

Changing the lives of our children

In the absence of political will and vision, bringing government schools at par with their counterparts in the private sector may seem an impossible task. However, organisations such as Zindagi Trust and Book Group are working hard to prove us wrong

By Rabia Ali

With a twinkle in her eyes and some magic in her fingers, Suman Asghar gently eases her brush to create vibrant strokes in the spacious art room at her school. All around her, children are relishing the simple task of giving life to their dreams and their imagination. There are colourful birds, flowers and airplanes. In this class, there is no compulsion to draw what is given. There is freedom and creativity in the air.

But things were not this way always. Two years ago, Suman's school - the SMB Fatima Jinnah Government Girls School, was a regular "Peela school" - dour teachers, outdated books and crumbling walls. But things changed for the better in 2007 when two private entities - the Zindagi Trust and the Book Group adopted the school and went in to transform the lives of the 2,300 girls studying here.



Laraib, a tenth grade student and a member of the Student Council tells Kolachi, "I love it here." There are many girls like Laraib who say they never want to leave this island of creativity and education - even after completing their studies. "I want to return here as a teacher," she adds. Over here, there are facilities that most private schools can't offer. "Life here is simply beautiful."

But a lot of hard work goes into creating this atmosphere. Hameedah Sayani, the Project Coordinator of the school tells Kolachi about the long journey. "The first step was to merge all the seven schools that were running in this building and give it under the command of one principal."

After securing a notification from the Sindh government to adopt the school, administrative changes came into place on November 2007. The two-shift system was done away with to make way for a single morning shift. The number of children was also rationalised so that classes were sized evenly. In some classes there were as many as 100 pupils. Now there are not more than 40.

"We decided to give every Saturday off and began new academic session from August," adds Sayani, and explained that emphasis was placed on attendance, which has risen to 85 per cent. Gradually, Sayani and her team started to effect academic changes. Books on phonics were introduced, along with those produced by the Book Group. The Book Group's specialty has been to produce quality books in Urdu for junior classes.

Curriculum was modified after government approval for a more interactive mode of learning. Pupils now do not take exams until the Seventh grade. Learning modules have been introduced. Girls now get classes in subjects as diverse as pottery, rollerblading, photography, rowing and Tae Kwon Do. A school that was once dilapidated and neglected now has a well resourced library, a state of the art computer lab, a practical science laboratory and even an Audio Visual room.



"The school used to be in a very bad state before," recalls Rabia Yousuf, in charge of the junior section. "Dogs would roam in the premises and the grounds were used for weddings. Most students, hailing from lower income families, were not serious about their studies. Parents could not wait to get them to work instead of study."

But now, things have changed. "The children are learning new things and becoming aware of a whole new world," continues Yousuf. "Their parents are much more willing to send them to school now. They have faith in the future"

But Sayani and her team want to do more. Recently, a breakfast programme was initiated where 120 children, all from the Kindergarten section, now receive their first meal of the day free of cost. "We want to increase the number of students, but lack of funds are a concern," says Sayani. "We would like to add another computer lab, but already the monthly expenditure of the school comes to between Rs1.2 million and Rs1.3 million."

In the final analysis, Hameedah Sayani comments optimistically that things will get better: "We often underestimate our children. They are very smart, hardworking and eager to learn. They should never be discriminated against and our education should be all encompassing. Then we will really see the results."

Why 'adopt' a school?

The SMB Fatima Jinnah Government Girls School is the first undertaking of the Zindagi Trust and the Book Group under the 'Government Schools Reforms' programme. This programme is designed to reform curriculum taught at government schools and to promote quality education, with a focus on extra curricula activities.

Speaking to Kolachi, singer and founder of the Zindagi Trust, Shehzad Roy, explained the concept behind the adoption of the school. "What my team wants to do is to reform four or five public schools to serve as centres of excellence and as role models." Roy says that the ultimate aim is to raise standard of public education by replicating this model.



He notes that only the government can bring the massive changes the education sector greatly needs. "What we all need to understand is that no NGO can reform the system. We can only create exemplary models which the government can follow, but the changes in the education system can only be brought about by the government."

Roy says that his aim is to work on government schools that have some infrastructure. "From where I see it, these schools need the most help, as sub-standard education is destructive and can destroy creativity. We have been successful in shifting the paradigm in this school, and I believe that when the paradigm shifts, the changes take place cannot be stopped by anyone."

A great believer in equality among all students, Roy is adamant that students from the lower income strata of society should be given equal or greater opportunities and facilities. "I want to reduce the class difference that exists between people, especially among students. I want all children to be thinking individuals, with their own concepts, views and opinions. I want to nourish and bring out the talent hidden in them."



Committed to reforming the syllabus taught in the government schools, Roy says, "In our government school, not even a single government book is taught until the eighth grade. We have to force change in the policies, and will continue to do so."

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