

Comprehensive Report on the APPI-Funded Project: Ummeed The Hope School

A Hybrid Donor-Report with Leadership Narrative by Ajaz Rashid, COO, Ummeed Foundation

Introduction: A Commitment Rooted in Empathy and Vision

As Chief Operating Officer of Ummeed Foundation, my journey overseeing the APPI-supported expansion of Ummeed The Hope School has been deeply fulfilling and transformative. The school is a beacon of hope in Mumbra, Thane, Maharashtra, providing free, inclusive, and professional special education services to children with diverse disabilities. Thanks to the Rs 1.15 Cr three-year grant sanctioned through persistent efforts and strategic leadership, we are elevating the quality, reach, and sustainability of services for an under-served population of specially-abled children and their families.

Organizational Background and Context

Since its establishment in 2011, Ummeed Foundation has passionately served marginalized groups, with a special focus on Persons with Disability (PwD). At the heart of our work is Ummeed The Hope School, the only free special education center in a large radius within Thane district. Currently, it serves over 315 students—spanning intellectual, physical, hearing, visual, autism spectrum, cerebral palsy, ADHD, and other developmental disabilities—with an acute waiting list evidencing the vast unmet need.

The school is a lifeline for families facing socio-economic hardship with no alternative affordable specialized education options. It operates on principles of dignity, inclusion, and localized empowerment, integrating academic learning with therapies, vocational training, and awareness of rights.

Project Vision, Strategy, and APPI Support

Our vision extends beyond education to building holistic ecosystems around PwD children enhancing independent living and social integration. The APPI grant has been fundamental in turning this vision into tangible outcomes through:

- **Individualized Education Plans (IEPs):** Personalized plans have been crafted for 175 enrolled students, incorporating detailed assessments, home visits, and parental counseling to meet academic, developmental, and functional needs.
- **Capacity Building Workshops:** We conduct 6 annual workshops each for students, parents, and educators focused on tailored learning enhancement, caregiving competencies, inclusive pedagogy, and government scheme navigation.
- **Therapeutic and Medical Support:** The grant supports 140 speech therapy and 200 physiotherapy monthly sessions for external beneficiaries, extending our clinical care reach beyond school walls.

- Documentation and Awareness Camps: Three documentation camps annually facilitate processing IQ certificates, disability ID cards, and entitlements while two awareness workshops educate families on government benefits.
- Vocational Skill Development and Social Inclusion: Through 12 vocational and socialization events yearly, alongside health check-ups and medical aid distribution, we foster independence and community belonging for PwDs.

This strategic framework is meticulously aligned with APPI's disability sector priorities and monitored through a robust Management Information System using Zoho software.

Implementation Journey and Team Dynamics

The school operates in two shifts to accommodate varying disabilities and age groups: mornings for physically and mentally challenged children and afternoons for hearing, visually impaired, hyper, and autistic students. Our dedicated team comprises special educators, therapists, administrative staff, and volunteers, all rigorously trained and continuously capacitated to deliver state-of-the-art personalized interventions.

Parental engagement is central, with monthly workshops and counseling sessions, creating a trust-based partnerships and enabling families to participate actively in their children's progress and access government schemes.

One of the most rewarding aspects of our work is seeing students successfully complete secondary and senior secondary education through NIOS, gain functional computer skills, and develop vocational competencies, thus preparing them for more independent and fulfilling lives.

Challenges and Adaptive Strategies

The project faces ongoing challenges, including the complex, diverse needs of the student population, persistent socio-economic disadvantages, societal stigma, and post-pandemic operational disruptions. Financial sustainability is a critical focus, with the APPI grant providing stability that enables us to pursue additional CSR and donor partnerships.

We employ flexible pedagogical approaches, community-dialogue initiatives, and regularly adapt therapies and interventions based on evidence and data, ensuring resilience and sustained impact.

Impact and Achievements

Since the APPI grant commenced:

- Over 175 students receive IEP-driven education tailored to their unique needs.
- 140 speech therapy and 200 physiotherapy sessions are delivered monthly to 70 external beneficiaries.

- 6 workshops annually for each category—students, parents, and teachers—build capacity and raise awareness.
- 3 documentation camps facilitate critical certifications enabling access to benefits.
- 2 health check-up camps annually provide comprehensive physical assessments.
- 8 special events celebrate disability awareness, social inclusion, and joy.
- Essential medical aids such as wheelchairs and hearing devices are provided on need basis.

These outcomes are meticulously documented with photographic, video, and MIS-based evidence, fulfilling accountability and learning requirements.

Program Design and Indicators Highlights (From Attached Documents)

Activity	Target Count (3-Year Grant)	Category	Purpose/Goal
Daily Regular Classes	12 (4 per year)	Activity	Sustained, professional special education delivery
Weekly Workshops	156 (52 per year)	Activity	Continuous capacity building of staff and students
Vocational Training	36 sessions	Milestone	Skill development for self-reliance
Socialisation Programs	36 events	Goal	Encouraging inclusion between special and regular students
Musical Events	18 events	Activity	Cultural engagement for confidence and joy
Medical Review Camps	6 camps	Goal	Monitoring health status

Activity	Target Count (3-Year Grant)	Category	Purpose/Goal
Health Check-up Camps	9 camps	Goal	Preventive and diagnostic care
Parental Workshops	36 workshops	Goal	Empowering caregivers
Sports Events	12 events	Activity	Physical development and fun
Documentation Camps	3	Activity	IQ & disability certificate facilitation
Awareness Workshops on Govt. Schemes	2	Activity	Enabling access to benefits

Future Vision and Government Partnerships

The APPI partnership is just the beginning. We are working alongside the Indian Army to establish a special school in Kupwara, Jammu & Kashmir's border area, a region of acute need. Discussions with Thane Municipal Corporation aim to foster a university for specially-abled students, expanding accessible higher education.

We envision scaling across rural Maharashtra and tribal regions, replicating our successes to build inclusive education ecosystems at a wider scale.

Personal Reflections: Leadership Through Service

Leading Ummeed The Hope School and the APPI-supported expansion has strengthened my conviction that dignity, opportunity, and love are the foundations on which special education must rest. The grant's sanctioning marks a vital milestone in creating professional, sustainable, and scalable services for PwDs.

Witnessing our students grow from dependence to emerging independence—passing examinations, acquiring skills, and becoming part of society—is deeply rewarding. It fuels my dedication alongside our passionate team and empowered families to continue overcoming obstacles and impact lives positively over decades.

This report integrates detailed program design and indicator data with leadership insights, capturing the milestones, challenges, and horizon of Ummeed Foundation's APPI grant-supported journey to serve specially-abled children in Maharashtra and beyond. If desired, I am available to further expand sections or provide additional data points as requested to help your organization on similar lines.

Epilogue: A Journey of Vision, Partnership, and Impact

When I first walked into Ummeed Foundation's modest premises in Mumbai in early 2017, I was there as the Head of Goonj's Maharashtra Chapter, meeting hundreds of grassroots groups to identify potential partners who were genuinely creating change. Ummeed stood out instantly.

At that point, the organization operated a small special school for children with disabilities in a *rented two-room facility*. The founder, Parvez M. A. Farid, welcomed me with warmth and candor. The school was home to little more than a few dozen children, dedicated special educators, and a vision that seemed far bigger than the resources they had. The annual turnover hovered around ₹25 lakhs just enough to keep the doors open, yet never enough to meet the waiting list of children who needed help.

What struck me the most that day was not the scarcity, but the *energy and clarity of purpose*. Here was an organization doing vital work — quietly, humbly, and without fanfare. I remember thinking: *If this spark is given the right fuel, it can light up thousands of lives*. That was the beginning of my association with Ummeed.

From Supporter to Leader

For the first year, I worked with Parvez and the Ummeed team purely as a partner through Goonj, supporting their initiatives and connecting them to resources wherever possible. But as our relationship deepened, so did my conviction that I needed to be more directly involved.

In 2018, I made the decision to join Ummeed Foundation formally as Chief Operating Officer. It was a choice driven by belief, not career planning. The school, the mission, and the people had pulled me in. I knew the scope of work was immense and the challenges — financial, structural, and operational — were formidable, but the cause was worth it.

My role as COO became a mix of strategist, fundraiser, project designer, and bridge-builder. I saw my task as expanding the organization's capacity, introducing sustainable systems, and positioning Ummeed as a credible, trusted partner for serious CSR and philanthropic investment.

Four Years of Transformation

Between 2018 and 2022, Ummeed Foundation underwent a transformation that was both structural and cultural. One of the watershed moments was moving from that small rented

two-room space to a Maharashtra Government-leased school building a move that symbolized stability, legitimacy, and the capacity to dream bigger.

Financial growth mirrored this expansion of vision. From a turnover of ₹25 lakhs in 2017, we scaled to an organization operating on an annual budget of nearly ₹3 crores by 2022. This growth was not accidental; it was the result of targeted initiatives, rigorous accountability, and tirelessly building relationships with institutions that believed in our work.

During this period, I had the privilege of conceiving, leading, and securing funding for multiple flagship initiatives. The APPI partnership was one of the most strategic — a three-year, ₹1.15 crore support that ensured professionalization of the school's services, expanded beneficiary reach, and created a replicable model for special education.

But APPI was only one chapter. We also forged partnerships with Indian Oil Corporation Limited (IOCL) for telemedicine and critical care facilities, ONGC for advanced cardiac care centers, AstraZeneca, Torrent Pharma, CAF India, and a host of others. Each of these was not just a funding relationship it was the translation of a social need into a well-structured project, backed by data, and designed to be impactful from day one.

The CEO-COO Partnership

None of this would have been possible without the deep mutual respect and trust between Parvez (Founder & CEO) and myself. As leaders, we balanced each other's strengths: his grassroots credibility, community trust, and unwavering commitment; my network-building, program design skills, and ability to translate vision into proposals that moved funders to action.

More than colleagues, we became friends and allies in a shared mission. Decisions were made not just within the walls of an office, but in long conversations over tea, in dusty rural schools, in crowded hospital lobbies, and in the homes of the families we served.

A Legacy Beyond Numbers

By 2022, Ummeed Foundation was no longer just a small local NGO — it had become a recognized, multi-project, multi-sector organization with impact footprints in education, health, livelihood training, and welfare for vulnerable communities. The school was thriving, the waiting list had reduced substantially, revenues were diversified, and systems were robust enough to scale further.

For me, the real measure of success was not the turnover, the number of funders, or the physical expansion — it was the stories of our children. A young boy with cerebral palsy learning to type his name on a keyboard. A hearing-impaired girl expressing her dreams through art. Parents who once felt hopeless now advocating for their children's rights in government forums.

These moments are not line items in an annual report — they are the living proof that our work mattered.

Looking Ahead

While my role in Ummeed has evolved over time and then formally ended in Spring of 2023, the journey from that first meeting in 2017 to the organization's status now remains one of the most satisfying chapters of my life. We proved that with clarity of purpose, collaborative leadership, and relentless pursuit of opportunity, a small community-based organization can grow to influence at state and national levels.

The partnerships we built, the projects we launched, and the systems we put in place will continue to serve Ummeed for years to come. And I will always look back at those five years from the narrow lanes of Mumbra to conference rooms of national CSR heads with pride, gratitude, and the knowledge that we turned hope into an institution.

The two-room school became a movement. And for me, that will always be the enduring legacy of my time at Ummeed Foundation. It is time to build similar partnerships and friendships elsewhere.