

A success story

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EDU

COMMUNITY involvement in education is important in order to provide quality education, a well-proven fact in the case of the South Asian States. Hunza a sub-division of Gilgit, famous for its high-literacy rate in the entire region, is rich for perceiving the concept of community involvement in developmental work in general and education in particular.

The entire community is more conscious for providing quality education to their children through participatory approach. For instance, there are three types of schools like the state run government schools, private schools and community-initiated English medium schools. The enrolment increased in community schools because of close coordination and cooperation of the community members and the students scored high in the competitive exams and aptitude tests as compared to the state run schools. The community got a sense of ownership and ensured accountability and transparency in financial discipline.

The community also got an opportunity to create democratic approaches in decision making and set an example of being the catalyst for other educational systems. As a result the state run school which suffered a lot for poor enrolment, high dropout rate and inappropriate teaching and learning issues realised the importance of community involvement and requested the Unicef to bridge the gaps.

Child-friendly schools (CFS) project is a Unicef-funded initiative to upgrade the quality of education and increase student's enrolment by introducing a child-friendly environment involving communities in government girl's primary schools in the Gilgit district.

The Aga Khan University-Professional Development Centre North (AKU-PDCN) is also partnering with the Directorate of Education (DoE), Northern Areas, Gilgit and Unicef Islamabad in designing and offering training pro-

grammes for the various stakeholders of the CFS, including teachers, head teachers, school management committees and mothers' support groups. The project was launched for the first time in 40 government girls primary schools in 2005, adding 15 and 20 more during 2006 and 2008, respectively. On the basis of successful experiences during the previous years in project schools, Unicef decided to extend its funding for the year 2009. A 100 schools are on board currently. The goals and pillars of the CFS project are given below:

Goals

- Increasing students (especially girls) enrolment.
- Improving child-friendly environment in schools.
- Upgrading the quality of education.
- Enhancing community involvement in schools.

Pillars

- Healthy environment.
- Academic efficiency.
- Gender sensitive.
- Protective and inclusive.
- Community involvement.

AKU-PDCN as one of the key partner organisations is keenly involved in capacity building of management heads, head teachers, subject teachers and community members through school management committees (SMCs) and mother support groups (MSGs). The experience influenced many other educational leaders and managers to visit these schools within the country as well as the globe. It is worth a mention here that one of the project schools (Federal Government Girls School Gulmit Goyal-Hunza) was declared the best school and its head teacher, Muhammad Rahbber received the Salam Teacher Award in Islamabad by the then caretaker Prime Minister Muhammad Mian Soomro.

The CFS project also helped the schools in providing several facilities (such clean drinking water, toilets, boundary walls, electrification and minor repair

and maintenance of the school building and furniture as well as provision of Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) teachers and material for three- to eight-year-old children with the help of communities and ensured the effective utilisation of the resources with quality assurance.

It was evident from observation and analysis that enrolment increased in government schools and corporal punishment decreased from its previous pace. Parents too wanted to send their children to such schools. The teaching and learning standard was raised with the teachers and head teachers pleased with their professional development. Communities were also happy as it helped them in capacity building. They got much insight and exposure during workshops and visits and were also able to display their commitment in playing an active role in school improvement.

The initiative also helped sensitizing gender issues. The cleanliness in schools helped improve the environment. Well-qualified teacher educators and educational leaders focus on pedagogy and content knowledge as desired by the stakeholders during training need assessment and follow-up visits during the capacity building sessions with the help of the social mobilisation team.

In a nut shell, we can bring improvement and positive changes in our educational institutions and the entire society through capacity building and effective communication skills among the key partners and other stakeholders. This model could be replicated in other regions of the country as well as in other developing countries in order to do away with embezzlement, nepotism, favoritism and the traditional teaching and learning system. And all this can only be made possible if all the stakeholders show their commitment to the holistic development of children by using a child-centred approach to transform schools into child-friendly institutions. ■