

Ex-student gratia for schools

From generating funds for repairs and donating laptops to developing maths lab and assessment methods, alumni do more than their bit

Four years ago, Jayashree Dharmadhikari, 62, a retired teacher from Dadar, was added to a social media messaging group created by a bunch of friends from the Chogle High School in Borivli. After the initial nostalgic exchanges and catching up, the batch of 1972 soon realised that their school, which at one time had eight divisions for every Class, was now struggling to get students. The group soon decided to use the virtual world to change the ground reality.

The result? More than 500 ex-students joined hands, from donating laptops to developing a fully equipped mathematics lab, to help the school regain its lost glory. "We met the school management and came up with various ideas. We discussed it with other ex-students, who volunteered to bear the costs," said Dharmadhikari.

With the government giving only salary grants that are just enough to pay teachers, several old schools across the city are now turning to their alumni associations for assistance.

INFRA BOOST

Parel's RM Bhatt High School, which completed 100 years this year, is being renovated with help from its alumni. "More than 2,000 former students have contributed to the massive renovation exercise. We have painted close to 38 classrooms and repaired the building. We have also set up a state-of-the-art computer lab and library," said Pratima Joshi, a senior editor at a Marathi daily, who passed out of the school in 1975.

Joshi's alumni group, Gurudakshina Maji Vidyarthi Sangh, has raised more than ₹80 lakh in the past three years. "When we were studying, children from reasonably well-to-do families would enroll in our school. Today, with most middle-class children going to convents and international schools, children from underprivileged backgrounds come to our school. The efforts have helped increase the enrollments over the past two years," she said.

Along with financial constraints, keeping up with new ways of teaching, through use of technology and training programmes for teachers, is another challenge. But the management at Sion's DS High School, which comprises only ex-students, has found a way to solve it. "Being part of alumni, all members of our school management are emotionally connected to the school," said Rajendra Pradhan, president of the school and a 1976 batch student.

Among other initiatives, the school has got a fully functional learning disabilities (LD) lab. Dr Sumit Shinde, an occupational therapist and a 1997 batch student, has been successfully running the centre for one year. "The lab has screened more than 500 students in the past one year and is treating close to 80 kids for various learning disabilities on a regular basis" said Shinde.

In 2016, one of the oldest schools in the city – Charni Road-based Wilson High School – celebrated the centenary year of its iconic alumni group – the Wilson Old Boys Union. As part of the celebrations, the alumni renamed the group as the Wilson High School Past students association and came up with ways to help the 185-year-old institute.

“Over the past one year, the association, which has more than 500 members, started conducting regular assessments of students’ learning capacities with the help of a private company. Students are evaluated on their skills in a scientific manner and reports are submitted to the school. This way, teachers get to know students’ weaknesses and strengths,” said Ajit Mandlik, an educationist and a student of the 1978 batch at the school.

POSITIVE RESULTS

In 2013, DS High School struggled to get more than 100 new enrollments in the entire academic year. In 2018, the number has gone up to more than 400. “We decided to have a comprehensive plan to better the school and students. Along with academics, we focussed on nutrition, sports, art and craft, music and other extra-curricular activities, where we saw students excelling with professional support. Every year, we make presentations of our achievements which are shown to parents in nearby areas. This helps boost our enrollments,” said Pradhan. Dharmadhikari said a year after setting up the maths lab, more children are interested in the subject. “Most students coming to our school were weak in maths. With number games and fun activities, they now look forward to the class,” she said.

Taking it a step further, the Chogle High School has decided to help not just the school, but also neighbouring schools in need. Nandkishor Deshpande, a retired banker and alumni of the school, said, “We realised that many quality schools of the state board need support. From donating books for their libraries to conducting medical camps, we are doing all that we can.”