



9th July 2021

Dear friends and supporters,

It has been two years in April since our last update letter, and apologies from us, yet again! Joanna and Gaurav were in India as the pandemic was starting to set in, in the first quarter of 2020, and Joanna was on a government repatriation flight (without Gaurav) on 27th April 2020. The Indian government had closed all schools in India on 15th March 2020, and the country entered a full, extremely strict lockdown on 23rd March. At that point we scrambled to try to offer some online learning opportunities – we encouraged our students' parents to get any internet-enabled device that they could, usually a smart phone, so that their daughters could keep up with classes, and the teachers, most of whom already had a smart phone, did their best to adapt quickly to a world of online teaching. At the primary level about 20% of our students actually participated this way, while at the secondary level it was a larger share, at about 70%.

The pandemic did not get as bad as we had feared in 2020, and the government seemed to be keeping children at home despite COVID case numbers not being terribly high. In November of 2020 the senior grades (classes 9-12) were able to return in person; about 80% of the students returned (some girls had, of course, graduated out of the school, based on the major Board exams which take place in February, so 2020's exams were thankfully unaffected by the pandemic). We did not get the new admissions at the secondary level that we would usually expect to receive, hence the numbers were lower than previously.

The primary and upper-primary levels were the hardest hit throughout 2020 – they were not allowed by the government to return to school in-person until March 2021. About half of the children returned, but this was because it was almost the end of the school year (since the Indian school year starts and ends in April) and we would have expected the children to be trickling in, with all children expected to re-join for the upcoming school year April 2021-April 2022. We have been offering online classes for the primary grades but as I describe below, it is much more challenging to keep younger children engaged remotely!

You will likely have seen in the news what happened in India from March to May 2021 – cases suddenly rose violently with what we now all refer to as the Delta variant. Joanna had finally felt safe to return to India on 4th March 2021 (after much happening on the home front – Joanna’s mother Rosemary sold the family home in Carlisle, very sadly, and moved in with Joanna and Gaurav in Edinburgh; she had not wanted to leave Rosemary during the ongoing pandemic before she was fully vaccinated). In February all seemed well in India, but by early April things were looking much worse. After only three weeks back in the classroom, all schools were shut down again, right at the start of the new school year.

For the secondary level students this year has been just terrible, the government postponed the Board examinations from February and kept the students hanging on for months with no clarity as to what would happen. They therefore had to do their best to keep studying and revising with no date in view – no clarity of when they would be able to finally sit any exams. This, of course, had a terrible effect on children’s morale and motivation. It was only at the end of last month that the examinations were officially cancelled, and since then schools have been asked to upload marks from internal assessments to the government’s website for assigning children their final lower- and upper-secondary high-stakes examination marks (like GCSEs and A-Levels in England). This whole process was organised extremely badly by the government, without enough notice to students so that they might have tried even harder for their internal assessments, rather than projecting towards the final push at the end for the Board examinations.

The 16 months or so since the pandemic began have been extremely uncertain, and we have been left wondering how things would change after the pandemic and whether things would go back to normal. In certain parts of India people have been going back to government schools – surprisingly, considering the abysmal quality of education on offer.

As of now, online classes continue. Gaurav has been in the UK awaiting his second vaccination (which he received yesterday) before returning to India, which he will do on July 14th. He has been overseeing things from UK nearly as easily as if he was in India, because all staff are working from home due to COVID, meaning they would be communicating via online messaging and calling applications (via smartphone) anyway. But once we receive the expected news that classes for senior grades will resume in person, he will need to be there in person as well.

In the meantime, online teaching is taking place using Cisco Webex and it has been impressive to see how teachers have been managing through this tricky medium where the strength of internet signals is often very weak. The teachers’ patience and determination has been inspiring

to see. There are also subject- and class-specific WhatsApp groups for sharing of homework and one student in each class has been monitoring student participation and reporting weekly to Gaurav. Given the limitations we face with regard to internet connectivity and access to electricity, classes are held audio-only because video classes suck up phone battery and data. We have managed to keep the instruction time per day at the same level as we had in-school, pre-pandemic while, as expected, participation is much lower, as mentioned above. It is much more challenging to get primary-level children to participate in, and concentrate during, audio-only lessons, not in the classroom environment. The younger the child, the more challenging this becomes, particularly considering the challenging home environments of the children – these children do not have their own quiet bedrooms and desks to help them to study and concentrate – households are usually quite crowded with many distractions.

We are expecting to hear any day now about the re-opening of the upper grades (grades 9-12 or ages 14-18), but we continue in uncertainty with regard to that, and the younger grades. We feel that all children should be allowed to return to school, if the older children are returning, because there is no prospect in sight regarding full vaccination of the population, and the current situation seems unsustainable. We are very unsure of the fate of many of our students and it is very difficult to keep track of all of our students as people tend not to keep the same mobile number for very long, switching networks due to changes in signal strength (as the area is not so-well served, people are always looking for a better signal). So, we live in hope that all, or nearly all of our previous parents will come back to us when schools are allowed by the government to reopen, but we do not have the capacity to find and track our previous 550+ students.

On July 4th we celebrated 17 years since the school opened for class, and we hope to continue for many more years, although things are particularly challenging at the present time and we continue to need your support to keep going, paying teachers salaries.

We now have a new website at www.freeschoolindia.net, however the old web address (www.free-school.org) will continue for the next year to redirect to the new site. Thanks so much to Michael Phillips for building us an updated site, that we hope to keep in better shape!

Thank you all very much for your continuing support in this very difficult period. We hope to survive and thrive in years to come!