

Inclusion by design: A way of life at Riverside

INCLUSIVE
EDUCATION
IS VITAL IF INDIA
AS A NATION AND ALL OF
ITS PEOPLE ARE TO THRIVE, AND IF
WE WANT TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER
PLACE, BUT WHAT SHOULD SCHOOLS
BE DOING? **PARUL PATEL** HAS
SOME ANSWERS.



'All learners have the right to be educated. All deserve that right; all must preserve that right!'

This is the overarching philosophy which drives inclusiveness at the Riverside School in Ahmedabad. The Riverside Education Foundation and its people believe that all children have an entitlement to receive a formal education, whatever their economic, social, physical, emotional, cognitive or spiritual situation. To ensure that entitlement in our school, however, students have to understand that this depends on each one of them earning and preserving their right to be educated by adding value to self and others on a daily basis.

Inclusion is manifold at Riverside because every teacher, student and parent celebrates diversity in the classroom and contributes in

meaningful ways to make a difference in the school community.

Inclusion at Riverside has been championed by Kiran Bir Sethi, a passionate educator and global changemaker, and the founder-director of the school. Deeply inspired by the perseverance, dedication and stamina of Mahatma Gandhi, and influenced by her design education at the National Institute of Design, Kiran has empowered children across 44 countries through Riverside's 'Design for Change' program.

Every day at Riverside, you'll typically find Kiran surrounded by children engaged in ideating, co-creating and chalking out plans to make the world a better place! They call it the 'I can' mindset, which not only enables them to feel and imagine, but also to do and share. Collaboration, design

thinking and action research drive the constantly evolving practices in the Riverside ecosystem.

Smile shamelessly; share generously

Students, staff and visitors from across the globe are all familiar with Kiran's famous dictum, 'Smile shamelessly; share generously'. In 2016 alone, Riverside hosted international trainees from six countries and conducted more than 80 long- and short-term training programs for 43 schools across India. It's not surprising that Harvard University researchers have recognised Riverside in its review of global education innovation initiatives.

With a curriculum design which intentionally balances passion and compassion, content and character, skills and attitudes, Riverside aspires to be not just, 'The best school in the world,' but rather, 'The best

school for the world'. In the same spirit, Riverside Foundation advocates for the right to education of every child.

History will show that the 2009 *Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act)* was a defining step in making India more inclusive, equitable and humane! The Riverside School has embraced the spirit of the *RTE Act* and has, since 2011, opened itself to children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, with 25 per cent of entry grade students offered a place under this category.

The RTE program in the school is inclusive by design, not 'after school' or 'remedial'. In the experience of the Riverside team, this step towards inclusiveness adds to the school's diversity and increases holistic learning for the entire community. The program means that the RTE program children are connected with and supported by 300 sets of parents who adopt their cause and root for their success by offering emotional, spiritual and financial support. Their acceptance and immersion in the regular schooling system is just the first step. Equally important are the various support initiatives that the school extends to each child and their parents.

Challenges

As Riverside's administrator, it's always heartening for me to see the RTE children interacting with teachers and peers right from day one. I've noticed that, more than children, it's their parents who initially feel apprehensive, perhaps even finding it hard to believe that their child has been accepted and welcomed at a school like Riverside alongside other children.

Our administrative team and teachers engage with them in counselling sessions and frequent informal talks to break the ice and understand the aspirations they have for their children.

Support

To support our RTE program children at home, we have started classes for mothers

so that they can help their children at home as they build their own skills and knowledge.

An adult literacy program helps parents in self-development and empowers them to guide and partner with their children in the educational journey.

To address the challenges and the gaps that our RTE program children might face, we conduct home visits, maintain one-on-one support sessions throughout the academic session and a support program through the summer break. We also provide updates on an on-going basis to parents.

All at Riverside – children, teachers, parents and the wider Riverside community – meet regularly to focus on support for every child under RTE. Staff team meetings, our orientation program for new teachers, cross-class teaching program, ongoing professional learning and collaboration with other schools have a focus on the development and refinement of inclusive practices.

As the program matures, we are looking forward to seeing our students graduate as responsible citizens and leaders. Our work to create an inclusive society happens day by day, and we are happy and proud to take the little steps that we are taking every day alongside the many other passionate changemakers to provide inclusive education for all. **T**

Parul Patel is the Administrator at the Riverside School, Ahmedabad.

LINKS

To find more information on Riverside's 'Design for Change' program, visit www.dfcworld.com

To find more on the Harvard University recognition of Riverside's Design for Change program, visit the Global Education Innovation Initiative website at <http://globaled.gse.harvard.edu/design-change>

To find more information on the Riverside School, visit <http://schoolriverside.com>

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