Site Visit Report

Site visited: Little Stars School, Varanasi

Date of visit: August 22, 2014

Visitors: Amrish Garg (Asha-Princeton volunteer)

Samir Biswas (friend of Amrish from New Delhi)

Background

In January 0f 2014, Asha-Princeton received an email from William Hinthorn (a student at Princeton University) who was spending 8 months volunteering at the Little Stars School as part of Princeton University’s Bridge Year Program. In the email, he explored if Asha-Princeton would support the mission of the Little Stars School.

Our chapter-coordinator, Aparna Abhyankar, responded to the email seeking more information. William replied that he would be able to meet with us after his return to the US in June. He also mentioned the connection of the project with the Berkeley chapter.

The matter was on hold until William contacted us on July 31 by email asking if we could offer financial help to the project. Aparna shared the contents with the chapter volunteers. I happened to be on a visit to Delhi in early August. I spoke to Asha Pandey on the phone and made arrangements to visit the project.

Site visit and details

I invited my friend Samir Biswas, a resident of New Delhi, to travel with me. Samir and I were together at IIT Delhi before we graduated in 1972. Samir worked in industry and was a management consultant for many years. We made train reservations so that we could reach Varanasi on the morning of August 22 and spend the day at the school.

We reached the new building that caters to the education of older children around 10 AM and were met by Ms. Malti Singh, principal. Ms. Asha Pandey was expecting us at the old building and came over after a few minutes. She was accompanied by Ms. Marie van den Bemd, a college student from Netherlands, who was spending a few weeks working as a volunteer at school.

The school provides education to underprivileged street children from pre-nursery to 10th standard. It was founded by Asha Pandey in 1996 with only 7 children. Now the number of children has grown to almost 900. One hundred percent of the 10th grade students passed the exams this year.

We visited all the classrooms in the new building and were greeted enthusiastically by the students and teachers. Students were in uniform and seemed joyful. Each class typically had 40 to 50 students. The classes had about the same number of boys and girls. The attendance was of the order of 90%.

Then we walked over to the original (smaller) building which provides education to pre-KG, KG, first and second standards. Again, we visited all the classrooms. The building also houses the hostel for about 28 orphans and/or street kids (all girls). Ms. van den Bemd was staying at the hostel, too.

Observations

* Cleanliness was of the highest order throughout.
* The teachers seemed to be proficient and motivated. They deserve to get more than their current salary of approximately Rs.4000 per month.
* The school is serving a genuine need in the neighborhood.
* The standard of education is satisfactory. As an example, in physics, the students were learning how resistance depends upon resistivity, length and area of cross-section.
* There is some lab equipment but is not in regular use
* Asha and her fellow administrators are receptive to suggestions for improvement.
  + They agreed to consider charging nominal fees.
  + They agreed to introduce the use of calculators in sciences.

Overall, both Samir and I agreed that Ms. Asha Pandey work is admirable and deserves all the support that Asha for Education can offer to the institution she has founded.

Amrish K. Garg