



**Mumbai, India**

# **Khoj school**

**Building emotional intelligence  
and empathy in students and  
caregivers**



**WORLD'S  
BEST SCHOOL**  
Community  
Collaboration

FUNDAÇÃO

**Lemann**



**WORLD'S  
BEST SCHOOL  
PRIZES**

# Table of Contents

---

<b>02</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>03</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>School Profile</b>
<b>04</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Context and Challenge</b>
<b>07</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Expertise and Approach</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Outcomes and Results</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Key Steps</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>Advice and Guidance</b>





# Introduction

Khoj – Apni Shala Foundation's SEL-Integrated School Initiative, currently operating at a public school in Mumbai, India, uses a hybrid educational model that incorporates counselling, mindfulness and inclusion practices to help empower its students and their families. The school caters to 200 children from Grades K-4 who come from low-income families in Mumbai's Govandi, Makhurd and Chembur areas, part of M-East ward, one of the most marginalised areas in the city. The area, largely underserved, has a low student attendance record – 46% of children between the age of 3-5 do not attend school – and an illiteracy rate of 21%.





# Profile:

---



**Country:**

India



**Region:**

Mumbai



**School type:**

Public-private partnership



**Location area:**

City



**Student population:**

101 - 210



**Prize Category:**

Community Collaboration

"A school doesn't function in isolation, it functions within the ecosystem of a community, whether we like it or not."

– Rohit Kumar, CEO  
of Apni Shala  
Foundation





# In-depth look

## CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

The hope for the students at Khoj is that through the school's high-quality Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) integrated education, they can explore and pursue their life goals and develop the right skills to thrive in a multicultural, diverse, and dynamic world.

46% of children (3-5 years) in M-East ward don't attend school and the ward itself has the highest number of out-of-school children in comparison to other districts. The ward also had an illiteracy rate of 21%, which is two times the rate in illiteracy of other parts of the city.

Therefore, as an organisation working with children and youth, the school believes that is critical to lay a foundation for mental health and

wellbeing, before all else.

And in order to achieve that, it believes that it is equally critical to have an ecosystem for children where their wellbeing is centred and the environment students learn in is inclusive and compassionate.

In order to cater to that goal, Khoj embarked on cultivating a closer partnership with caregivers (parents and guardians of the students). Staff had to contend with caregivers' previous experiences with other schools, which was negative – often these schools did not treat caregivers as key stakeholders in the education of their children.

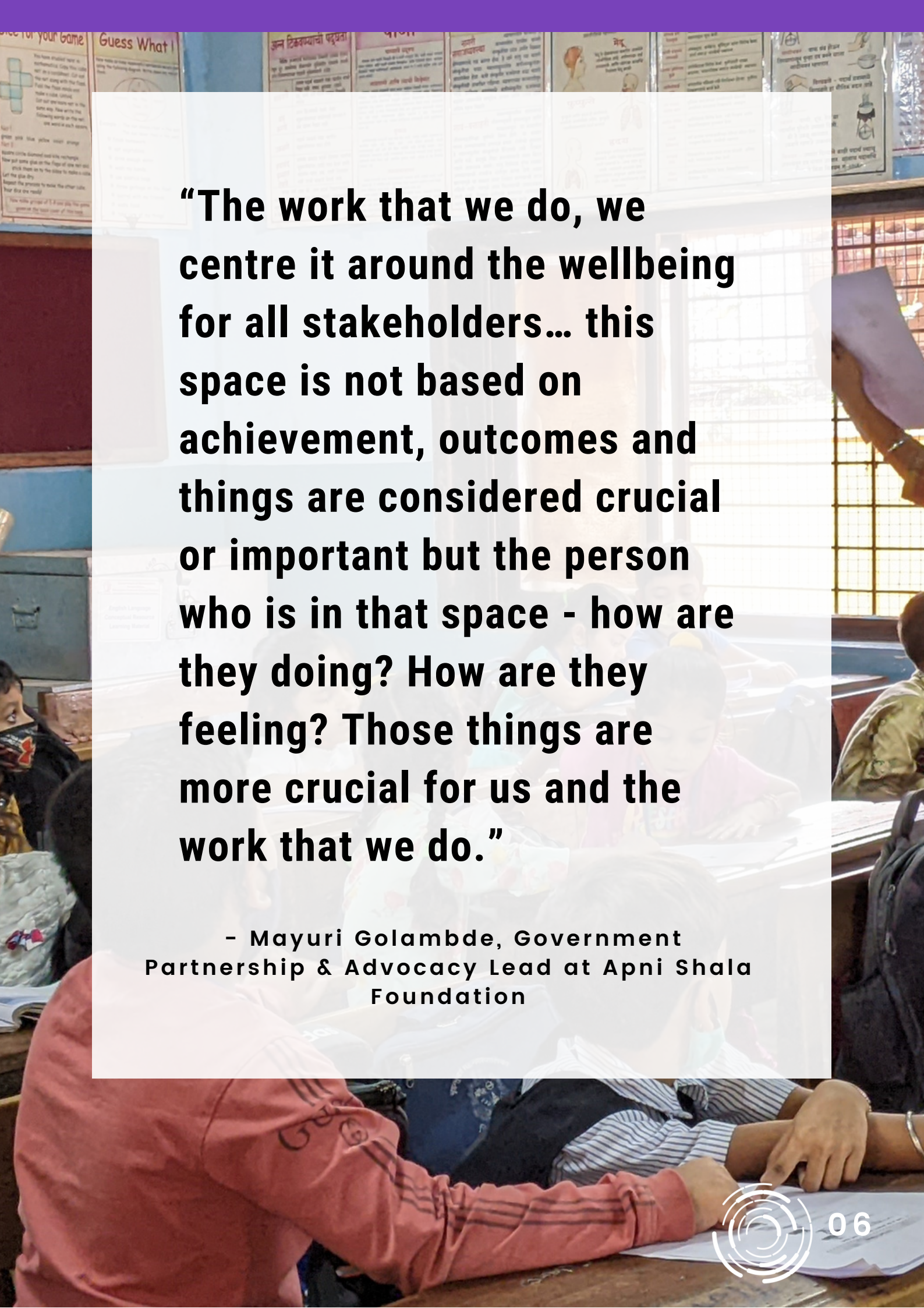


Furthermore, there was a level of discrimination faced by caregivers for not being readily able to attend to their children's needs, or instances of violence due to stressors in their own environment such as poverty and class tensions. In the school's mind, it is critical to understand the

nuances and wider context of a student and their family in order to better develop the right processes for stronger community engagement.







**“The work that we do, we centre it around the wellbeing for all stakeholders... this space is not based on achievement, outcomes and things are considered crucial or important but the person who is in that space - how are they doing? How are they feeling? Those things are more crucial for us and the work that we do.”**

**- Mayuri Golambde, Government Partnership & Advocacy Lead at Apni Shala Foundation**



# EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

It was through the joint efforts of the community and Khoj faculty that the school was able to serve the needs of an underserved community of young children and provide them with a quality education. The school believes that when it comes to teaching a child, it cannot happen in isolation, but through a harmonious and healthy ecosystem that revolves around the child's wellbeing. This led Khoj to develop a holistic educational model informed by SEL. The process focuses on building emotional intelligence and empathy, in not just the students but in caregivers as well.

Central to this is the idea that “people are not the problem: the problem is the problem”. The school has taken great strides to get to the heart of issues that have caused great distress to its students, with the understanding that the breakdown in family relationships is commonly the result of oppressive systems of poverty and exclusion. For instance, in the case of physical violence, Khoj first works towards ensuring the child's safety and then proceeds to support the parent with their mental health and coaching in anger management.





The school takes the position that people, regardless of age, are experts in their own lives – it identifies this as a ‘Key Narrative Idea’. It enables constructivist learning processes in its classrooms, as well as ensuring that it is approaching students with a mindset that attends to the needs of its students and the wider school community. Rohit Kumar, CEO of Apni Shala, says: “Children are the curriculum, their families are the curriculum, their communities are the curriculum.”

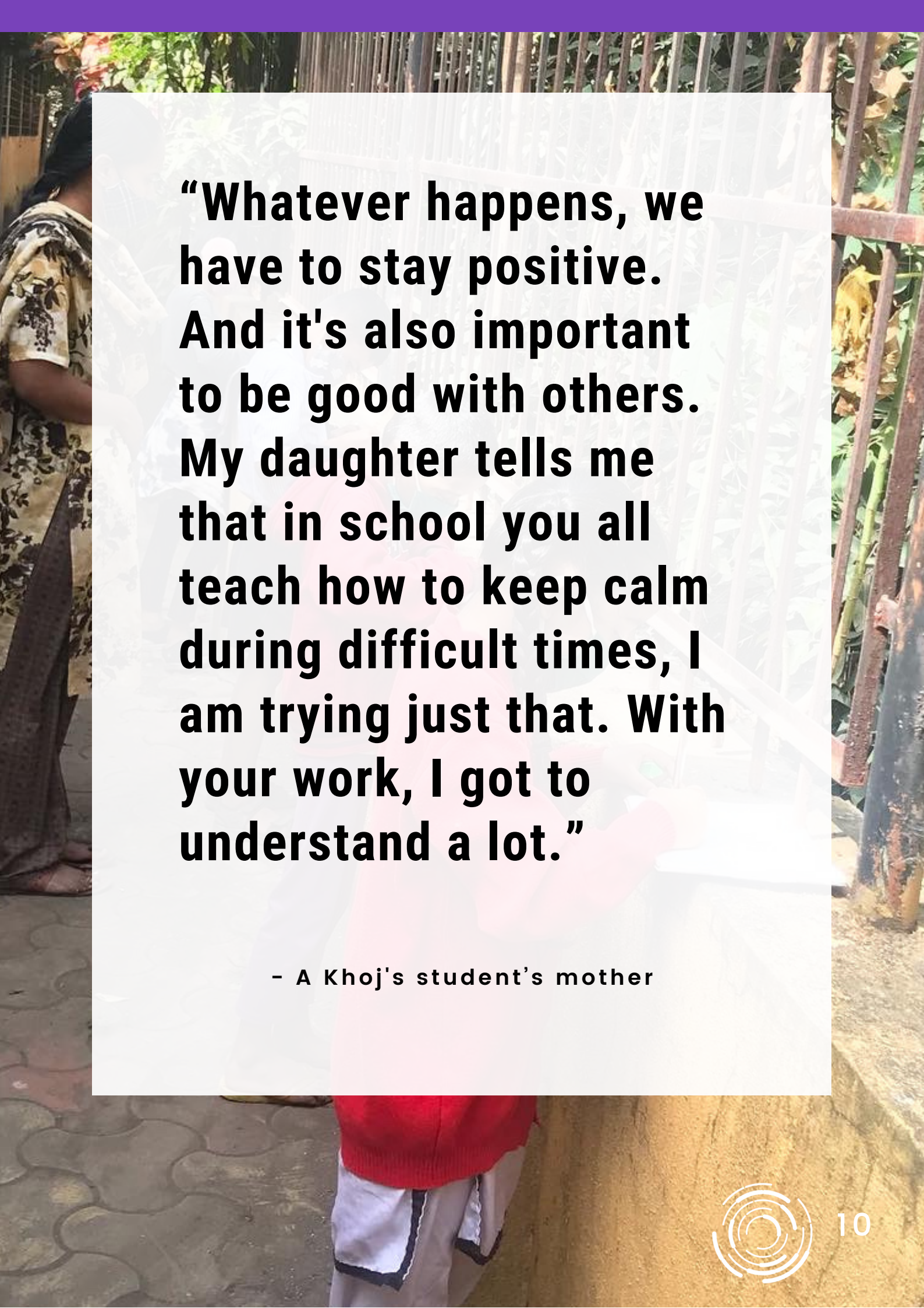
Khoj also runs a voluntary support group to do deeper social-emotional work with caregivers and students. This is facilitated by Apni Shala’s SEL-trained staff members and external consultants. All caregivers are supported with need-based psychosocial support in partnership with relevant organisations such as SNEHA (for domestic violence), and Arpan (for Child Sexual Abuse). Khoj collaborates with caregivers as integral partners by co-deciding on the fees, designing uniforms for the students, and reflecting on parents’ availability for monthly caregiver meetings. In addition, caregivers are given a voice in meetings with staff about how the school can best support their children.

The school formed a committee where membership is determined each year through a voting process. The committee is responsible for building caregivers’ voices and perspectives in the school’s decision-making process. Khoj also provides professional development for the committee members on topics such as child rights, constitutional rights and government programmes for financial and other support. Many caregivers often volunteer with teachers to teach students about their profession, hobbies, or school events.









**“Whatever happens, we have to stay positive. And it's also important to be good with others. My daughter tells me that in school you all teach how to keep calm during difficult times, I am trying just that. With your work, I got to understand a lot.”**

**- A Khoj's student's mother**



# OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The school's ongoing meetings with caregivers on topics like child development, nutrition and maternal health have also yielded positive results: a caregiver told the school that she now understands how her child's brain is developing and the role she can play in that process. The work the school has done on caregivers' SEL has also yielded favourable results. Parents and caregivers have stopped relying on physical violence to discipline their child and have adopted Khoj's approach in trying to resolve problems through conversation and dialogue.

Feedback provided to the school showed that parents of students now have a better relationship with their children as a result of the school's parent community engagement initiative.

The school also implemented year-long programmes for youth in the community aimed at helping them develop SEL skills to understand themselves and express themselves better. The youth helped address issues that emerge in everyday community life, such as distributing food and other supplies to community members during the pandemic.

Another outcome was a caregiver-led initiative in which a group of caregivers visited the offices of the city's bus authority to request if they can provide a dedicated bus service for the school in order for their children to arrive on time for classes. This proved to be a success and outlined the ways in which Khoj's expertise was leading to positive community engagement.





# Key Steps



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The school interacted with various actors in the community (from residents to government authorities) and reflected on the lived experiences of team members who come from the community. Using this data, it had an understanding of the demography and challenges faced by those in the wider school community.



## IDENTIFYING MAIN COMMUNITY ACTORS

The next step was to identify the community actors that the school had planned to engage with. It identified four actors: primary caregivers of students, families of students, community-level decision-makers, and youth in the community. Then it developed a structure for engagement with these four community actors.

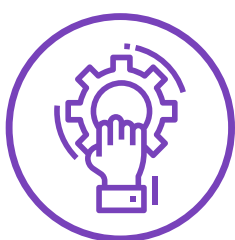


This structure was informed by the role of these actors in the learning and development of each student. For example, Khoj's engagement with primary caregivers takes the shape of monthly meetings and the School Management Committee, the parent-body that partners with the school in its operational decision-making. At the level of the family, there are home visits by the school team, and invitations to join training on childcare, nutrition, mental health and social-emotional learning.



## **DEVELOPING A FEEDBACK SYSTEM**

The initiative was piloted with four groups of community actors: primary caregivers, families, community leaders and youth. In order to monitor its progress, the school developed a mechanism for feedback and review of our engagements with the various actors.



## **COMMUNITY ACTORS' AGENCY**

Over time the school noticed that several girls stopped engaging in physical activities and sports as they grew older.





Upon exploring why it was recognised that different school uniforms for boys and girls played a role in this. In response, the school invited caregivers to collaborate to resolve this situation. After six months, there was a consensus on shifting to gender-neutral uniforms for all students. From engaging with the underlying need to finalising the resource person to stitch and procure uniforms, the caregivers were part of the whole process.



## MERGING

Aligning Khoj's Community initiatives with Apni Shala's core approaches of mindfulness, narrative practices, diversity and inclusion and constructivism was the next step. This was done with ongoing training with the school team. For example, Khoj's Caregivers Meetings are designed with a constructivist learning approach where caregivers construct their knowledge in partnership with the facilitator on topics such as SEL, nutritional needs of children, child rights, and educational development.





## **CREATING WELLBEING SPACES**

A concerted effort was made on creating spaces for the wellbeing, healing and care of community actors – for example, support groups for caregivers, provision of psychosocial support for children and families, and working with the community on navigating prevailing social stigmas in the community. Furthermore, in order to enable access to high-quality schooling, differentiated learning plans for children with disabilities and partnerships with resource persons and organisations for additional services that children may require for their development and learning.



## **ONGOING MEETINGS WITH CAREGIVERS**

Finally, the school decided to invite caregivers to the classrooms as observers and/or volunteers. The school teachers would answer any questions the caregivers had and would listen to the reflections shared by the caregivers. This provided an opportunity for caregivers to build an understanding of Khoj's pedagogy.









# Advice and Guidance

When the child walks into the gates of the school, so does the context of the child. It is important to honour and respect the background, history and reality of the students and embrace it through love, joy and humility. In essence, it's critical to design an educational model that takes these factors into consideration. The school also recommends that other institutions should not be bound by traditional educational models as Khoj itself moved away from traditional grade-based learning and reports focusing more on the holistic development of the child.

## More information


 **@ApniShala**

 **Apni Shala**

 **Apni Shala**

 **@apnishala**

 **Apni Shala Foundation**

 **<https://www.apnishala.org/khoj-community-school.html>**

**Extra resources:**

**[Apni Shala's Report, April-June 2022](#)**

Learn more about their work by watching their event at 2022's T4 World Education Week: [watch here](#)

