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SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION PILOT PROGRAM

## PREVENTING DROPOUT

Schools and Communities Champion Retention through Joyful Learning





# Awareness Leads to Support for Education in India

The ceiling fans whirl on and off with the power as 12 school headmasters sit on cushions against the salmon colored walls of Chakbahuddin Upgraded Middle School sipping tiny paper cups of hot chai.

The educators are used to the blinking electricity, used to the dragging heat. They are also accustomed to managing schools where a quarter of the children leave after the free government-provided lunch, and where 16 percent of India's fifth graders never return for their sixth grade year.

Here in Bihar, one of the poorest states of India, 26 percent of Grade 5 students leave school to help with farming, work in family shops or even get married. Some leave because they don't do well in classes, and with no additional help to succeed, are pulled out by parents who don't see the point of more schooling.

After all, for many of them, a day spent in school is a day spent not contributing to their families' livelihood. It's a very real tradeoff.

But, as the headmasters are discussing today, things are changing.

While the poverty that churns as an underlying driver of school dropout isn't going anywhere, there is promise in the air. A

pilot project to keep children in class is creating a tighter bond between parents and schools and showing teachers how to identify and support children at risk of dropping out using an Early Warning System.

The Early Warning System uses existing school data on attendance, behavior and performance to identify students at risk of dropout, enhances the capacity of schools to address the needs of at-risk students and strengthens the partnership between schools and families. An Enrichment Program also increases the attractiveness of education to motivate student attendance.

Funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the School Dropout Prevention Pilot Program was implemented by Creative Associates International in 113 schools in Bihar's Samastipur district, where 4,213 fifth graders are at risk of dropping out.

Anecdotal evidence from meetings like these suggests the pilot's interventions are working to dramatically reduce absenteeism, a key predictor of school dropout.

"At my school, the students in the program seem really happy compared to other students," says a headmaster wearing an orange sari. >>



Equally dubious were the parents. Many first generation learners themselves, they had no idea what was going on at the schools and at the same time worried the schools weren't doing enough for their children.

"A lot of illiterate parents say 'we send our children to school but they don't get any monetary benefits,'" explains one Community Champion, a young volunteer working with the program. "We have to ask them if they send their children to school to learn or to earn."

Monitoring and home visits are breaking down these barriers, and in their place, building understanding.

Teachers and the Community Champions meet with families to emphasize how important school is for their children. Parents also have the opportunity to explain why their children have been missing classes. These visits enable schools to learn more about each student's home life and to strategize with parents how they can prioritize their child's education.

For one Class Five girl who was already married, her parents at first refused during a home visit to return her to school, insisting she was needed at home to help her mother with housework.

But repeat home visits gradually resulted in a changed mindset by offering an alternative solution that met both parties' interests.

"I've seen positive changes in the children's development," another headmaster says. "After the midday meal about 25 percent of kids would leave. But now," because of the afternoon Enrichment Program, "they are staying and they enjoy themselves."

## Seeing those at risk

Using an Early Warning System, these headmasters and their teachers are able to monitor student attendance and zero in on

children who have been absent for multiple school days and reach out to families to ask why their children weren't in class.

Such outreach is critical to building trust where earlier there was none. Teachers need to understand their students. And, so too, parents need to understand the schools.

Some teachers in Samastipur doubted that their students were truly interested in learning, notes Neha Parti, an education specialist with the program.



“We told the parents ‘Don’t make your daughters work during school hours. Make them work after school, if you want,” recalls Community Champion Swarna Rani.

Parents are not only encouraged to send their children to school, but also to become more involved in their children’s academic achievement. Through the program, parents have the opportunity to meet with teachers at quarterly Open Houses held at the school and are welcome to stop by regularly.

“Parents’ involvement has increased, along with our phone calls and, home visits. The gap between the teachers and the parents has been bridged,” observes Shahid Ahmad, a monitoring officer with the program. He sees teachers realizing their responsibilities and parents becoming more involved in their children’s education.

## Training engaging teachers

Training teachers in observation and engagement techniques has made a difference both in the classroom and in motivating students to come to school.

One aspect of the training, Focus Child Identification, trains teachers to assess the students’ progress through a comprehensive approach, making note of such indicators as: class attendance; behavior; subject comprehension; early departure; degree of responsibility; and parents’



literacy. Using this readily available data, teachers are able to identify children at risk of dropping out, track their progress and trigger actions to address problems when they occur.

With these new skills, teachers are approaching their classrooms with renewed determination to help their students succeed.

That dedication appears to be the result of making teachers stakeholders in the program’s – and their students’ – success.

“They plan and set targets for achieving a goal,” says Principal Virender Jha of his teachers at Madh Vidayala Bishanupur Baande. “They want to achieve their objectives.”

## Toward a promising future

During a visit to one school, a headmaster pulls out the attendance log for Class Five. He displays the current academic year results, which followed the implementation of the program. Attendance tipped toward 90 percent. He then flips back the pages to show the previous year, when the students were in Class Four, before the program’s implementation. Those same students came to school only 60 percent to 65 percent of the time.

Locally, the pilot program is known as Anandshala, which translates from Hindi to “a place of joyful learning.” Teachers, headmaster, community champions, parents and students tell us how much Anandshala has changed the education atmosphere in Samastipur for the better.

A school director wearing a bright yellow sari puts it this way: “it has created hope for the children that they will learn and be successful in life.” ■



# Joyful Learning Keeps Indian Classrooms Full

**B**ihar, India—Rahul Kumar is not a basket weaver. He is supposed to be in school. But today he is helping his family weave fronds into traditional trays used to offer rice to the sun god to sell for an upcoming festival. In a lackadaisical line under trees bearing pink and white offerings to a different deity, they cut and pull the dried leaves expertly so that no light shines through.

Rahul's practiced fingers belie his claim that he is missing school because he is sick today. In fact, Rahul misses at least

ten days of school every month.

If school were different, he says, he would go despite the work that must be done. Rahul says he would attend class more regularly if students learned more from the classes, and if there were sports. He especially loves playing cricket.

For children in Bihar, the poorest state in India, Rahul's simple request for more interesting classes and a little fun is familiar. Due in part to an unattractive school environment where teachers use beatings and criticism to ensure compliance, only

42 percent of primary students regularly attend school.

Their absences are not without consequence. Attendance is one of the most telling indicators of how likely a child is to drop out of school. And here in Bihar, 26 percent of the children in fifth grade never make it to the sixth.

"Students will stay in school when they can study in a joyful and happy environment," says Sivnath Chaudhry, a fifth grade teacher at the Utkarmit Urdu Vidyalaya School near Samasitpur, India.

Chaudhry's students used to show up to make roll call and then bolt, he said, or stay until the government-provided midday meal which, for some, is the only one they'll eat. But a program being tested at his school has started to foster a happier environment.

The School Dropout Prevention Pilot (SDPP) Program is a U.S. Agency for International Development initiative implemented by Creative Associates International and local Indian partner, QUEST Alliance. It is part of a broader pilot project that has also been implemented in Cambodia, Tajikistan and Timor-Leste. "The School Dropout Prevention Pilot Program," explains USAID's Rebecca Adams, "is an impact evaluation testing promising low-cost interventions that may reduce school dropout." Local data collected from the pilots can inform responses to what has become a global crisis.

In Bihar, part of that response is working with teachers to deliver an enrichment program that makes school an engaging place where kids can both learn and enjoy themselves, motivating them to come to school and stay the entire school day.

Now after a full day of classes, Chaudhry's students who have been identified as at-risk for dropout stick around for activities that include making masks, drawing and painting with colors they mix themselves out of materials they find around them, like bricks and spices. Local youth who are paid a small stipend to volunteer as "Community Champions" help him and other teachers organize sports and games.

"Because of the activities children put time into school, and they work in a happy environment," Chaudhry says. "Because of this, students do their work diligently and they stay on in school."

## The joy of learning

Anandshala, as the pilot is known in India's schools, literally means "a place of joyful learning." That translation aptly describes the noisy enthusiasm of the program classrooms. Each enrichment session starts with an "energizer"—a call and response song and dance that gets

shy children moving around and breaks the ice for nervous teachers.

"They've never facilitated a session like this before," explains Program education specialist Neha Parti.

The last class of the day is reserved for life skills activities, which include the development of skills enhanced by the enrichment activities, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. But the region's teachers often have very little formal training or professional development to speak of, let alone exposure to new methods that inspire participation and creativity, and break down gender and class barriers.

Those qualities are exactly what Anandshala's enrichment program tries to spur. By getting children active and excited in a supportive setting, they learn interpersonal skills that can cross India's lingering caste system and build their confidence.

"The kids become so much more confident and much more open in terms of expressing themselves," says Parti. "Usually in study it's the smart students who are always in front. But something like an enrichment program gives them an equal opportunity where they can also showcase whatever...talents they have."

The fifth graders at the front of Saleha Parveen's class are showing off their creativity and quick-thinking in a game similar to charades. They imitate or pantomime the words they've drawn on slips of paper from a basket, trying to get their classmates to guess that they are a motorcycle, a rainbow or an egret. Three students band together to form a water pump and then a chugging train.

Eighth grade students crowd the doorway to watch. The game is the most interesting thing going on at Vishnupur Bande middle school.

Then, in a big circle, Parveen leads them in a reflection of the activity. "What were the challenges?," she asks them. "What did they like and dislike?" "The noises the boys made!," answers one girl—all the encouragement a few of them need to start chirping, howling and motoring all over again.

Daily attendance used to be abysmal, according to Vice Principal Prasan Kumar Paswan, who says up to a third of his students were dropping out after fifth grade.

Paswan runs a finger over the fourth grade attendance records of last year's worn attendance log to show that the very same students who had an attendance rate of around 60 percent have brought it up to 90.

## The fun effect

Learning in a joyful environment seems to have resulted not just in better attendance but overall interest in education too.

"Because of Anandshala the children who used to run away from studies and classes now come to school on time and stay," says community leader Mohammed Naseemuddin. "They want to stay because of the fun and play in the Anandshala program and they feel happy."

Parents report that their children spend more time at home studying as well as recreating the crafts and games they learned at school. They have better focus and attention, and say they look forward to learning new things.

Teachers remark that the improved attendance has resulted in better reading and writing skills.

According to School Dropout Prevention Pilot Program officer Shahid Ahmad, the same cannot be said for the control schools, which receives no interventions.

The local government has observed similar results.

"These activities are much more enjoyable and fun, and children become connected to the school and think they should do more," says District Education Officer Sanjay Kumar, who credits the community champions and class teachers with reaching the most at-risk students and encouraging them to stay in school. ■

*Produced for USAID by Creative Associates International. Written by JC Finley with reporting by Jennifer Brookland in India. Photos by David Snyder.*

# Why Students Drop Out of School in India

## Academic:

**10%** cited poor academic performance.

**40%** of at-risk students and 55% of dropouts have missed more than 15 consecutive days of school. 40% of parents/guardians were not or seldom aware of their child's absences.

**50%** of students report that teachers use physical punishment on students.

**44%** say teachers criticize them for wrong answers.

## Economic:

**55%** of parents/guardians and 60% of child respondents cited the need to supplement income through household chores or domestic work.

**30%** -40% of respondents cited school-related expenses.

Source: USAID Situational Analysis

