

## Big Help Final Essay

My name is Sandeep Gingipalli and I'm a 14-year-old rising sophomore attending Brookline High School. When I decided to volunteer for Bighelp for Education, I not only saw it as an opportunity to act as the cultural ambassador that I always strive to be, but also saw it as an opportunity to enrich my own understanding of India's culture and education system.

I chose to do my internship at the Zilla Parishad School in Konijerla, which my mother also attended, located about 16 kilometers away from the bustling city of Khammam. A majority of the students attending the school resided in the nearby village of Baswapurum, whose residents primarily focused on agriculture to make a living. The school was a government school, which meant that it was free to all students and fully funded by the government, and taught students up until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Upon arriving at the Zilla Parishad school I received a warm welcome from the students who enthusiastically approached me, each of them eager to know who I was. Soon after, I took a tour of the school with the headmaster, Mr. Srinivas, and saw around 20 classrooms each of which were well equipped with desks, notebooks and other common items you would find in an American classroom. I also observed that the student to teacher ratio was around 40 to 1, a stark contrast to the typical 20 to 1 ratio in American schools. Following the tour, I entered the classroom of one-hundred 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders I would spend the next two days with and once again received a gracious welcome. I was immediately struck by the level of discipline the students possessed. While it would've taken well over a minute to quiet down a large group of students at my high school, here one word from the teacher was all it took for the students to immediately quiet down. After introducing myself I began my presentation, the entirety of which I did in Telugu, and spoke about America's history, culture, and education system. Throughout

the presentation, I engaged in a conversation with the students, both fielding their questions and asking my own questions about their experiences living in India. I gained valuable insight from them about Indian culture, how their school system works, and what a typical day looks like among other things. After the presentation, which took around three hours, we did an activity where we went around and said what job we aspired to have in the future. A common theme I noticed surrounding the students' responses was that they all sought to pursue a career through which they could directly help others. A girl named Harshini said she wanted to become a teacher at a government school so that she can educate and uplift underprivileged students. Another boy named Suresh said that he wanted to become a lawyer because his own father had wrongfully gone to jail, and he didn't want anyone else to be wrongfully convicted of a crime. Another girl, Preethi, said that she wanted to become a doctor so she could help the sick people in her village who didn't have access to high quality medical services. The passion and drive the students showed towards achieving their goals was powerful and overall, the activity was extremely worthwhile.

On day two of my internship, I recapped some information about myself and moved onto the second days topic: global warming and the environment. As I spoke about the harm being done to our planet and the urgent action that we collectively needed to take, the students enthusiastically asked questions, eager to learn about how they could keep the planet clean and live sustainably. At the end of the presentation I posed a question to the students regarding how they could keep their own school environmentally friendly. Immediately, the students jumped to try and think of a solution. Soon enough, they came up with the idea of establishing a day where all students arrive five minutes early to clean up the trash around the school. The initiative the students took from my presentation to establish a plan to consistently keep their school clean

really impressed me. Soon after my presentation on the environment, I went back to a topic I spoke about on the first day that the students were engrossed by: American sports. After I explained various American sports in depth and provided them with equipment so they could play during their break time, all the students in the school gathered outside where the headmasters and I presented backpacks with supplies to the highest achieving students and gave all the students a small gift. As my internship neared an end, I took some time to reflect back on my experience at the school.

Though I initially expected for the school to be lacking basic facilities and supplies, given the general reputation of government schools in India, what I saw was the polar opposite of my expectations. The school had running electricity, chalkboards, textbooks, a stage for performances, and even a computer lab where students could learn essential computer skills and use the power of the internet to enhance their education. The students were dedicated to learning and the school staff was dedicated to providing all the resources their students needed to succeed; Some of the staff had even taken pay cuts in order for their students to have the supplies they needed. While I recognize that this school may have been an anomaly among government schools, given the severe underfunding and corruption that defines some school districts, it was refreshing to see another side of the narrative that is often propagated regarding government schools being “hopeless”.

Overall, I was thrilled with the experience I had as it not only taught me how to be a vocal leader but taught me about India and aspects of Indian culture that I wouldn't have been able to experience through typical avenues. It was insightful to see and learn about the education system that my parents and millions of others went through and the power it has in transforming lives. I would like to thank the founder of Bighelp, Mr. Chand Paksha Shaik, for creating the

Youth Internship program which enabled me to give my presentation at the Zilla Parishad school. I would also like to thank my mentor, Mythili Eadara aunty, who assisted me through this internship.