

Signal School Project

The Signal School Project was launched on March 6, 2023, by the Gujarat State Legal Services Authority and Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) to educate children engaged in begging or labor. The project converts ten buses into classrooms, offering free education, mid-day meals, and health check-ups. The buses have essential facilities like blackboards, tables, chairs, LCD TVs, Wi-Fi, CCTV, drinking water, and mini fans.

The project's motto, '*Bhiksha Nahi Shiksha*' (*Education, Not Alms*), ensures that no child is excluded from education. The two-step plan involves teaching a bridge course followed by enrolment in nearby schools. Daily educational activities occur from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., with additional events like parent meetings, cultural events, sports competitions, and skill development activities.

Signal Schools prepare children for formal education through a ten-month bridge course, after which they are transferred to mainstream education. The AMC-funded project aims to convert public buses into mobile schools for out-of-school children at traffic signals across the city.

The first batch of 'Signal Schools' run by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) saw 139 children enrolled during the first phase under Ahmedabad Mahanagarpalika. After that, the admission process was accomplished for 125 students in phase 2 via the School Admission Festival (Shala Praveshotsav) conducted in the motivational presence of Honorable Chief Minister of Gujarat State, Shri Bhupendrabhai Patel and former Honorable Chief Justice of High Court Shri Arvind Kumarji. In the third phase, with the aim of "Bhiksha nahi Shiksha", 151 children enrolled in the School Praveshotsav program (Gujarat's Government's annual statewide school enrolment drive) to get joyful, stress-free, skill-based vocational learning.

The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation has provided 12 buses and state government educational benefits. An MOU with Anant National University offers vocational training under NEP 2020. Efforts are being made to enable these children to receive higher education through adoption by Charitable Organizations.



My experiences during this entire process:

First, let me share with you how this idea of teaching kids at Signal Schools came to me. One day, my vehicle stopped at the signal while returning home from school. Just as my car was about to leave, I noticed a girl with a child in her hands. She came begging before me. I was disturbed and disheartened as I tried to figure out what to do. It was awkward for me, and I felt hopeless. I imagined myself in her life, walking the streets, going to cars, being ignored, not having enough money to feed the life that I fostered - begging as a single mother. I rarely forget the luxuries that life provides me; however, sometimes, humans forget things outside life's small circle - forget that people live far worse off than themselves and forget their plight. I needed to keep reminding myself that I was just lucky - many are not - and my problems are insignificant compared to theirs.

I wanted to give up my lunch and all the little money I had on me; however, it was too late. I looked back at the woman as my driver sped ahead. I regretted not giving her anything; then again, if I were in their place, would giving a few hundred rupees to a person really change a generational problem? Would it help change anything in their life in the long run? Or perhaps give them a better future.

I had heard stories about how uneducated kids are used as labor, and sometimes, when they fall through the wrong places, they turn to petty crimes. Most parents don't educate their kids simply because they cannot afford it or prefer that their kids help at home. Thus, the vicious cycle of poverty continues - while the rich grow ever so affluent, forgetting that there are people whose basic needs aren't even met and that the poor have a tendency to fall into the cycle that is poverty.

After reaching home, I talked to my parents about this. My father, the then Municipal Commissioner of Ahmedabad, mentioned an education project he was undertaking. Through my father, I learned that to integrate these kids into mainstream education, they had started signal schools - quite recently, actually - in various city zones. Parents agreed that if the school were conducted at signals (where the parents worked), they would send their children. The schools were to be conducted inside buses. These buses were functional and were the buses the AMC had just stopped using as they were switching to electrical buses for our city's BRTS.

The entire concept fascinated me; honestly, I was pretty impressed. I asked my father if I could do something. Maybe teach the kids? I initially started contributing as a teaching faculty member for math and English in a school near my residential area. I am trying to contribute in a way that is satisfactory to me, and it will hopefully help shape these kids' lives.

Most of these kids were into begging at signals, around 24 locations around the city, and didn't know how formal education could change their lives. These Signal Schools initially give these kids hope to pursue education at their doorstep, mainly to integrate them into mainstream education at government schools at a later stage.

I am not sure I can adequately describe my experience teaching them, but I will do my best to put it into words. I had no idea what to expect on the first day I started. It was a Saturday,

meaning they had a half-day of fun activities. I knew the kids were small, so I presumed I would probably teach them the alphabet or the numbers, maybe throw in a few nursery rhymes.



I had not been given previous information about what I was supposed to teach the day I was supposed to go, but I did prepare a few things. Before leaving, I also stuffed my bag with a handkerchief and a handful of chocolates and toffees - both of which would be pretty useful; the former for a game and the latter wisely chosen to make the kids like me. When I first arrived, I was pretty nervous and was all but thrown in with expectant smiles from their teachers. After the introductions and passing them the chocolates I had gotten for them, I started teaching them the alphabet. I did have to talk in Gujarati, something I can speak quite well enough, being brought up in Gujarat; however, considering I did not speak it regularly, I was a bit rough around the edges with it.





I think the children were exceptionally sweet and obedient. I know children, being a sister of two, and it was pleasantly surprising to see how well-behaved the children were. I was also led to believe I was quite the source of excitement for them (not to mention the generous helping of toffees I passed around). They knew the alphabet by rhyme but did not quite know how to write it, and that's where I started. I started teaching them the alphabet.

The kids surprised me yet again. All the kids were excited to learn, as they showed me their previous work in Gujarati, numbers, or even arts and crafts. While I was teaching them, I found them zealous to learn. Some were pretty fast learners and showed unending enthusiasm to learn—something I believe is relatively lacking in children nowadays.

This was also partly because the teachers were working hard for the children and their education and taking care of them. I can say that the teachers were a significant force in teaching the children and were quite pleasant and friendly. The children actively tried to participate in or during class, and the class breaking out into the ABCD song or a nursery rhyme during breaks is just an example that attests to the children's eagerness to learn. While teaching, I also found some of the children to be extremely bright, as they quickly picked up on what I taught and were eager for more. When I teach, I usually do so for an hour and make them write, but I have yet to see them complain. They write quite well, and I take inspiration from the kids and their tenacity and willingness to learn.

After the usual teaching, we played games, did art, or sang songs. I also bought them the ABCD charts and stickers so that they could use references. Some kids have finished

writing the ABCD from the chart (not on my input; however, it was a nice surprise), and I am all but pleased. I plan on doing some fun theatre or dance, including self-expression, teaching them a few more rhymes, and perhaps a few art activities where I could also add elements of basic science.



The children's willingness to learn inspires me to work not only to teach them but also to be more diligent in my studies. While it sounds strange, teaching them has also taught me. Ultimately, I feel that if my presence makes even an ounce of difference in giving them a brighter future, my goal has been met since I am pretty attached to the kids.

Today, when I am writing this, I feel happy and proud, and I express my deepest happiness when this venture of Ahmedabad Municipal School Board and the successful administration of Signal School with dedicated efforts has been awarded by NUEPA (National University of Educational Planning and Administration), by the Government of India. This innovative project of Signal School has brought so much happiness to me as an individual - because of my association with this project - since its inception, and it is very satisfying to know that one can work to change other lives.

During my association, one of the most important issues we faced was making sure that these kids came to these signal schools regularly. On a few occasions, we faced hardships in requesting parents to send their children regularly to school to become good citizens and be an important part of our signal school project. I also raised funds to buy books, bags, school uniforms, and stationery for these kids. That was a big motivating factor for these kids to join the Signal School.

In the last year, I have seen how difficult life is for these kids and how eager these kids are to learn. While persuading their parents, I learned a very important lesson of my life: local problems can be solved in a local language only, as these kids and their parents trust people who speak and communicate in that language.

Today, it gives me immense pleasure because 12 buses are now turned into Signal Schools, and this effort helps prepare 151 children under "Bhiksha Nahi Shiksha" at the major junctions and signals of the fast-growing metropolis of Ahmedabad to participate in the third School Admission Festival (Shala Praveshotsav) of the Signal School Project. This experience strengthens my belief that "Education is the most powerful tool to change the world." Better education helps not only to uplift an individual but also to improve society as a whole.

