

Career and Higher Education Guidance for Secondary and Higher Secondary Students in Rural Gujarat

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Introduction

...Everybody gets confused while selecting one's career in any field. The field of career education and employment is also not spared. Many times this situation is very difficult for class 10 and 12 teenage students and their unaware or busy parents. There is lack of help and guidance regarding education or career in our schools and colleges or professional facilities any where else [sic]. Whatever is available is [often] last minute information.¹

Bajipura is a village with a population of about 5,000 in rural Gujarat, India. Every morning, over a thousand children wearing red and khaki uniforms come to this small agricultural village from all around²—some are from nearby villages, whereas others may travel over an hour. Bajipura prides itself in its biggest school, the Shri R.V. Patel School, which provides Primary, Secondary, and Higher Secondary education for standard I to standard XII students. With a total of 1,435 students as of 2009, the student population is comprised mostly of Scheduled Tribe students (Figure A). The school is relatively well endowed compared to other schools in the area, owing to the fact that it has a trust that funds the school's operations to supplement government subsidies. However, most of the students come from very low-income families; many cannot afford school uniforms or textbooks. As such, education is of extreme

¹ Department of Education, Government of Gujarat. How to choose a career, 2008. <http://gujarat-education.gov.in/education/who_are_you/Students/career_after_ssc/karkidishetrani-pasandgi.htm>.

² Number estimated by faculty

importance to allow students to have sustainable jobs in the future. The quote above from the Gujarati government's Department of Education website expresses the difficulties that secondary and higher secondary students face in choosing their educational and career paths. Especially in isolated rural schools, help and guidance are crucial in helping students make informed decisions.

Research question

This research paper will focus on the following question: What kind of support system does the R.V. Patel School currently have to guide students in planning for future careers or studies, and how can it be improved? Researching this question is particularly significant, because the goal of the Nanubhai Education Foundation is not only to focus on the school's lesson programming but also to ensure that the school system can effectively help students build sustainable futures. In the United States, college counseling is a significant part of many high schools' operations, and career counseling plays a similar role in many colleges. Is there a similar need or demand among secondary and higher secondary school students in rural Gujarat? Would a similar sort of system be beneficial to them? What do the needs of the students, if there are any, indicate? These are some of the questions I set out to answer.

Method

I conducted this research during my three-month long internship at the R.V. Patel School teaching supplemental English classes to students ranging from standard VIII to XII in the summer of 2009. By viewing administrative records, interviewing faculty, and conducting surveys among students, I was able gain valuable data that informed my conclusions. Online research and general knowledge acquired through participant observation in the Bajipura

community has also supplemented my research. Language barriers made communication difficult, but with the school's support I was able to collect significant information. In this paper, I will first outline basic background regarding the options that students have after finishing secondary or higher secondary school, and the types of government support that are available. Then I will go on to explain the school's current guidance system, followed by findings on the students' demonstrated needs. Finally, I will give some suggestions on how the system can be improved in a cost-effective manner.

Basic Information

In any Indian government school, students must take the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) Board Exam after completing standard X. Only those who pass the exam may continue to Higher Secondary School, or standard XI and XII. At the R.V. Patel School, 63% of standard X students passed the 2009 SSC Board Exam; although the pass rate is higher than most other schools in the area, this means 78 out of 211 students were not able to complete the requirement necessary for higher secondary admission (Figure B).

Those who do not pass the SSC Board Exam may choose to repeat standard X and retake the exam the following year. However, many students will either begin working or pursue certificates in career-oriented courses at a government funded or private institution such as ITI (Industrial Training Institute). Although mostly male students will enroll in ITI courses to receive specialized training in technical fields such as mechanics, instrument repair and welding, some female students will pursue certificates in computer application, cooking, and design. Girls may also enroll in three to six-month beauty parlor or mehndi courses.

Those who do pass the SSC Board Exam and choose to enroll in standard XI will matriculate in one of three streams offered at the R.V. Patel School: Arts, Commerce, or Science. Their performance on the exam will determine which streams are available or optimal for them to pursue. Most who pass the SSC Board Exam will enroll in higher secondary school, but some may choose to take diploma courses at other institutions; these courses are offered in various fields, from Mechanical Engineering to Computer Technology. A few diploma courses are also available for those who have completed SSC education but did not pass the exam, in fields such as Commercial Practice and Textile Design. The option to take courses for a Pre-Primary Teacher Certificate (Pre-PTC) is also available; this would allow students to begin teaching Junior and Senior KG students in government schools after two years.

If the student does choose to enroll in higher secondary school, he or she must take the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) Board Exam after finishing standard XII. There is a much higher pass rate for HSC Board Exams than SSC Board Exams; in the Arts and Commerce streams, 83.87% of students passed, and in the Science stream, 84.0% of students passed (Figure B). Although there are no exact statistics, faculty estimated that about 98% of students who pass the HSC Board Exam will go on to higher education. There are two types of colleges that a student who completes standard XII can apply to: a government granted college, or a private college. The former, which receives government subsidies, requires lower fees, whereas the latter, which is run by trusts, has higher fees. The quality of education tends to be similar, but it is competitive to be admitted into government granted colleges because of their limited number. A typical college offers three different graduate degrees: Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Bachelor of Commerce (B.Com), and Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.). Students will usually pursue the respective degree of their higher secondary stream. Students may also enroll in other institutions

of higher education that offers bachelors degree in more specialized fields such as B.B.A (Bachelor of Business Administration), B.C.A (Bachelor of Computer Application), or B.Pharm. (Bachelor of Pharmacy). These institutions tend to be privatized; they are considered more prestigious than general colleges, but require higher fees. Students may also choose to pursue a Primary Teacher Certificate (PTC), which will allow them to begin teaching at government primary schools after two years.

Figure A.

Student Body Demographics

Standard	Scheduled Tribe		Scheduled Caste		Baxi		Open Caste		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1	19	14	1	1	17	10	6	5	73
2	14	15	-	-	9	8	9	1	56
3	16	10	1	-	13	20	3	8	71
4	10	12	-	-	17	9	11	7	66
5	19	10	-	-	17	10	7	5	68
6	12	13	-	-	20	8	6	4	63
7	13	13	-	1	11	13	7	11	69
8A	16	24	-	-	12	8	4	5	69
8B	27	29	-	-	2	6	2	1	67
8C	28	27	1	-	3	1	3	3	66
8D	26	28	-	-	3	8	2	-	67
9A	21	24	-	-	11	7	8	5	76

9B	37	25	-	2	3	5	3	3	78
9C	37	28	-	-	5	5	2	-	77
10A	17	19	-	1	8	13	5	9	72
10B	33	23	-	-	12	-	6	-	74
10C	25	36	-	-	5	3	3	3	75
11 Arts	14	23	-	-	1	1	-	2	41
11 Commerce	1	3	1	-	4	8	8	2	27
11 Science	10	16	-	1	6	3	1	-	37
12 Arts	21	44	-	-	1	4	-	1	71
12 Commerce	6	3	1	-	7	3	1	2	23
12 Science	9	24	-	1	3	6	3	3	49
Total	431	463	5	7	190	159	100	80	1435
	894 (62%)		12 (<1%)		349 (24%)		180 (13%)		

Figure B.

Shri R.V. Patel School SSC and HSC Board Exam Results for 2009

10th Std. SSC Board Exam Results:

# Students	Pass	Fail
211	133	78

→63.0% pass rate

12th Std. HSC Board Exam Results:

Arts/Commerce

# Students	Pass	Fail
93	78	15

→83.87% pass rate

Science

# Students	Pass	Fail
50	42	8

→84% pass rate

Current Support System

After interviewing several faculty members, it became apparent that one of the major obstacles that prevent students from pursuing higher education is the financial burden. For many families, it is more economical for their child who has completed standard X to settle with a career oriented certificate from a local institution and start working immediately after, rather than paying for extra tuition classes to help the child pass the SSC Board Exam or investing in a degree from a college-level institution.

To address this issue, the Indian Central Government offers various scholarships and loans. For low-income Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Baxi students, a small caste/need-based scholarship is available to cover uniform and textbook costs in secondary and higher secondary schools. Merit-based scholarships are also given to students via the National Means-cum-Merit Scholarship Scheme, an initiative of the Ministry of Human Resources Development. Based on performance on a state-level examination, eligible students between standard IX and XII will receive a scholarship of Rs. 500 per month. The Department of Higher Education has also recently introduced the Central Sector Scheme of Scholarship for College and University Students, which awards students pursuing college degrees who completed standard XII with a mark of 80% or higher with a merit-based scholarship of Rs.1000 per month. A portion of the government funds are reserved specifically for SC/ST students. All students in government schools, including those of the R.V. Patel School, are eligible to receive these scholarships, given that they meet the requirements. Furthermore, the central government has recently begun the

initiative to give no or low interest loans to students pursuing medicine or engineering in universities abroad.³

According to teachers, there are help centers for students in the nearby city of Surat, about an hour and a half away by bus from Bajipura. These help centers, funded by various trusts, provide free college and career counseling services; students may seek advice on filling college forms, deciding on a stream, or finding vocational training institutions. The most accessible institutionalized help for students, however, is whatever support system offered by their school. At the R.V. Patel School, various measures are taken to support the students in making decisions after finishing secondary and higher secondary school. Every spring, students from standard IIX to XII attend weekly vocational guidance classes for a month. In these classes, teachers will inform students about various career and higher education options available to students and their necessary requirements. The school will also distribute informational pamphlets about applying to vocational courses and colleges. Other relevant information may be given as morning announcements.

From the survey that I conducted, it appears that most students at the R.V. Patel School consult both teachers and parents about their future choices. Nearly 100% of standard XII students reported talking with both teachers and parents about their career and higher education options; 88.7% of standard X students reported consulting teachers, and 97.1% responded that they consult their parents. The school faculty has confirmed this; they claimed that many students and parents will approach them with questions. However, with 721 students in the secondary school, the student-teacher ratio is 52:1. Due to this overwhelming number of students,

³ Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2010. <<http://education.nic.in>>.

teachers and administrators do not normally initiate conversations with students about what they plan to do after secondary or higher secondary education unless they take special interest in a particular pupil.

Demonstrated Student Needs

Despite government and school efforts, the survey results show that most students at the R.V. Patel School wish they had more resources to help them make important life decisions post-matriculation. In standard XII, 84% of students in the Arts stream responded that they would like more information about different colleges and scholarships; in the Commerce stream 80.3% responded the same, and in the Science stream it was 100% (Figure C). This shows that there is much room for improvement in creating a stronger support system to guide students in making decisions about further studies.

An unexpected finding, however, is that much fewer students find the need for information about different careers and their requirements. In standard XII, 44.0% of students in the Arts stream responded that they would like more information about different jobs and their requirements; in the Commerce stream 29.8% responded the same, and in the Science stream it was 43.6% (Figure C). Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that in higher secondary school, education becomes very specialized; because of the need to choose a particular stream at a young age, students seem to be very aware of their various career options.

When the statistics from standard XII classes are compared to those of standard X classes, some striking differences are apparent. It should first be noted that as in most other government schools, the R.V. Patel Secondary School divides students into three classes according their performance level. Based on their scores from a test taken when entering secondary school (in

standard IIX), they are divided into class A, class B and class C, with A being the highest performing class and C being the lowest. Theoretically, this arrangement is necessary to keep the higher performing students challenged and to ensure that the lower performing students understand the material. However, in the long run there seems to be little mobility between A, B and C as expectations, teaching methods and classroom dynamic become differentiated according to each class. With this in mind, let us examine the statistics from standard X.

In 10A, 92.9% of students reported wanting more information about different colleges and scholarships. In 10B, this number drops to 75.8%, and in 10C, only 45.9% responded the same (Figure C). There seems to be a strong correlation between class level and their reported need for resources: the lower the class level, the less students feel the need for more information about colleges and scholarships. Furthermore, whereas 54.3% of 10A students and 71.9% of 10B students reported wanting more information about different kinds of jobs and their requirements, only 14.1% of 10C students reported the same (Figure C). These results suggest that while the higher performing standard X students feel that they have a variety of opportunities after finishing secondary or higher secondary school, the lower performing students are less ambitious and have already limited their options.

Some other statistics also support this theory. For example, when asked what stream they wish to pursue in higher secondary, 11.4% of 10A students chose Arts whereas 75.5% chose the more respected and prestigious Science stream. In stark contrast, 50.0% of 10C students chose Arts and a mere 13.2% chose Science (Figure D). The prestige of the Science stream comes from the fact that it opens paths to well-paying jobs in fields such as medicine and engineering; yet the results of the survey suggest that the lower performing students have struck out this possibility before even taking the SSC exams. Furthermore, statistics on where the students wish to continue

their studies yield similar conclusions. While 3% of standard XII Science stream students plan to pursue higher education in nearby towns Bardoli or Viara, 76% plan to go to other cities in India, primarily Ahmedabad. On the other hand, 81% of 10C students plan to pursue higher education in Bardoli or Viara, and only 5% plan to go to other cities (Figure E). These results suggest that whereas higher performing students have considered a variety of options in higher education, the lower performing students have limited their options to staying close to Bajipura. By doing so, the latter may be missing the numerous opportunities that other cities beyond the vicinity of Bajipura offer.

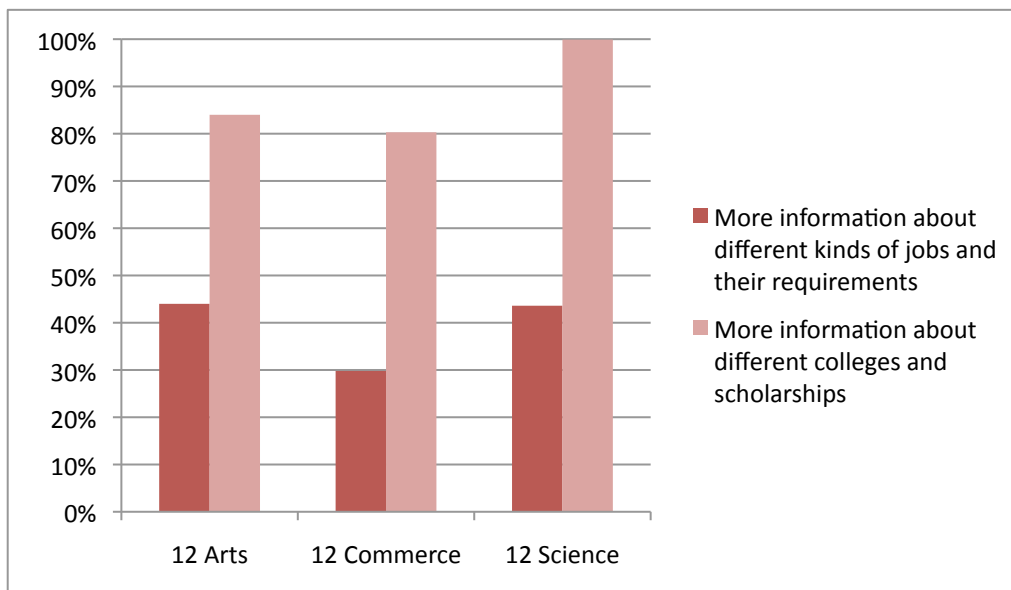
Although the cause is uncertain, it is possible that the lower performing students have limited their options because they lack the economic means to invest in quality education. At the R.V. Patel School, only the secondary school and the Arts/Commerce streams in the higher secondary schools are government subsidized; the primary school and the Science stream are run by funds from the school trust. Although the government subsidized sectors have no fees (besides materials), the primary school students and Science stream students must pay the tuition fee of Rs.200 per month. Therefore, 10A consists mainly of those who were able to afford the higher quality education provided at the private primary school of R.V. Patel School, and 10C students tend to be those who attended free but low-quality public primary schools in the area. As such, the A, B, C class system can be seen as a quasi-replication of the larger societal structure, for it reflects the students' *economic* and *social* class. This trend continues into the higher secondary school, as only those who can afford it can choose the prestigious and challenging Science stream.

Yet it is also possible that the 10C students have limited their future options much more than the 10A students because they are living up to the expectations attached to their low-

performance status. Because it is common knowledge that the 10A students are “higher performing,” teachers treat students differently depending on their class. It is not uncommon for teachers be more willing to skip teaching for their C classes over the A classes, or talk lowly of C class students because they are less willing to work. Although more research is necessary to back up this theory, I suspect that it is the lack of encouragement that the C class students receive which results in their less ambitious goals. The economic and social status of these students determine what kind of education they receive in their primary school years, and this in turn determines what class they are placed into when they reach secondary school. This further determines how they are treated within the school system, influencing their future goals and ambitions. As such, it is clear that the students’ difference in motivation is not a result of their inherent intelligence level but a product of the vicious cycle created by their economic and social constraints.

Figure C.

What Resources Students Need



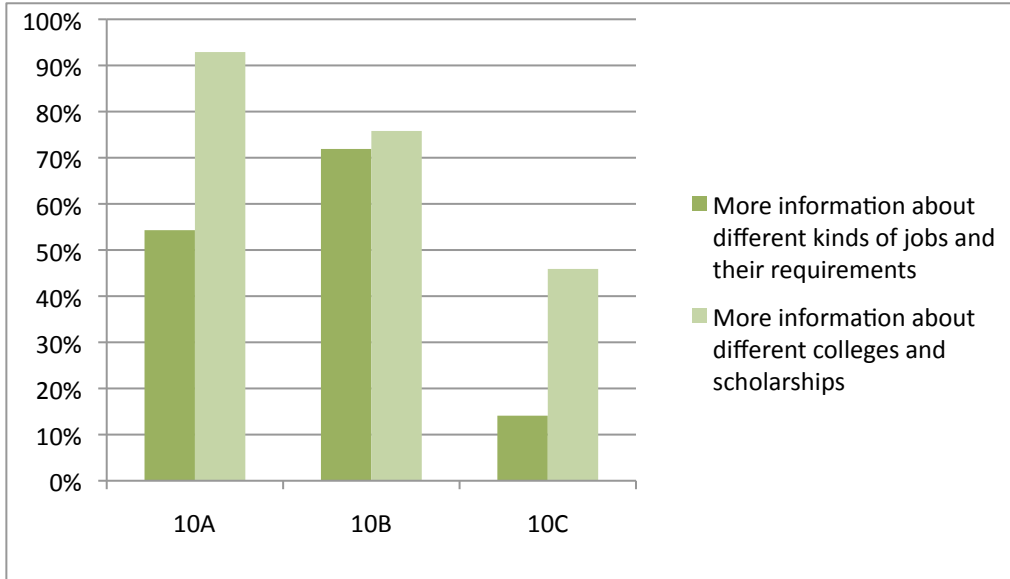


Figure D.

What Streams Students Wish to Pursue

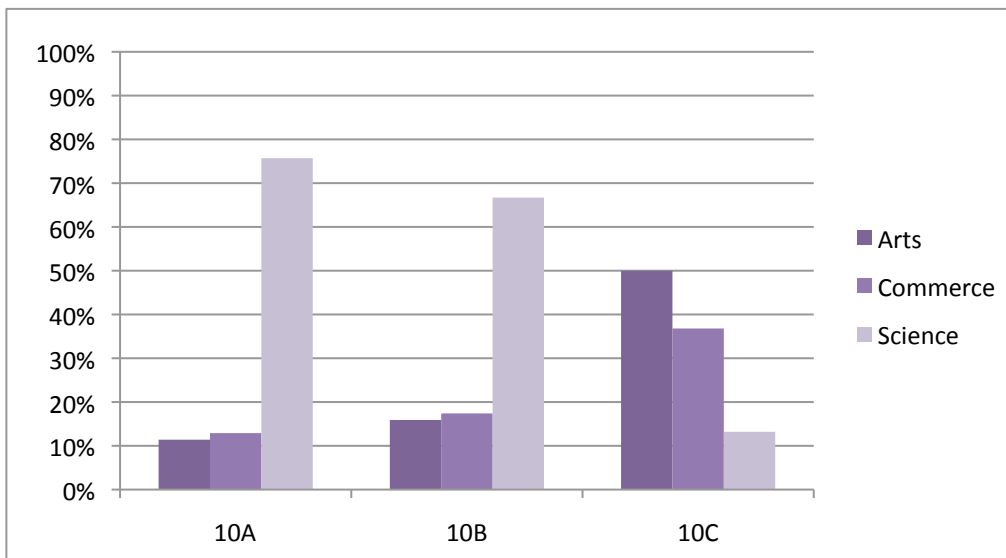
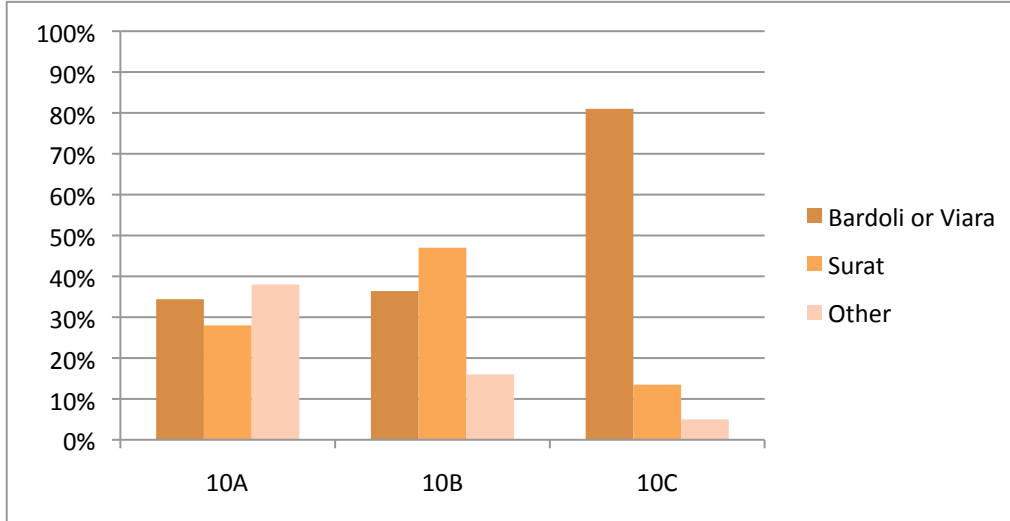
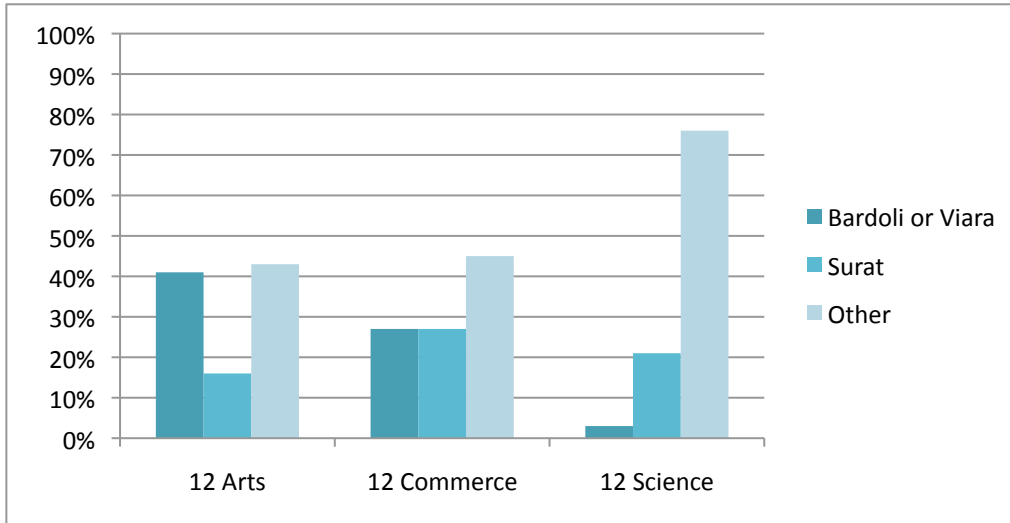


Figure E.

Where Students Wish to Study



Suggestions for Improvement

Whether the students' varied demonstrated needs stem from economic reasons, a lack of encouragement, or a combination of both, the power to succeed comes from the students' ambitions. What, for example, can be done to prevent students from limiting themselves before even taking the SSC exam? Although it is impractical and perhaps culturally insensitive to immediately change the A-B-C class system, there are some measures that can be taken as soon as possible. The following suggestions aim to achieve two goals: facilitate a faster and smoother flow of information, and create a more positive learning environment.

One way that the school can improve its current system is by providing guidance for the use of online applications, especially for colleges far away. Online applications have only recently become available, and many students either do not have internet access or are not familiar with maneuvering the internet. Furthermore, it would be useful to create a reliable college and scholarship database, including non-government scholarships. This would include copies of application forms, information about diploma courses (accessible to those who did not pass the SSC exam), and information about various bank loans and trusts that are reasonable and accessible to students. Similarly, a career database with explanations of various kinds of jobs and their requirements could be useful especially for standard X students. Although it is ideal to encourage students to finish standard X, the school should provide assistance to those who do not complete them too. These databases would make information about various careers, educational institutions and scholarships readily available to students, giving them a better idea of the various options they have post-graduation. It would be optimal to have one or more school faculty members be "specialists" in careers, higher education and financial aid, so that they can keep up to date on recent information and have "office hours" designated to give guidance to students;

however, because of the various logistical limitations (such as lack of personnel and funds), it may be unrealistic to put a program like such into place.

Moreover, it would be beneficial for the school to keep a record of what students do after standard X or XII; currently, the school does not carry any such information. Keeping careful records of each individual student would be a step towards investing more in and showing more interest in the students' career or higher education choices. Finally, the school should stay connected to graduates, making sure graduates also have access to the resources that the school provides. The faculty should be willing to give as much individual attention as possible. In such a way, the school can begin to build a positive and friendly environment where the purpose of education is not only to boost the students' scores but also to give them the tools to be able to achieve their dreams and goals. As one of the faculty members claimed, what the students really need is the extra tuition classes that they can't afford; the best alternative, then, is to motivate and encourage all students alike, high performing and low performing, by providing them the necessary resources.