

Studyhall Education Foundation

Goal to make high quality education available to poor children

By Ela Dutt

Landing in New York after close to 20 hours of flying Urvashi Sahni does not wait to get over her jetlag. She responds in detail to a waiting email about Studyhall Education Foundation, an organization with headquarters in Lucknow, that she established 23 years ago to address the education needs of poor children. This determination is what has made Studyhall an example of how and why some schools achieve vigorous learning goals despite an impoverished student population. Non resident Indians can sponsor children in any of the Foundation's programs, Sahni said. (For more information visit studyhallfoundation.org)

"Studyhall was inspired by a discontent with the kind of education prevalent in schools in India - even in 'good' schools the teaching learning was based largely on rote learning and recitation. These school systems were disrespectful of children and abusive - these did not foster and nurture their creative instincts, imagination and curiosity," Sahni told *News India-Times* by email from New York where she was scheduled to speak to interested audiences about the achievements of her students of which there are now more than 4,000.

The general aim of Studyhall was to evolve a high quality system of education that values and nurtures children to allow them to grow into strong individuals, Sahni says.

"I wanted to extend this education to as many children as possible throughout India," she adds, something that has given them a future they never dreamed possible.

"For example, the girls at Prerna (a Studyhall schools initiative) who have spent their childhood cleaning homes, looking after a drunk father and bringing up their younger siblings, are now interning at 5 star hotels, computer labs and libraries. These girls now dream of becoming teachers, doctors and entrepreneurs," Sahni said.

The Foundation finds innovative ways to meet the needs of poor families. In the area covered by the Prerna program, for instance, "What is happening is that mothers get beaten up and 53 percent of the fathers are alcoholic. So we started 'Didi's Food,' where the mothers can make food and sell to children and their parents," Sahni said.

Starting with just six middle class kids Studyhall today boasts a variety of schools and educational projects including -Studyhall K to 12 school for middle class kids with 1600 students; Prerna, a K-12 school run in the same premises in the afternoon and educating 430



Digital StudyHall (DSH) at BETI School in Mauthri, U.P. DSH seeks to improve education for the poor children in slum and rural schools in India. They digitally record live classes by the best grassroots teachers, which are then transmitted and collected in a large distributed database, and sent on DVDs to poor rural and slum schools. Education experts and teachers use the system to explore pedagogical approaches involving local teachers actively "mediating" the video lessons. (Photo, as it appears on studyhallfoundation.org)

girls from very poor and lower caste homes.

"Many of these kids work as domestic help during the day to supplement the family income and some of them, as young as 13 years, support their families entirely with the money they earn," she said.

Vidyasthali is a K-12 school in a village near Lucknow. It educates 330 children who come from 30 villages in the region.

"We charge a very small fee and hope to make it self-sustaining as soon as possible," Sahni notes. Opened 4 years ago, it has 40 students, all on scholarships.

Another initiative, Dosti, is an integrated program run in the Studyhall premises for children with special needs. It currently helps 47 children who are specially challenged - ranging from autism, to blindness, hearing impairment and dyslexia.

The Digital Studyhall, another venture, helps deliver good quality education using video technology, to 9 schools in and around Lucknow. It reaches some 1800 children, Sahni says.

The Foundation also collaborates with the Government to conduct teacher training courses. "My programs have impacted literally thousands of teachers - over 30,000," she said.

The Foundation has some 175 full time, part time and volunteers working in it.

Sahni said NRIs could help Studyhall in various ways - sponsor children in Prerna, Vidyasthali and Dosti schools; sponsoring a child at Prerna and / or Vidyasthali would cost around \$150 per student for one year; sponsoring a student at

Dosti costs more, around \$600 a year. They could also sponsor a teacher for \$1500 a year.

The Foundation spends approximately 1.6 million rupees on Prerna per year; 1.4 million on Vidyasthali and the same on Digital Studyhall. These projects are the ones that need funding. Because Studyhall charges its student a fee, it is self supporting and can partially support its other ventures.

Many individual donors, Indian and American support the organization, as do corporate donors like HSBC bank, Hindustan Petroleum, Tata consultancy Services, Citibank, Microsoft Research, and Wave Care Foundation. The University of Washington, University of California, Berkeley, and University of Toronto are collaborating on action research projects and they fund these.

NRIs, Sahni said, could get more deeply involved if they feel up to it.

"They can collaborate with us to set up more rural schools. That is a larger scale involvement in terms of money. They should contact me and we can talk about it," Sahni said. Donating to specific projects is better, she says, though all checks have to be made to Studyhall Educational Foundation, which is the umbrella organization and the money is then routed to the specific projects.

Those interested in getting involved on the ground can volunteer for small periods.

"We have American graduates and undergrads from University of Washington, Seattle, and Stanford working with us in our Digital Studyhall program right now," she said.

The Foundation has specific long term goals, among them, to start more high quality but low cost schools in rural areas; extend enrollment in Vidyasthali and Prerna; extend Digital Studyhall's services to all Government schools in Uttar Pradesh and eventually in other states too; set up a teacher training college in Lucknow and in rural Vidyasthali; and start vocational training courses in rural Vidyasthali and in Studyhall for poor urban youth; as well as start a shelter home plus working girls hostel for girls who face abusive treatment and extreme oppression at home.

Profile of a StudyHall student as related by founder Urvashi Sahni

One of our students Laxmi is a 15 year old. Her mother died when she was 11. She has four siblings - three sisters aged 11, 5 and 3 and a brother aged 13. Their father is an alcoholic and does not support them.. though he lives with them. He often beats them and sells any saleable thing at home for money, including the kids school books.

Laxmi works as a domestic help in 7 homes before she comes to school and again after school. Her younger brother ferries lunches for folks; Lalita, her sister aged 11, works in 2 homes. Together they earn 2400 Rupees (\$50) a month and support the family (including the drunk father). This child is truly the bravest girl I have ever met. She comes to school everyday and is doing well. She claims that Prerna, her school, has given her the strength to live. She dreams that her education will give them all a better chance in life. These days she is in great danger of being sold off by her father. We are doing everything we can to prevent this.

Almost all our students in Prerna face such challenges. They claim that they find a safe haven in their school and it is an empowering experience for them.

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Images



PHOTO ABOVE: Studyhall Education Foundation has several programs delivering quality education to poor students. PHOTO RIGHT: Vidyasthali school children holding a performance for parents. (Photos, as they appear on studyhallfoundation.org)