Crafting School Transformation step-by-step

By | Oct 30, 2017

Two years back, when I first entered Florida English School (FES) in Goripalya, I saw a tall person wearing a white sherwani sitting amidst a huge pile of admission forms, surrounded by many parents around his office; his hands going back and forth on the papers and the call-bell like an automatic machine. The scene was no less than that of a busy market. It did not take me long to understand that I was not going to get an appointment from him. As I started walking towards the stairs hopelessly, I heard a lady calling me, “Excuse me, Sir. Principal sir wants to meet you.”

Wow!! Finally, I did get to meet him. As I entered his office, sir offered me a place to sit and we discussed about our work at Mantra4change & potential to collaborate for a school transformation project over a cup of tea. More than the conversation about the work, what left me spellbound was his explicit willingness to learn: a man running an institution for the last 19 years was still willing to learn. I could see a man with aspirations to provide quality education to the children of his community. As he narrated the tales of endless struggles that he faced during functioning of the institution, I could see a man on a mission with a positive mindset and a fighter’s spirit. Zaka-ullah Shariff, the Principal of FES, is quite an inspiration.

“Give me ideas for the improvement of school and I will implement it.” – This statement from Zaka sir summarizes my discussion with him. Over a period of two years, Mantra4Change and FES have embarked on the journey of improvement and transformation with a vision that FES would be a model school in the locality. It would be an example for other under-resourced, budget schools of the possibilities within the constraints. True to his promise, Zaka sir ensured that he invested time, energy and financial resources to create a great experience for the children studying in the school.

Principal Sir, as he is fondly called by everyone, invested himself and his entire staff at FES in the process of change. He worked tirelessly to understand what additional structures and tools could help elevate the school. He created a second tier of leadership in the school that can ensure sustainability of change efforts. Most importantly, as a leader, he has learnt to delegate and let go. He has started realizing the power of collaboration. Throughout these two years of our partnership, we have introduced six of other partner organizations and many volunteers to FES and Zaka sir has welcomed them all with enthusiasm.

There has been paradigm shift in the way teachers use time after school hours. While they were always seen doing random admin work earlier, now they sit together to plan for their next day lessons and share ideas. Learning circles are facilitated and led by the teachers themselves. Even Zaka sir participates in the learning circles whenever his schedule allows. One day, we saw him explaining to teachers how ‘hook’ (a technique) can be designed to introduce a particular topic.
"How can we create better experiences for our children?" - sir asked one day. We brainstormed and jotted down few ideas on a piece of paper that remained with me. Little did I know that sir kept them in his heart. After the Diwali holidays, we were up for many surprises: there was an activity center for Pre-primary, a well-designed terrace-cum-auditorium and a beautiful library space for the children. This Diwali indeed lit up the lives of our children.

School Transformation is a long journey. It is not a two year sprint, but a marathon worth attempting. You need a hero to lead the efforts and we were lucky to find one in Zakaullah sir at FES.

The blog piece has been written by Santosh More, who works with schools at Mantra4Change.