Asha for Education 7/15/2019

Site Visit Report

Organization Rishi Pragatisheel Shikshan Sansthan

visited:

Place Little Stars School located in Nagwa, Varanasi

visited:

Dates of July 15 2019

visit:

Our names: Amrish Garg (from Princeton chapter of AfE in NJ)

Samir Biswas (ex-management consultant residing in N. Delhi and friend of Amrish from IITD, where both studied)

Background: The relationship of the Princeton Chapter of AfE with Little Stars School was established in 2014 when the two of us visited the School in August of that year as a result of William Hinthorn’s initiative to contact our Chapter on behalf of the School. William, an undergraduate at Princeton University, had spent several months at the School while participating in the University’s Bridge Program for incoming freshmen. During our visit, we were very favorably impressed with the work done by the organization under the leadership of Ms. Asha Pandey. A report on that site visit is available on ashanet.org.

 In recent years, every year one incoming freshman from Princeton Univ. has continued to spend about 7 months at Little Stars School

 In February of this year, we received a proposal requesting funding toward support of teacher salaries. After due diligence, the request was approved by the Princeton Chapter in April of this year. However, Asha Treasury did not release the funds as our site visit was made more than two years ago. Therefore, the present visit was undertaken during the first author’s trip to India this year.

Description of We left for Varanasi from New Delhi by Manduadih Express.

visit: It was an overnight train journey and we reached Manduadih Railway Station at about noon on August 30. Manduadih is a new railway station in Varanasi to ease the congestion at the old station. We had earlier taken a decision to not visit the site on that day, as the school closing time was 2 PM. Instead, we spent the evening walking along the Ghats, taking a boat ride and attending the Aarati at Dashashamvedh Ghat. Overnight we stayed at the Palace on Ganges Hotel (we were pleased with the boarding and lodging at the hotel).

 On July 15th, we reached the Little Stars School before 10 AM. We had decided not to disturb the ongoing education of the children by visiting individual classrooms, as we knew form our previous visit that the School was doing a good job in delivering quality education. Instead after some preliminary discussions with Ms. Asha Pandey (founder) and Ms. Malti Singh (Principal), Samir focused on understanding management and financial issues confronting the organization while Amrish talked to several science teachers individually to exchange ideas with them and apprise them of the New Generation Science Standards being adopted in the US.

 Samir continued to hold discussions with Ms. Pandey and Ms. Singh. Later Ms. Jyotima Sinha, Vice-Principal, also joined the conversation.

 Meanwhile, Amrish talked with Ms. Jyoti Pandey (biology), Ms. Kanchan Gupta (chemistry), Ms. Madhvi Mishra (science at elementary school level) and Mr. Ghanshyam Singh (physics).

 The above meetings continued till about 1:45 PM. Thereafter, we proceeded to the nearby building that housed Ms. Pandey’s office and the KG to 2nd grade classrooms. After a lunch hosted by Ms. Pandey, we continued to discuss with her the numerous challenges she faces on several fronts till about 5 PM. Then we left the premises in order to catch the Shiv-Ganga Express to New Delhi, which had a departure time of 7:35 PM.

Recommendations: (1) The Little Stars School is providing good education to about 900 underprivileged children at no or low cost. Approximately, half the children are from Dalit communities. Further about 8 to 10% children are from Muslim families. The missions of AfE and the Little Stars School are in alignment and their proposal should be approved.

 (2) The School has a fee structure of Rs. 500/- per year. In many cases, however, the parents of students are not willing to even pay this tiny amount knowing that their child will be allowed to continue as the payment is not enforced. We recommend an increase of the fee to Rs. 2000/- per year in a phased manner with reasonably strict enforcement.

 (3) Ms. Pandey is stressed out as a result of many responsibilities that she is shouldering. In addition to the Little Stars School, she is running a child shelter that caters to about 25 girls. Due to government regulations, the organization is required to accommodate runaway girls that are apprehended by the authorities at all hours. She has to deal with many government bureaucracies that keep creating obstacles in her path. We recommend that she should identify people who share her passion and vision and delegate some of the work to them. Also, she should explore receiving help from an experienced and committed lawyer who would be able to deal with the government agencies.

 Amrish Garg

 Samir Biswas