



The Nad-i-Ali District of Helmand Province, Afghanistan has been in the news a lot recently as the Taliban have taken over village areas, including Shin Kalay where our school is located. How has this latest development affected our project? Not much so far and here is why.

Earning Support for Education

The school has brought about a paradigm shift in the culture of education in the district, with the Taliban being swept along with the changes and, to our surprise, becoming a positive force themselves in the changes. We usually don't know and certainly do not keep track of family political persuasions but it is clear that some fathers who identify as Taliban have children enrolled in the school, including every girl in one large extended family. When the Taliban "took over" the village in early August, without harm to any person or any infrastructure, their commandant spoke with the village elders and with our administrator. His message: 1) do not let anyone enter the school for shelter or other reasons, and 2) when school year starts again, enroll all of your children, including your daughters. Their "Director of Education" for the district was given a two-hour tour of the school, in part to take an inventory in case anything should be reported missing while the village is under their control, but also to learn more about the school that was well known to him through Facebook, TV, radio, and word of mouth. During the tour, the Director said the Taliban were fine with having older men teach girls in the absence of female teachers. Upon learning that we stored English language books in Lashkar Gah, including some with depictions of the human body, he invited our administrator to bring them to the school's new library for the students to use as needed. They seem genuinely interested in real education.

The Taliban commandant left our administrator both a letter from him to show to anyone asking to enter the school, and a phone number to call him if there were any problems. The letter has been effective but must be read aloud for those who are unable to read.

Construction will continue

The Taliban are also supportive of our plans to continue construction at the school, specifically the work on the second floor classrooms. There are reports of Taliban mining the main road between Shin Kalay and Lashkar Gah but also reports that they have notified locals about alternate safe routes to use. This is important to us when we plan for transport of materials, such as sand, gravel, cement, and rebar. And it's a harsh reminder that we really are working in a conflict zone.

Why would we want to continue construction under these conditions? Here are the reasons: The school is owned by the

Afghan government and they pay the salaries of government teachers employed there. They have always been eager for us to improve and expand the school's infrastructure. As political control of the area has changed hands for an undetermined length of time, we are in the position of dealing with parallel governments while taking no interest in the politics ourselves. We are interested only in offering the opportunity of education to the children of Shin Kalay and the surrounding catchment area. The enrollment of about 2,000 is crowding classrooms and limiting the quality of education the teachers can offer.

We have completed the walls for 22 second-floor classrooms and need only roof slabs to make them useable while we await funds to fully finish their interiors. Afghan Appeal in London and The Drever Family Foundation in California have made available enough funding to complete the roof slabs for most of the classrooms. There are many people in the area who are eager to work on the construction and have the necessary skills from previous work on the school. As long as the materials are available, they can be transported safely, there are enough workers to complete the work, and they can work as the conflict in the area continues, we want to keep expanding the school. It is vital that the Taliban are invested in the school and want to protect it for the sake of their own children.

Teacher Shortage

In addition to the shortage of classroom space, there has also been a shortage of teachers. It is our understanding that the shortage results from an inadequate budget to pay teachers, which in turn results from the disappearance of international funding to the Ministry of Education at the federal, provincial, or district level, under the previous administration. To cover 39 classes during the last school year, the government was able to provide only nine fulltime teachers who each taught in the morning and afternoon. The school principal managed creatively by utilizing some part time teachers, some student teachers from the Teachers College in Lashkar Gah, and some students from the higher grades in Shin Kalay, who taught some of the primary school classes. At one point parents planned to help with salaries for the part time teachers.

How do the teachers manage? All boys in grades 3-12 attend in the morning. Boys in grades 1-2 and all girls (about 700 last year) attend classes in the afternoon. Although the average class size was about 50, Mohammad thinks there may have been as many as a hundred students in one or more lower classes. It is hard to imagine that much effective teaching was going on in those classes. If new enrollment this fall equals the new enrollment last fall, the addition of another 170 girls and 130 boys in the first grade, balanced against the

graduation of only 30 boys from the 12th grade, will compound the crowding. We need to be prepared by finishing new classrooms and the Ministry of Education needs to be prepared with funding for more teachers if we want to improve the quality of education.

A New Partnership

Another way we would like to improve the quality of education is to participate in a Reach to Teach program that was recommended by Afghan Appeal. The organization has offices in London and in Ahmedabad, India in the state of Gujarat where the focus is on more effective ways to teach math, science and language classes in rural settings. Our founder, Dr. Mohammad Kharoti, has already been in touch by phone with one of the directors and Skype sessions are planned between GVS, Reach to Teach, and Afghan Appeal staff. The hope is to send three teachers from Shin Kalay to Ahmedabad for several weeks of training and to have Reach to Teach staff visit Shin Kalay to better understand the unique rural setting in which the Afghan teachers work. The three teachers would be selected based on their English language skills and Mohammad would accompany them to India to facilitate their first foreign travel and to act as translator to maximize the value of the instruction there. The three teachers would then share their new skills with all teachers in Shin Kalay and on-going training would be done remotely.

Updates on Former Students

Who are some of the shining stars among the graduates from Shin Kalay? Certainly among those who shine the most brilliantly are the four female medical students. Three of them, on full scholarship from The LBW Trust in Australia, are in Wadi Helmand Medical School in Lashkar Gah. Medical school in Afghanistan requires one year of pre-med, two years of basic sciences, three years of clinical rotations, and a year of internship. These students are in the second semester of their second year of clinical rotations. They should finish their clinical years in 2017 and their internships in 2018. The head of Wadi Helmand recently has been appointed the Director of Helmand Province Public Health

Office, which means these students may have greater access to a wide range of internships. As expected, none of the students has chosen what type of medicine she wants to practice yet, but Mohammad guesses that they will go into pediatrics or gynecology and practice in Nad-i-Ali District. Women in these medical disciplines are in high demand in Afghanistan. This decision will be made during their internship year.

In the meantime, a fourth girl enrolled this year in medical school at Boost University. She is an excellent student and was one of the graduation speakers at our Advanced Education Center. She passed the university entrance exam and could have enrolled at any undergraduate university in Afghanistan, but Mohammad guided her toward medical school knowing that this is where she would be needed the most in the future. She is not on scholarship and has recently asked GVS for assistance. We invite anyone interested in supporting the tuition of a female medical student to make a donation through our website at greenvillageschools.org.

Other Funding Needs

We still hope to bring electricity to the school for lights and computers by means of solar panels (\$39,000 for panels and batteries). In the meantime the computer labs, fully wired for the computers we have in storage, are in use as classrooms.

After the roof slabs are in place, we hope to finish the 22-second floor classrooms with doors, windows, blackboards, plastering, and paint (\$1,500 per room).

We are especially grateful for support from donors who understand the challenges and risks of working in a conflict zone and yet still stand behind us. It is our belief that the best resolution to all conflicts is reached through education, which helps reduce the misunderstanding between the participants in the conflicts. In this regard, our experience in Helmand Province is demonstrative. On some level we all have the common goal of supporting the future of our children.

Donate to GVS at:
<http://www.greenvillageschools.org/donate>



Starting again in 2012 after the first school was destroyed



By 2015, 24 completed classrooms with 22 more in progress