ASTHA Project, Delhi (Asha Seattle)

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***ASTHA’s mission, short and long-term goals***

ASTHA deals with the education of mentally and physically challenged children in the age group of 4-16 years. Its main objective is to ensure that its students are absorbed in the mainstream education system. With this view and the RTE(Right To Education), ASTHA is planning to change its current model. In future it wants to concentrate on getting disabled children into mainstream schools and focus on providing training to the teachers of these schools, to handle and educate such children. Currently it is in the process of understanding and utilizing RTE to the best of advantage for these children. It has already started the process of getting its children into government schools near the children’s houses. After admitting the children, ASTHA staff keeps visiting each child in order to ensure the healthy condition of the children and also to provide equipment and training that is initially required by the schools. ASTHA now has around 15 children in its own school that it is running and plans to get those children in the mainstream school as soon as possible.

***ASTHA’s site visit experience***

ASTHA as an organization is fairly big. Apart from helping disabled children, they also organize workshops to train children’s parents and teachers from other schools .

I went to ASTHA’s Kalkaji branch during the morning. It was a nice sunny day so all the children were outside having their meal. There were helpers with each child. I met one of ASTHA’s Directors, Ms. Jayshree Ganpati. Jayshree is also the main contact of ASTHA for Asha Seattle. Jayshree gave me a tour of the school. It’s a small but a clean and well maintained facility. Apart from 2-3 small classrooms, it also has a small kitchen to warm children’s food and a library at the back of the school which is used as a resource center by children’s parents and teachers that teach disabled children.

After finishing their food, the helpers took the children back to their classes where their teachers started teaching them. Meanwhile, one of ASTHA’s trustees, Ms Radhika Alkazi, came and after that me, Jayshree and Radhika went to a room and discussed ASTHA’s goals and vision. They told me that ASHA’s committee is planning to change the organization’s direction. Rather than working as a center for children’s education, they want to work as an organization that makes sure that disabled children are admitted in the mainstream schools and are provided facilities that they need. Their long term goal is to make sure that all mainstream schools are well equipped to accommodate children with disabilities. They mentioned the following reasons for their decision:

1. With the application of RTE, their school is not recognized as a legitimate school.
2. Disabled children will get the best exposure and life experience at mainstream schools.
3. RTE provides a lot of facilities for disabled children at mainstream schools.
4. In the long run, it is much more sustainable to make existing mainstream schools to be well equipped and trained to accommodate disabled children.

ASTHA is still coming up with the plan on how they want to approach this goal. They have been working on getting some of their children admitted into nearby government schools. They initially received negative feedback from the parents as the parents preferred to send their children to ASTHA rather than to government schools. For this, they organized an informational session with the parents and explained them the children’s rights at government schools and told them that in the long run it is much more beneficial for children to be a part of a mainstream school. ASTHA has currently admitted around 15 students to mainstream schools. After children get admitted, ASTHA staff regularly visits them to train the teachers and the schools to make arrangements for disabled children. They also help the schools to get all required equipment and trainings from the government. This is just the initial start of the vision that ASTHA sees for itself.

***Feedback to Asha***

The project definitely seems to be on the right track and have good opportunity for growth. I recommend continuation of the funding. They have good vision in terms of where they want to take the organization and how they want to make it grow. I also believe that in the long run it is much better to improve our existing mainstream schools to accommodate children with disabilities than opening other separate schools.

***What we can learn from ASTHA***

I think they have a good plan for utilizing RTE and we can educate other organizations that we support and that deal with the education of children with disabilities, to learn from ASTHA’s steps and also make the most use of RTE.