

# Holistic development of students to continue

Dr Baby Sam Saamuel, chairman, Board of Directors, Indian Schools Oman, who completes a fruitful three-year term in office (including a one-year extension due to the pandemic) leaves with satisfaction on having taken the vision of the previous boards ahead during his tenure. "I wish the new board continues our child-centred approach and our promise of education continues to be inclusive and affordable," he tells *Muscat Daily* in an exclusive interview.

Hubert Vaz  
Muscat

Could you spell out some of your key achievements since you took over as chairman?

The overarching achievement of the present board is that we have been able to complete all of our stated goals. When we took charge as the board, we began by assessing the current and future needs of our stakeholders and developed a strategic plan for the term, Vision 2020, for the betterment and uplift of all our stakeholders - students, faculty, and schools. We are proud and honoured to note that we have implemented more than 45 initiatives all aimed to bring about holistic development of our children.

These include laying the foundation for academic growth through the number of advisory committees and groups; bringing clarity and transparency through new manuals and policies such as the Academic Manual; introduction of educational tools such as the Virtual Learning platform ISO-VLE, and new educational outreach programmes such as Tele-tutoring, Gurukul, and Remedial Classes.

In addition, extra emphasis has been placed on 21st century skills development through new inter-school programmes, such as the career guidance fest - Avenir, IS Quiz, IS Talent Fest (ISTF), STAI, Entrepreneurship Club, IS Film Fest (ISFF) and more. In order to cater to the physical, psychological and social development of students, we have introduced a series of measures, such as a 24x7 accessible free tele-counselling service, Happiness Curriculum (a SEL curriculum), Counselling and Special Education Manual, Physical Education Manual, Young Communitarian of Indian Schools (YCIS), Gift a Book initiative and more.

We have also strengthened our resources - infrastructural and our faculty. Indian School Bausher (ISB) is a prime example, developed as a model 21st century school, with facilities and pedagogy that promotes holistic learning. Our faculty have had international training through renowned names and organisations.

Some of these were launched in our first year, and some in the second year. So, we already knew these have had an impact on our students, staff and parents. But only after COVID-19 started, have we realised just how much qualitative impact these have had on our schools in terms of strengthening our resources, the changing attitudes and perceptions, increasing digitalisation and adaptability. For example, the Virtual Learning Platform - ISO-VLE - if it was not for this platform which we launched in 2018, our schools would not have been able to transit so quickly into remote schooling. Video recorded lessons, tele-tutoring, tele-counselling, all these had silently equipped our schools to respond to COVID-19, in a much more efficient and quicker manner than we had anticipated.

What challenges did you face during your tenure as chairman and how did you find appropriate solutions?

The current term has been a remarkable one for all the opportunities we had to make an impact on the system and the

challenges we needed to overcome to bring each of our ideas into reality. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge during the tenure of this board has been the COVID-19 pandemic - the unprecedented closure of the schools as well as the cascading impact of the financial challenges faced by the community. As community schools, the solutions we have found to overcome the crisis too have been keeping the spirit of the community at large.

We have been one of the quickest in the region to transition to online classes, beginning as early as last March. Additionally, given the lockdowns and the sudden loss in income to a major part of our parent community, we introduced various measures that offered financial relief amounting to more than RO1mn. In addition to financial concessions, we also set up Help Centres with specific hotline numbers in each school to offer aid to the needy, while our in-house 24x7 tele-counselling service was extended to parents as well.

What has been your specific efforts in streamlining online education due to the pandemic?

Our primary objective and motto as the Board of Indian Schools in Oman has always been to ensure that no Indian child in Oman is deprived of access to education. Ever since the pandemic was declared and the schools were closed, we have striven to ensure that all our children enjoy continued access to education.

According to the United Nations, around 168mn children have missed almost all classroom instruction in the past year due to the school closures.

We have been fortunate that to be able to prevent this from happening within our schooling system and ensure continued access to education throughout these months.

In March 2020, as we were suddenly faced with school closures, we had one tool ready with

## INTERVIEW

DR BABY SAM SAAMUEL

CHAIRMAN, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, INDIAN SCHOOLS OMAN



### What are your personal sentiments on stepping down after a fruitful term?

Indian schools in Oman have a history of more than 45 years. If for first few decades the focus had been on ensuring access to education for the Indian diaspora, the goal now is to constantly elevate the standards of our resources, schools and education to produce competent global citizens. This requires a shift in mindset towards an international, globalised perspective among the management, teachers, students, and even parents, unlearning some of the inefficient approaches of the past and adopting the best practices from across the world.

This has been my personal focus in the last five years with the board - initially as director and later as chairman. I leave satisfied that we have done our best and have taken forward the vision of the previous boards as well as envisioned and accomplished our own objectives.

As we now welcome a new team to head our schooling system, I wish they will continue to grow and better the system with a child-centred, child-first approach that ensures the holistic well-being and growth of our students. Equally important, our schools are a unique model of community-led schooling and this is a system that needs to be nourished and sustained so that our promise of education continues to be inclusive and affordable.

us, that's ISO-VLE (Indian Schools in Oman Virtual Learning Environment), an in-house virtual learning platform and resource repository for our schools developed in 2019. One of our aims while creating ISO-VLE two years ago, was to establish a repository of recorded classes for the senior sections. In 2019, we had started with a selection of recording by some of the best teachers in our system for Grades 10 and 12, which were used as reference by students during the preparation for the 2019 Board Examinations.

Therefore, when the pandemic hit, we already had this backing. We began by expanding the recordings to include 9th and 11th Grade, as well. Simultaneously, we started training all the faculty for remote schooling.

We began the academic term 2020-2021 in April 2020 with remote schooling and we have had, so far, almost a year of successful and regular online schooling, with all aspects of schooling - examinations, assessments, parent-teacher forums, and even extra-curricular activities and events shifted to the virtual space.

What are your predictions for education in coming years?

Education as a sector is going to continue to witness more changes, especially in the use of digital technologies to aid and enhance teaching and learning. From the past year of trial and error, we have all seen for ourselves the advantages and disadvantages of digitally-enabled schooling.

It is crucial that children in K-12 (KG to Class 12) schooling attend in-person classes in a social classroom setting, in order for their wholesome social and cultural development through student-teacher as well as peer interactions. This will necessitate the resumption of in-person schooling as soon as the epidemiological situations support such a system. At the same time, we need to realise that today's generation comprises 'tech natives'.

This is evident from the rapidity with which even kindergarteners adopted platforms such as Zoom and Google Classrooms as we moved classes online. Given the massive potential of such platforms and other learning management systems to offer educational support beyond the classrooms, the use of these tools will continue in some form or the other, in a blended learning model.

What is your opinion about revamping all curriculum to suit the challenges of 21st century?

In general, in educational systems across the world, especially in Asia, our curriculum, pedagogy, our learning goals, and outcomes have been hesitant to change, even as the world around us were changing at an astonishing pace. COVID-19 has shaken up this status quo and has accelerated the changes already in the making.

Children require more than academic expertise from their K-12 schooling. They need to learn the skills to be able to navigate their careers and lives with confidence and resilience and be taught the skills to be global citizens. These include:

- ▶ Learning and Innovation Skills like Creativity, Critical Thinking and Collaboration
- ▶ Emotional Intelligence Skills like Social behaviour and Connection, Communication, Collaboration
- ▶ Information, Media and Technology Skills like Information Literacy, Media Literacy and ICT Literacy
- ▶ Life and Career Skills like Flexibility, Self-Direction, Cross-Cultural Skills, Productivity & Responsibility
- ▶ Values like Tolerance, Empathy and Acceptance

Programmes like STAI promote Logical Thinking and Applied Learning, IS Talent Fest, IS Quiz, IS Film Fest all promote the values of Creativity, Innovation, Collaboration, Communication, Problem Solving, and so much more.

Our biggest achievement in this aspect is the introduction of a Happiness Curriculum, a new supplementary Social Emotional Learning SEL pedagogy aiming to address the well-being and happiness of our students through emotional literacy.

As our students, and even the world itself, struggle to grapple with emotional health amidst all the uncertainties, it is fitting that we introduce this curriculum this year, to highlight the importance of emotional and social skills, and teach our young learners to make sense of their feelings and emotions.

What are the current constraints faced by the board and what is needed to tide over them?

As community schools, our priority has been to ensure access to education and we have done so, offering 100 per cent admissions to all students, establishing schools in even remote regions with, perhaps, just a handful of students and staff, such as in Khasab and Masirah. The schooling system is an ecosystem in itself, with schools supporting each other, as possible.

This is the benefit of the community schooling system, where the schools exist for the community and are taken care of and run by the community itself. But this comes with its own challenges. The biggest constraints that the entire Indian schooling system is facing is with our revenues.

With COVID-19, there has been a genuine financial impact on our parents. At the same time, as non-profits, unaided schools, with no financial support from any government or organisational support, we depend purely on the timely remittance of fees for meeting the operational expenses. Most of the schools are running already on a very lean model, so the bulk of these operational expenses, around 80-90 per cent comprises staff remunerations, which is something that cannot be compromised on. Therefore, to ensure the financial sustainability of our schools and the benefits of the community system that we have going on here, we, as a community, need to make sure that the schools receive the fees on time, as much as possible, and are supported financially.

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