BACK TO SCHOOL:

Collaborative and holistic campaigns to prevent child trafficking

blue dragon
CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION

Providing access to education and ensuring all the conditions are met for children to be able to stay in school are essential components of Blue Dragon's work in Vietnam. Our many years working at a grassroots level to end human trafficking have taught us the powerful role education plays in breaking the cycle of poverty and keeping communities safe from modern day slavery. To attain these goals, Blue Dragon has developed a comprehensive, collaborative model to keep children in school: Back to School campaigns.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Illiteracy, poverty and slavery: A preventable combination 1

Blue Dragon's Back to School model 2

Back to School campaigns in Ha Giang province 4

Back to School campaigns in Dien Bien province 6

Understanding the problem to provide solutions 7

What we know 8

What we do not yet know 11

Inspiring and informing children to stay in school 13

ILLITERACY, POVERTY AND SLAVERY: A PREVENTABLE COMBINATION

Blue Dragon Children's Foundation has been rescuing people from slavery and providing a range of legal and reintegration services for survivors of human trafficking for 15 years. Through this considerable experience, we have observed that vulnerability to trafficking—both as a victim and as a perpetrator—correlates with poverty and illiteracy. This observation has been corroborated through our research into the profiles of traffickers and victims of trafficking.

Blue Dragon's report, *Human Trafficking & Traffickers in Vietnam*, analysed information from 102 human trafficking court cases. Of the 76 victims with information, 71 (93%) were illiterate or had left school before Grade 12. This was also the case for 179 (96%) of the 187 traffickers whose level of education was known.[1]

The links between poverty, literacy and vulnerability to trafficking become particularly apparent when analysing trafficking among the H'mong ethnic group. Victims from this ethnicity, which makes up only 1.4% of Vietnam's total population, represent 20% of the 1,633 victims of trafficking Blue Dragon has assisted since 2005[2].

IN OTHER WORDS, THE LIKELIHOOD THAT A H'MONG PERSON WILL FALL PREY TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING IS 14 TIMES THAT OF A PERSON OF THE MAJORITY ETHNICITY KINH.

This is not a coincidence: The Multidimensional Poverty Index—a measure that takes into account access to services such as education, healthcare, water and sanitation in addition to income—among H'mong people is 91.7%, which is seven times the national average. A study by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour Invalids and Social Affairs and Vietnam's Academy of Social Sciences found that "the average number of years of schooling was small (for both genders)," and the distances to schools, markets or health clinics were much further than for Kinh people.[3]

[1] Le, L. Wyndham, C., Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, Human Trafficking & Traffickers in Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 2021, p. 5. www.bluedragon.org/profile-of-trafficking-in-vietnam

[2] Le, L & Wyndham, C., Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, Profile of victims of human trafficking in Vietnam. What factors make people vulnerable to human trafficking, Hanoi, Vietnam, September 2021, p. 4., www.bluedragon.org/profile-of-victims-of-human-trafficking-in-vietnam

[3] UNDP/MoLISA/VASS, 2018, Multidimensional Poverty in Vietnam. Reducing poverty in all its dimensions to ensure a quality life for all, Hanoi, Vietnam, 2018, p. 60. www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/en/home/library/poverty/MDPR.html

For all of these reasons, prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Blue Dragon conducted various activities aimed at keeping children in school in rural areas considered hotspots for human trafficking. These programs provide direct scholarships for students and target specific schools in rural areas of Ha Giang, Thua Thien-Hue and Dien Bien provinces where trafficking is particularly rife. In those areas, many students stop attending school after the Lunar New Year break and the summer holidays.

BLUE DRAGON'S BACK TO SCHOOL MODEL

The pandemic, however, changed this. Because the economic hardships caused by COVID-19 were widespread, so too was the problem of children dropping out of school due to their families' struggles. In the northern mountainous provinces of Dien Bien and Ha Giang, where the majority of the population are from ethnic minority communities, Blue Dragon and our government partners noticed a sharp increase in the number of children not returning to the classroom when schools reopened after months of closures due to COVID.

In these two provinces, Blue Dragon has assisted hundreds of children and adults who fell prey to human trafficking over the years, and currently works to prevent human trafficking and help victims build new lives away from danger. This combination of high poverty and trafficking prevalence rates means that dropping out of school poses a risk not only to children's education but also to their physical safety. In response, we transformed, expanded and systematised our existing interventions to keep children in school, and created the Back to School campaigns.

The creation of these campaigns had two main objectives: reaching children at risk beyond the specific schools we already worked with; and creating a model that could be implemented by public institutions in other vulnerable areas of Vietnam, without the need for Blue Dragon to oversee it. The ultimate goal was to create a sustainable model that would ensure children's access to education in the long term.

Blue Dragon partners collect information on the needs of a student and his family during a home visit.

First, Blue Dragon liaised with the provincial Department of Education to assess the situation in each school district (the number of children who had not returned to the classroom, their ages, gender, etc.). Then, we assisted teachers from local schools to visit the families of the students who were absent. Responding swiftly was essential, and given the remote locations and rough terrain of these rural areas, the support from teachers to travel to the homes of each student as soon as possible was crucial.

After discussions with each family, the teachers reported back to Blue Dragon social workers, and to the local authorities when needed. With this information, Blue Dragon could then assess each family's circumstances and the reasons why their children had to leave school. This allowed the social workers to design a support plan tailored to each family's specific needs.

The support plans have a holistic approach: they don't exclusively focus on the educational expenses of each child, but rather aim to address the root of each family's struggles to provide long-term solutions. This is why, in addition to paying for school fees, uniforms, books, bicycles (for travelling to school) or any other school supplies the students may need, Blue Dragon may also provide livelihood support (such as livestock or farming supplies). This helps families develop a steady source of income, which in turn eliminates their children's need to sacrifice their schooling to earn an income, and reduces their reliance on financial aid in the future.

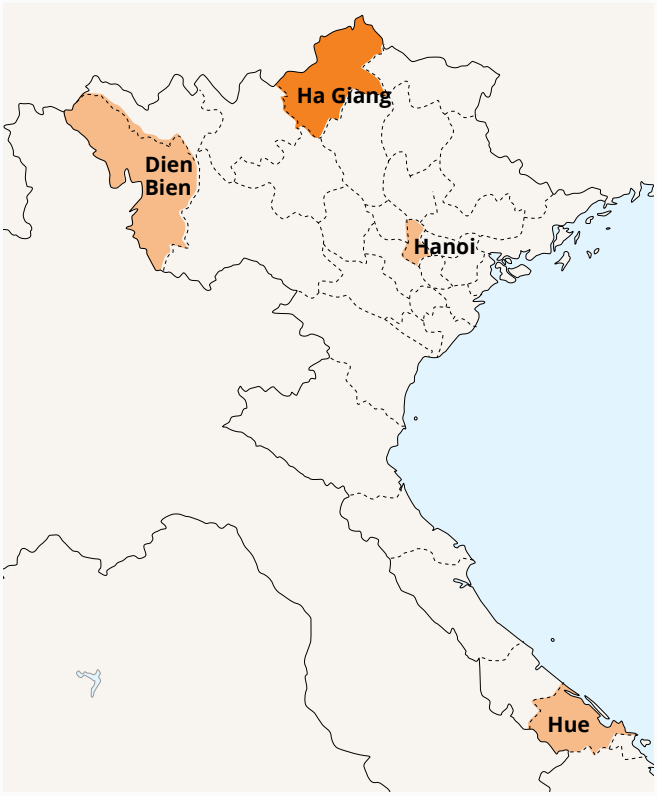
BLUE DRAGON'S BACK TO SCHOOL MODEL

PHASE 01
Identifying the problems
- Home visits by local teachers
- Assessments of the situation by Blue Dragon social workers
- Solutions designed based on each family's needs

PHASE 02
Tailored solutions
- Rescue from trafficking and exploitation
- Scholarships to cover educational expenses
- Livelihood support to ensure financial stability
- Community development activities and monitoring by social workers

PHASE 03
Systemic change for long-term success
- Sharing the model with public institutions
- Advocating for its adoption in other provinces

BACK TO SCHOOL CAMPAIGNS IN HA GIANG PROVINCE



In Ha Giang province, Blue Dragon conducted two Back to School campaigns in 2020. The first took place in May and June, when the schools reopened after almost four months closed due to COVID-19, and the second at the beginning of the school year, between September and October. In the two districts where the campaigns were conducted, 90% of students come from the H'mong ethnic minority, followed by the Dao and Tay ethnic groups, while the number of students from Vietnam's majority ethnicity Kinh is negligible.

During the first campaign in May 2020, Blue Dragon identified 189 students of all ages, from preschool through high school, who had not returned to class. Of these, 130 (69%) returned to school after receiving a visit from their teachers and being offered Blue Dragon's support.

During the second campaign in September 2020, of 164 students in these same age groups, 98 (60%) returned to school.

Since the first campaign in May 2020, Blue Dragon has provided support to 132 students from Ha Giang province who had left school or were at a high risk of having to do so. Not all students who we visited needed support to return to school; some families just needed the encouragement to do so. Among the students who received Blue Dragon's support, 89 (67%) were assisted with educational fees, bicycles, school supplies, blankets and/or clothes, while the remaining 43 (33%) received livestock for their families to earn an income.

In total, **Blue Dragon assisted 47% of the students** who had abandoned their lessons. Of the remaining 53%, some received government support.

IN MANY CASES, INFORMATION ON THE RISKS OF CHILD LABOUR AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING, AND ON THE BENEFITS OF COMPLETING THEIR EDUCATION, WAS ENOUGH TO ENCOURAGE THE BOYS AND GIRLS TO RETURN TO SCHOOL.

To ensure children remain engaged with their education and want to stay in school, Blue Dragon organizes a range of youth development and training activities at their schools. Social workers continue to monitor each child's progress and provide them ongoing guidance and support.

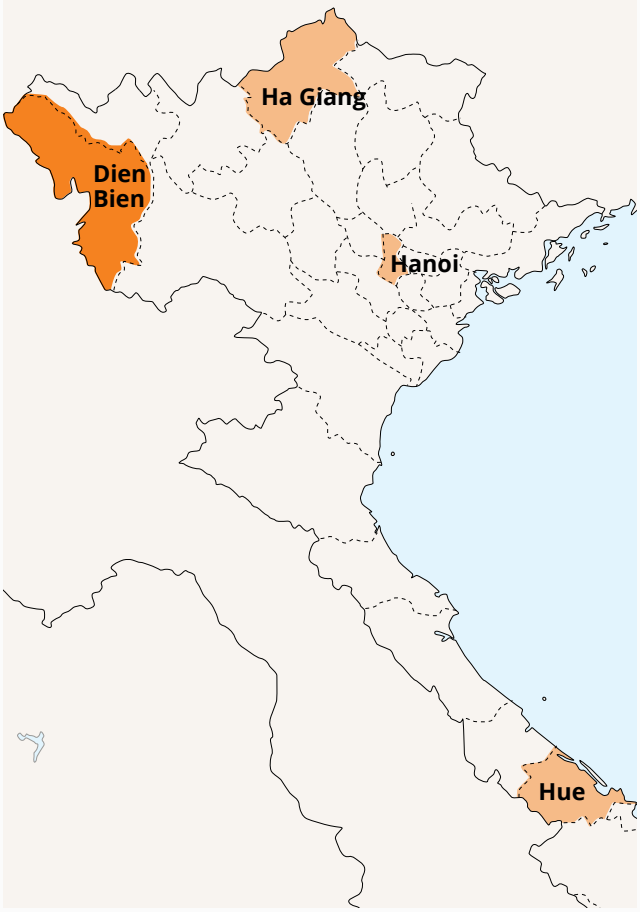
A YEAR AFTER THE FIRST CAMPAIGN, IN MAY 2021, 98% OF THE STUDENTS WHO RETURNED TO THE CLASSROOMS WITH BLUE DRAGON'S SUPPORT IN HA GIANG WERE STILL IN SCHOOL.

BACK TO SCHOOL CAMPAIGNS IN DIEN BIEN PROVINCE

In Dien Bien province, in addition to the two campaigns in 2020, Blue Dragon also conducted a third campaign in March and April of 2021 due to a high number of students leaving school following the Lunar New Year holiday. In the two districts where the campaigns were conducted, the vast majority of students come from ethnic minority communities: 80% of the school children belong to the Thai ethnic group, followed by H'mong and Kho Mu, with a very small percentage belonging to the Kinh national majority.

During the first campaign in May and June 2020, 111 (50%) of 221 students who had stopped attending school returned to the classroom. The percentage of boys and girls who went back to school during the second campaign was significantly higher, with 85% of the students (81 out of 95) returning to school as a result of Blue Dragon's intervention. The third campaign, after the Lunar New Year holiday, resulted in 82% of the students returning to the classroom (91 out of 111).

In this province, Blue Dragon provided support to 45% of the total boys and girls who had left school in two districts. Nearly all received bicycles, school supplies and tuition support, while only three required livelihood support for their families to develop stable sources of income. Of the remaining 55%, some were referred to the local government for support, while others only required some information and encouragement to return to school. In May 2021, all of them were still in school.



THIS MODEL HAS PROVEN TO BE VERY SUCCESSFUL:

65% OF THE STUDENTS WHO DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL PRIOR TO THE CAMPAIGNS IN DIEN BIEN AND HA GIANG RETURNED TO THE CLASSROOM. OF THOSE WHO RETURNED, 99% REMAINED IN SCHOOL ONE YEAR AFTER BLUE DRAGON'S INTERVENTION.

In light of this and the likelihood that COVID-related economic hardship will continue to force children out of education, Blue Dragon will continue to conduct these campaigns twice a year: after the Lunar New Year holiday and at the beginning of each school year. We have shared this model with the provincial Departments of Education, and are currently advocating for its wide adoption by the Department of Education in other vulnerable provinces.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM TO PROVIDE SOLUTIONS

In order to ensure future Back to School campaigns are successful and tackle the root of the problem, it is essential to understand it in depth. To achieve this, Blue Dragon not only monitors the progress of the students who return to school with our support, but also strives to collect as much information as possible about the factors driving children away from the classroom. Insight into the reasons why the children left school in the first place is key to being able to cater to the needs of all children in crisis.

Because not all families are reachable and some are reluctant to disclose the reasons why their children dropped out, Blue Dragon does not have data on all the students who left school. The information we do have, however, provides valuable insight into the difficulties and risks children in these areas face.[4] This knowledge will inform Blue Dragon's interventions to keep children in school.

[4] **Ha Giang province:** Total number of students who stopped attending school prior to the two campaigns: 353. Total number of students who returned after being offered support: 228. Of these 353, sex disaggregated data is available for 164 students, while information on sex, age and reasons for dropping out of school is available for 122 students.

Dien Bien Province: Total number of students who stopped attending school prior to the three campaigns: 427. Total number of students who returned after being offered support: 283. Of these 427, sex disaggregated data is available for all 427 students, while information on sex, age and reasons for dropping out of school is available for 15 students.

This is what we know:

- **Girls' education has been more impacted than that of boys:**

In Dien Bien province, more boys left school than girls. However, the percentage of boys who returned to the classroom after being offered support was also higher than that of girls: 75% of the boys, versus 67% of the girls resumed their education with Blue Dragon's assistance. In Ha Giang province on the other hand, during the campaign for which sex disaggregated data was available, more girls dropped out of school (52% of the students who did not return to class after the break were girls), and fewer of them resumed their studies after being offered support (48%, as opposed to 56% of the boys).

- **In remote, rural areas of Vietnam, despite extensive government efforts, traditional practices of child marriage continue to jeopardise girls' education:**

In one school in Dien Bien province alone, 80% of the students who did not return to class after the first Back to School campaign were girls who had been married or became pregnant during the four-month school break. Of these students, the majority were aged 15, while others were 14 and some 13. Blue Dragon's province-wide data indicates that at least half of the female students from Dien Bien who did not return to school had married during the school closures. As for Ha Giang province, the available data points towards at least 22% of the girls not returning to the classroom for this very reason. Much like in Dien Bien, these girls from Ha Giang were all aged between 12 and 15.

It is worth noting that the actual figures might be higher than what Blue Dragon's data indicates. Vietnam's Law on Family and Marriage was modified in 2014, raising the legal age for girls to marry from 17 to 18 years old, while men can only marry once they have turned 20. This change in the legislation has deterred many from engaging in this practice. However, child marriage remains a common practice in remote rural areas of the country, especially in ethnic groups like the H'mong.[5] These families generally conceal if their daughters have been married, in order to avoid penalties. The law establishes administrative sanctions for families who arrange underage marriages for their children, and bans underage spouses from living together. If this isn't respected, the law stipulates higher penalties and, in some cases, criminal prosecution.

[5] The child marriage rate in the H'mong ethnic group could be up to 60%, according to UNDP/MoLISA/VASS, Multidimensional Poverty in Vietnam. Reducing poverty in all its dimensions to ensure a quality life for all, 2018, Hanoi, Vietnam, www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/en/home/library/poverty/MDPR.html

Despite substantial efforts from both national and local governments to curb child marriage[6], this practice continues to be a problem in very remote areas. In the northern mountainous region of Vietnam, remoteness makes policing and enforcement of this legislation difficult to implement. In a study conducted by UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 18.8% of women aged between 20 and 49 from this region admitted to have been married or in unions before they turned 18. This was the highest rate in the country.[7]

Child marriage and lack of education play a crucial role in a girl's vulnerability to human trafficking, as both these factors result in increased poverty, the common denominator in all trafficking cases.

- **Boys leave school later than girls, and for different reasons:**

Male students from Dien Bien and Ha Giang are suffering the consequences of widespread poverty. In Dien Bien province, boys represented 63% of the students who stopped attending school, and 75% of them resumed their studies after Blue Dragon's intervention. In Ha Giang province, the available data indicates the percentage of boys leaving school was lower (48%), but so too was that of male students returning to the classroom after being offered support (56%).

The information the schools collected during the second campaign in Ha Giang points to another significant fact:

ON AVERAGE, BOYS LEAVE SCHOOL THREE YEARS LATER THAN GIRLS.

More than half of the boys who did not return to school were aged between 15 and 18, 38% were aged between 12 and 15, and only one was still in primary school. As for the girls who stopped attending school, only one was in the 15 to 18 bracket, 78% were aged between 12 and 15, and 18% between 6 and 11.

The 15-18 age range coincides with the age when it is legal in Vietnam for a person to start working (16 years). This is traditionally the reason why most boys will abandon their education. Although only 15% of the boys admitted the search for employment was what motivated their leaving, it is likely the boys who cited a lack of financial means to stay in school (46%) also set out to look for work.

[6] For instance, a new project on minimisation of child marriage and consanguineous marriage among ethnic minority communities to be applied between 2021 and 2025 was recently approved by Dien Bien's Provincial People's Committee.

[7] UNICEF and UNFPA, Understanding child marriage in Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam, p.5. https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/sites/unicef.org.vietnam/files/2018-09/Child%20Marriage%20Eng.pdf

While leaving school places both boys and girls at risk of falling prey to trafficking and exploitation, and reduces their chances of overcoming hardship, the disparity in the ages at which they do so has serious implications for girls. Leaving school earlier does not only make girls less likely to secure decent employment and break out of poverty, it also makes them a bigger target for labour exploitation. Not having yet reached the age to be legally employed reduces their chances of finding legitimate work.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE CHILDREN WHO LEFT SCHOOL?

ALL children come from impoverished ethnic minority communities

Girls leave school **3 years earlier** than boys

Fewer girls than boys **return** to education after dropping out of school

At least 36% of the girls who did not return to school were married during school closures

99% of the returning students who received Blue Dragon's support **stayed in school**

While this information provides Blue Dragon with indispensable knowledge to continue tailoring our interventions to keep children in school, the Back to School campaigns are still at an early stage. Some unknowns still remain.

This is what we do not yet know:

- **The specific reasons that forced each child out of school:**

The data Blue Dragon has gathered through these campaigns is sufficient to draw the above conclusions and identify some trends in Dien Bien and Ha Giang provinces. We know an increase in poverty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was the main factor driving children away from the classroom. However, despite the large volume of information collected, we still do not fully understand the specific reasons that caused 640 children to stop attending school. Obtaining data on whether each child had to marry, look for work or support their families at home to mitigate their struggles will be essential to devise strategies that specifically address each issue.

Blue Dragon is already working to develop systems that will enable teachers in Dien Bien and Ha Giang to collect and store this information on every child they visit during future campaigns. Systems to monitor the retention rates in all the schools with whom Blue Dragon works across Vietnam are also being developed.

- **The feasibility and effectiveness of applying this model in other areas of Vietnam with different demographics and geography:**

The provinces of Dien Bien and Ha Giang share geographic and demographic traits that make them very different from other parts of Vietnam. In these provinces, ethnic minority groups account for the vast majority of the population, while only a small percentage of the population belongs to the Kinh ethnicity (which accounts for 85% of Vietnam's population). Poverty rates in both provinces are among the highest in Vietnam on account of their remote location, rough terrain, low population density and less developed infrastructure. In both provinces, industrial development is scarce and most people rely on subsistence agriculture or economic migration to earn a living.

Therefore, while the Back to School campaigns have been very effective in these two provinces, more testing is necessary to determine if the campaigns would yield similar results in other parts of the country, and which adjustments would be necessary to achieve the same degree of success.

Blue Dragon aims to test these campaigns in Hue province, where we have been assisting children and families in crisis for over 15 years.

In this province located in central Vietnam, the vast majority of the population is Kinh and only a small number of people come from ethnic minority groups. Compared to Dien Bien and Ha Giang, the population density is much higher, the poverty rates are lower, and the trafficking of children and adults for labour exploitation has traditionally been much more prevalent than that of women and girls for sexual exploitation. All these factors have an impact on both the types of interventions families in this area benefit from the most, and the way in which Blue Dragon is able to deliver assistance.

In Hue, systematic Back to School campaigns have not yet been conducted. However, due to the impact of COVID-19, and devastating typhoons and floods in 2020, we have recently provided scholarships, livelihood support and other assistance to over 500 poor families to ensure they could keep their children in school.

Aside from disaster relief, since 2005, Blue Dragon has been providing scholarships for students in vulnerable situations; organising activities in schools to keep children engaged with their education; and working with at-risk families on a regular basis in Hue. These interventions have likely mitigated the impact of the pandemic on school dropout rates in the province.

Although we do not yet have comprehensive data on school retention rates in Hue, the overall information available indicates that, while the pandemic did negatively affect many families in the province, the floods that took place a few months later had a more severe impact.

In order to implement the Back to School campaigns successfully in Hue, Blue Dragon will tailor the campaigns to the specific characteristics of this province.

INSPIRING AND INFORMING CHILDREN TO STAY IN SCHOOL

These findings reinforce Blue Dragon's belief that, in order to protect the education of boys and girls in poor, rural areas, financial support must be accompanied by measures that increase children's motivation to stay in school and improve their knowledge of the hazards of dropping out. While the results of these campaigns will continue to inform our interventions, Blue Dragon is already implementing some activities geared towards this goal. In addition to the assistance described above, Blue Dragon conducts a series of activities in schools to keep children, and particularly girls, engaged with education.

Through group training activities and fun games, children from these areas learn the risks of human trafficking, child labour and child marriage, as well as the protection that Vietnamese law grants them with regard to these issues.

In parallel, initiatives such as sports tournaments, career orientation sessions and Science Technology Engineering and Maths (STEM) Fairs aim at keeping children motivated and provide knowledge about good career paths available to them.

In schools located in areas considered hotspots of sex trafficking, Blue Dragon supports Girls' Clubs. Through these clubs, at-risk teenage girls meet monthly to learn a variety of skills, expand their knowledge, bond with each other, increase their confidence, and receive encouragement to continue their educational journeys.

Finally, peer support systems are being set up to ensure the children who once dropped out of school can count on the guidance and assistance of one of their classmates when they resume their education.

Blue Dragon firmly believes in the right of all children to receive an education and live in safety and dignity. While there are still significant challenges to attain this goal, these simple, inexpensive and effective interventions show that it is possible.

Published by Blue Dragon Children's Foundation
PO Box 297, International Post Office
Hanoi, Vietnam
September 2021

For more information:
www.bluedragon.org
info@bdcf.org