

Reward site visit report

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Reward trust background:

Reward trust was formed by two Scientists, working in IGCAR, Kalpakkam (Tamil Nadu, India). Reward is working on upgrading selected Government schools in Kancheepuram district to the next level by paying the 40-50% of the mandatory Public Deposit Fund. The remaining fund is generated from local philanthropists and public by the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) of the respective school. Reward trust places new teachers in these selected government schools, via PTA. The salaries of these teachers are taken care of by Reward, through support from various organizations and local public. These teachers are periodically trained by Reward founders and volunteers to improve the quality of education. They have adopted about 35 Government schools in and around Kalpakkam and have appointed a total of about 60-65 teachers in all these schools.

Goals of Reward:

They ensure that the schools up to higher secondary levels are available within walking distance in every village. They try to maintain the quality of these schools on par with those schools in the urban areas. Improving students-teacher ratio is one of their top priorities. They ensure all kinds of talents are nurtured. They want to ensure a good library and laboratory in these schools. They also focus on encouraging the students to opt for higher education.

Site visit:

I went to Kalpakkam on a Monday morning and I first met with Drs. Sridhar and Kalavathi at their residence. Soon after breakfast, they took me to some of the Government schools where Reward teachers work, in the nearby villages. Mrs. Anandhi, Reward trust treasurer also joined us to all the schools.

The first school we visited was a middle school (Grades 1-8) in Lathoor village. The school had about 85-90 children in total. We first met with the School Principal; she was very happy and thankful for all the support and help from Reward & Asha. We went and sat in a Math class for 8th grade students (teacher appointed by Reward). We let her teach the students whatever she had planned on teaching for that day. It was a geometry class and the teacher did a very good job explaining them the concept of geometry and the logic and rationale behind each formula. After few minutes, Sridhar Sir asked a few application oriented questions to the students and also taught them how to think when such questions are asked. The students were very active, eager to learn and answer. All of us had at least one question to ask the students and they did a pretty good job. We then went to the next class, English for 6th graders. Students were being taught how to spell words in English. Anandhi Ma'am asked one of the girls to spell 'Florida' and 'America' 😊.



The next school we visited was a high school located in Vadakku Vayaloor village. We pretty much did the same thing there too. Waited for the teachers to teach a little bit and we randomly questioned them on subjects and their general interests. This school also has a couple of Reward teachers working in addition to the teachers appointed by Government. We heard some 1st and 2nd graders sing for us. They have a new teacher appointed for one of the subjects, who also teaches Yoga to these kids. I got to interact with a few teachers and I was really amazed when one of the teachers said she spends 5-6 hours on travel every day to get to work since she lives in a city far away from the school. I was even more surprised when she said she has a 5 month old. The teachers seemed to be very sincere and dedicated. While we were there, the kids were served their mid-day meals (tomato rice and egg).



A middle school in Kalkulam was the last school we visited. This school had only one Reward teacher. He was teaching biology; prokaryotic and eukaryotic cell. He was very interactive during the class and was able to hold the attention of students the entire time. He was very passionate about teaching and about his village (Kalkulam).



Overall positives and concerns:

What is special about Reward and how are their teachers different from the teachers employed by the Government?

When we were commuting from one place to another, visiting these schools, I got to know a little more about Reward trust, what they do and about their mission, from Sridhar Sir, Kalavathi Ma'am and Anandhi Ma'am.

- They appoint teachers after carefully screening their qualifications and capabilities. Kalavathi Ma'am did mention that they don't always focus on the depth of knowledge in these teachers during interviews. If a teacher is good enough to be trained further and dedicated enough to learn new things, they will go ahead with the appointment process. She gave a few examples of how some of their teachers were appointed and how great they improved. They strongly believe in their training process.
- Once the teachers are appointed, Reward founders and volunteers conduct teacher training every month (4th Saturday, hosted by one school every month) to make sure that the students are getting the knowledge that they should. The teachers are also given training on how to deliver what they know, to the students.
- They frequently conduct various tests and activities to both the teachers and students. One such thing is 'Smart test' that they conduct to students from 6th grade and above. They prepare a common question paper for all these students. It will have all types of questions from easy to hard and these are NOT from their text books. The goal is to improve the critical thinking of students. The students will then be graded and awarded prize in 3 categories: within the class, within the school and interschool. I got to meet the boys that came 1st and 2nd during last years' smart test. They sure are very smart and are able to think analytically. The teachers are also made to answer the same question paper.
- The next thing they do is activity based learning. In one of the pictures attached with this report (Kalkulam middle school), you can see some drawings and colorings hanging on the wall. Those are the work of 6th graders from their activity based learning sessions. These sessions help the students understand and remember things better.
- Apart from these training sessions and tests, the teachers are also given access to computers/internet and books at the residence of Sridhar & Kalavathi.
- The teacher student ratio has improved from 1:80 to 1:40. The teachers are evaluated on their progress from time to time by Reward trustees.
- 2 Reward students are graduating from Pondicherry University with their Doctorate degree (Physics and Chemistry if I remember right) and 1 student from Dental College. Apart from this, 2 boys are staying at their residence and finishing 12th standard next year. Their education and living expenses are taken care of by Drs. Sridhar and Kalavathi.
- They mentioned that they do see a clear difference and marked improvement in students taught by Reward teachers even though it is difficult to measure and compare the outcome of reward teachers and Government teachers.
- These schools being closer to the power plant in Kalpakkam, the students and teachers get to meet and talk to many scientists from time to time which serves as a great inspiration.

Concerns

- One main issue that the trust and schools are facing, is the stability of teachers appointed through Reward. Many teachers, appointed by the trust get trained well and after a few months of experience, they either leave for a better job/salary or go as Government teachers. Given the remoteness of these villages, the trustees are having a hard time to find a suitable teacher frequently. As an example, when I was there on my site visit, the Principal of Vadakku Vayaloor high school requested that the Reward trustees find a new teacher as soon as they can for 9th and 10th grade students (I don't remember for which subject it was) as one of the teachers left the school. It was already 4 months in to their academic year and they were still looking for a teacher. This was very concerning.
- Many schools still have 1 teacher handling multiple subjects. Even though they try and train themselves, sometimes they don't seem to be very confident when they teach something that is not their expertise.
- The higher secondary schools (11th and 12th) are located away from these small villages and so I was concerned about the continued education of the students studying in these remote villages. When asked about it, reward trustees said that they try and make sure that the students are sent out of the village for their higher secondary education. And in fact, the 2 students studying from their residence are from one of these remote villages. But it still might be an issue for many students as they cannot afford to come out of their villages and also the transportation facility is very minimal.

Overall, it was a very good experience for me personally. I met new people; to some extent I was able to see and witness in person, the cause that we are working for; how much we still need to improve and much more – a day worth spent! 😊