks, which means 80 children get a bag filled with learning supplies that are theirs to keep.

5. Rulers

Every ounce of weight can make a difference when you're transporting School-in-a-Box kits long distances in areas that may recently have been hit by major natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and cyclones. Wooden rulers were considered, but the weight saved by using plastic meant plastic won out. Even with such careful considerations, the box weighs in at a hefty but necessary 110 pounds. That didn't stop UNICEF from getting an amazing 10,000 School-in-a-Box kits to the Kashmir region of Pakistan after a disastrous earthquake in 2005 (see related story on page 14).

6. Posters

UNICEF is always assessing its own work and finding ways to improve even the most successful programs. Currently, UNICEF is collaborating with its field offices around the world to develop new kits based on the School-in-a-Box concept that are tailored to individual countries and needs. These kits may contain teaching aids and study guides in native languages, or focus on specific areas of learning such as math or even life-saving hygiene. UNICEF has begun hiring local businesses to manufacture the kits within the communities they are destined to help (and so compound their benefit by generating jobs and wages). Since School-in-a-Box was first developed in 1994, the kits have helped untold numbers of children to learn in even the most dire situations. Now, new generations of children all over the world will benefit from kits made just for them.