

## **REWARD, Anupuram, Kanchipuram Dt, TamilNadu**

### **Government school teachers program, Kanchipuram Dt – A site visit report**

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**Photos** - [http://picasaweb.google.co.in/chennai.asha/REWARD\\_Kalpakkam](http://picasaweb.google.co.in/chennai.asha/REWARD_Kalpakkam)

REWARD Trust is similar to Asha in that it is a zero-overhead, all volunteer group with its main focus on education. It was set up by a few scientists from the Indira Gandhi Center for Advanced Research at Kalpakkam with a core focus of improving the quality of education rendered by government schools in Kanchipuram district.

I decided to see the project on a weekday so that we could visit the schools when they were functioning. I was picked up by Mr. Sridhar at the Thirukazhukundram bus stop at about 7:30am and we rode to his house at Anipuram. I was welcomed by his wife Mrs. Kalavathi there. After a round of introductions and talking about our backgrounds, we set about discussing the project administered by REWARD and supported by Asha. I had read through their reports and proposals, and so was fairly familiar with the target area, the scope and the implementation of the project. I had also talked to Subashree and Ram to understand the project details. Sridhar and Kalavathi talked about how they used to conduct coaching classes for government school students after work in some of the villages nearby in the early nineties. This work and vision expanded to bringing in a couple of high school students every other year to their house and having them stay there till they completed their 12<sup>th</sup> class, providing them with all the required support (financial, economic, academic) and making sure they do well enough to go on to college. They also mobilized people and funds from IGCAR to help upgrade government schools in and around Kalpakkam. Another education-related activity was to award scholarships to students who passed class X for a period of five years till they completed college.

The couple then mentioned how they got introduced to Subashree and how the project to appoint teachers in government schools got underway with the support of Asha in 2004-05. It has been scaled up over years with more teachers being appointed and more schools reached.

#### **Schools and students**

REWARD Trust currently works with 11 government schools employing 33 teachers with anywhere between 2 to 5 teachers in each school whose student strengths vary from 220 to 1500. These schools are ones where there is a need for additional teachers and the teacher-student ratios are sub-optimal. REWARD has a long history of association with some of these schools and has helped upgrade them. In general, the students attending these schools come from villages nearby and most often, these are the only schools in their neighborhoods. As is the case with most parts of TamilNadu, most of the children studying in government schools tend to come from poor families and are first-generation learners.

#### **Teachers' selection, review and impact measurement**

Sridhar and Kalavathi hire well-trained teachers with reasonably strong subject knowledge through a very interesting selection process. They make sure to have the HMs/teachers of schools in the interview panel for selection of teachers in the respective schools. In addition to having experienced teachers be part of the process, this also gives the teachers an opportunity to establish a comfort level with the REWARD teacher which will certainly be beneficial in the long run. The teachers are hired to fill gaps and teach subjects for which a government teacher is not available or not posted or insufficient, thereby creating an immediate impact. Sridhar and Kalavathi meet the teachers regularly, provide guidance, help with subjects/concepts and in general are on top of things.

Thanks to Asha, the REWARD teachers are compensated well and the trust also has a very good review+bonus process in place. They have developed a pretty elaborate qualitative+quantitative review process that includes self-evaluation, trustees' evaluation, peer evaluation, evaluation by students and feedback from the government teachers in the respective schools. The evaluation criteria also span a wide range from subject knowledge to communication skills to board exam results. Sridhar and Kalavathi

mentioned that the review process has been very helpful in identifying areas of improvement and sometimes throws surprises. An example of the latter was a teacher who did not do particularly well during the interviews but got very good feedback from the school teachers and students because of her excellent communication skills and comfort level when dealing with students. Overall, I think such a technical & professional review process in itself is a wonderful idea and can certainly help track the quality of the delivery mechanism very well.

I was curious to get their perspective on the impact of their involvement in these schools. As the teachers appointed are at middle school level or higher for specific subjects, they track the board exam results year over year and that straightaway serves as a measure. Sridhar showed me the pass percentages and some subject-wise performance breakdowns for the previous academic year, and indicated how the improvements over years since their intervention.

The couple then talked about monthly training sessions held for the teachers. They bring resource persons from various fields and have them share their experiences with the teachers. In addition to getting exposed to new ideas and thoughts that these resource persons share, Sridhar mentioned that the teachers find some of the sessions very motivational.

### **Financials**

The financials for REWARD are pretty straight-forward in a sense because their only expenditure is teachers' salaries. I went over the register where they keep track of the salaries paid out and the signatures of teachers who receive them. Asha-Bangalore has been paying and accounting the salaries for the teachers, and REWARD was maintaining records for the same. I verified some of the numbers and totals, and they looked fine. They had applied for FCRA and were waiting to hear back from the Ministry of HRD.

After discussing the project and going over the financials, we decided to plan the school visits for the day. They left me to decide which schools to visit and using a combination of schools not visited by Subashree previously and/or one farthest from Anupuram, we shortlisted four schools. We then had breakfast, packed lunch and started on our visit.

### **Government High School, Natham Kariyacheri**

This school is about 5km from Sridhar's house and has classes VI to X. It has a large campus and most of the school premises is surrounded by a compound wall, thanks to funds mobilized by Sridhar & Kalavathi from their fellow officers at work. We started talking to two REWARD teachers Ms.Sowmya and Ms.Kamakshi, and a couple of government teachers in the office room and the headmaster joined us midway. I asked him about REWARD's involvement and what he thought of it. He said that the appointment of two additional teachers has been very helpful and that all government teachers have a good relationship with REWARD teachers. Their qualifications and training mean that they are able to create an impact and bridge gaps in terms of subjects right away. There is a government primary school in this village and a lot of students join this school after class V. I wanted to know if he sees any clear differences in the quality of students that joined class VI in the past two years given that these students would have gone through a year or two of ABL, but he didn't think so mainly because he was not sure.

We decided to walk around the school and interact with some students. We were first taken to a computer room. Under a recent SSA scheme, this school has been given six complete set of PCs with a large printer and power backup. All electrical supply points had been set up as well. A separate large room had been constructed for the computer lab and the school was waiting for the computers to be setup. One missing link, as is the case with such computer labs in most government schools, is that there is no trainer/teacher provided. A couple of government teachers from the school are typically trained for about two days and they are required to teach the students. The HM mentioned that this would be an incomplete solution and asked if REWARD would be able to help. Sridhar said it might be possible for them to impart computer training to REWARD teachers but would decide later.

Sridhar and I then spent some time with class X students. We asked some science and maths questions/puzzles and got enthusiastic responses. We queried them on static electricity and some experiments they could do to demonstrate the concept. We also asked them about how a dynamo used in

a bicycle to power lights works and the keyword we were looking for was magnet/magnetic fields. Some kids had a vague idea but were not able to elucidate the concept. We left them to ponder on the solution and come back to Sridhar next time he visits.

We walked around the school and saw the other classrooms. We noticed that two ladies were cooking mid-day meals. I wanted to see the condition of the kitchen and also get their opinion. As with so many other government schools, the kitchen here was covered in soot with no proper ventilation and is not used for cooking anymore. The cook complained that the roof leaks during rainy season and they have to have makeshift arrangements which make things very difficult. They have complained to the school and education authorities several times but to no avail. Kalavathi said she would talk to the HM and see what could be done.

### **Government Social Welfare Board Middle School, Paramasivam Nagar**

We got here after about a 15 minute drive from Natham. The village panchayat counselor is a very motivated gentleman who is keen on education, and Sridhar said that he helps REWARD in whatever way he can. There are three REWARD teachers Ms.Tanuja, Ms.Ezhilarasi and Ms.Sridevi working in this school. The school has three different buildings, two of which are in bad condition. After a brief round of introductions, we went to the HM's office. We spoke to her for a while and then spent a lot of time with children in different classrooms.

We first checked out the primary section where ABL was in progress. We didn't disturb the children too much as they were busy learning in different groups. We then spent some time with class VI students. It was a fairly large classroom but the building was in very bad shape. The 40-odd students were seated on the floor and we interacted with them for a while, asking about their backgrounds, their favorite subjects, some puzzles and played a memory game. Our next stop was in class VIII. This was a smaller but newer classroom and the children were excited to see Sridhar and Kalavathi, who seemed to be pretty popular. Again, we interacted with the students for a long time, talking about different things including their backgrounds, ambitions, role of women & men in society, science concepts from their textbooks and so on. It was well past their lunch time and so we decided to leave. We requested the HM to extend their lunch break a bit.

We had a chat with the teachers before we left. This school has an open ground in front which some anti-social elements in the village misuse all the time; they throw garbage, remove saplings that are planted, etc. The panchayat has not been able to resolve the issue due to various reasons and the teachers were complaining about how the children find it difficult to use the ground at all. The only solution is erecting a fence or a compound wall but the authorities have not been able to provide funding for either. We requested to the counselor to keep pushing for a solution and he promised to do his best.

We were on our way and stopped by some lush green fields with a pump-set nearby for a picnic lunch. After a sumptuous lunch, we were on our way to the next school.

### **Panchayat Union Middle School, Vallipuram**

We arrived here at about 3pm. This school is quite remote and the road leading upto it is not in great shape. There are two REWARD teachers here Ms.Muniammal and Mr.Kannan. Sridhar told me that these teachers are a couple of the most enthusiastic ones and it showed when we visited. They were very excited to receive us, showed us around the school and insisted that they speak to the students in their classes. Mr.Kannan was teaching civics and wanted me to talk to the students. We had a very interactive session talking about different forms of government, the Indian parliamentary system of democracy, the importance of elections and voting and so on. We then moved onto class VII where Ms.Muniammal was teaching Maths. We spent about half an hour talking to the children, asking them different things and giving them a couple of puzzles to solve. The school closing bell rang at 4pm or so and being a Friday evening, we did not want to hold back students eager to leave. I had a brief chat with the REWARD teachers and they were very thankful for the job and were definitely keen on doing their best. We thanked them for their time and left.

We had run out of time for the day and knew we could not visit any more schools. Sridhar and Kalavathi drove me back and dropped me off at the bus stand. I thanked them for spending the entire day and taking me around to the schools. They were off to a PTA meeting session in one of the schools.

### **Summary**

- REWARD Trust has a very definite focus in terms of adding teachers to government schools and does a very good job of it. The trust is able to track their impact and compare performances clearly for class X level, thanks to public exams.
- Sridhar and Kalavathi have a good rapport with all their teachers and interact with them frequently. The teachers are paid well and the review/bonus system is very systematic and fair.
- Sridhar and Kalavathi know all the education authorities responsible for the schools they work in and don't hesitate to reach out to them in case of any issues.
- Asha Chennai works with a lot of government schools but mostly at the primary level and some at middle level. I see REWARD almost as a continuum because they work at middle, high and higher secondary school levels in government schools. There are some best practices that I certainly picked up from them; examples are teacher interviews, teacher evaluations, salary structures, etc.
- Being a zero-overhead organization, their accounting is simple and straight-forward as their only expense is teachers' salaries.

### **Suggestions**

- We at Asha Chennai try to involve ourselves in a wholesome way in government schools; we appoint teachers, provide educational materials, conduct annual day functions, take care of basic infrastructure stuff like painting blackboards, fixing toilets & kitchens, etc. REWARD's style is different but certainly pretty effective in terms of academics. Depending on their bandwidth, they could try pushing the education authorities to fix infrastructure issues. It takes a lot of pushing and prodding for such things to be done though.
- REWARD is interested in working with government schools at the primary level with the use of some of Asha's excess funds carried over from previous years. They were still exploring the possibility of doing this. I shared Asha Chennai's experiences with Sridhar and Kalavathi and pointed out some differences in the way such an intervention needs to run. For example, we've seen that communication skills are more important than subject knowledge at primary level. Impact measurement is difficult because with the introduction of ABL, primary level children are not supposed to be administered any tests/evaluations.

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