

# Letter from the Chairman, Board of Governors, IPSS

**Gautam Thapar**  
200 H, 1979

It is not often that the Chairman of the Board of Governors receives a request from the editor of the Rose Bowl to write a piece on the direction and work being done at School. Such an opportunity was too good to pass up, and should be a regular feature in The Rose Bowl.

I have served on the Board of Governors for seven years, four as a director and upon taking the mantle from Analjit Singh, I will be completing my third year as Chairman this Founder's Day. The good health of the school today owes a lot to Analjit's pragmatism and drive in putting together a 10-year development plan. And, after consultation with the wider Dosco community, in hiring Peter McLaughlin as headmaster to personally drive its implementation. A copy of the plan is available to any member of the Doon community and should be available on the dsobs.net website. I would urge all to peruse it and see that School is very much on track.

Why was this development plan necessary? Simply put, the school was lacking resources on all fronts - financial, academic and infrastructural. The market for high school education had changed. Traditional decision-makers in families no longer have the final say. Financially well-endowed and new, branded schools were springing up in urban centres making quality education accessible, closer to home and in metropolitan cities. Academic results and university placements became the new criteria when choosing a school, and boarding schools were increasingly being seen as a throwback to older times. All these represented unprecedented challenges in keeping the Doon School education model relevant in a rapidly changing world. Any attempt at change requires

large resources, commitment and time to deliver results. The school did not have these resources, having made financial losses in 18 of the previous 23 years. But we did have the commitment and time to bring about the change we needed.

All these challenges manifested themselves in and on School in different ways. Doon had lost its all-India character and was reduced to recruiting from a narrow north Indian geography. We were unable to upgrade our academic and physical infrastructure, which in turn made it difficult to increase fees. There was increasingly, little perceived value in a Doon School education. The introduction of the International Baccalaureate program, while progressive, only increased the financial problem as it imposed higher costs and different teaching standards, requiring spending on teacher training and development. This in turn made it difficult to attract good teachers. The school was resting on its reputation and had matters been allowed to continue, the very ethos of the school was in danger of being lost. I will not name other boarding schools that have been unable to recover their reputation once such a spiral of decline set in.

A development plan did a number of things to help restore the ethos and essential values of School. It put the student and his welfare - academic, pastoral, physical well-being and discipline - at the centre of our aims. This adheres to the same spartan traditions of the past, but makes concessions for the 21st century. Above all, it put active recruitment of students from all over India and Old Boys' families at the heart of the plan.

To achieve all these outcomes we needed resources which we did not have.

The school has only two possible avenues of increased income; school fees and donations. Both had to increase simultaneously as we had about 25 years of under-investment to overcome. Increasing school fees meant we would be able to make a start on this development plan. Further, we had to put aside more money for bursaries so more students from wider backgrounds could afford a Doon school education.

As a community we should be proud of the strides that the school has made in the last seven years. We have achieved much of what we set out to do. New infrastructure; teacher training; excellent academic results and university placements; strong student discipline; students from wider India; bursaries and scholarships for almost 60 percent of the boys in school; increase in teacher remuneration and tight financial control - are all manifest in School's functioning today. To sustain all of this we need to do more, much more.

### **Where is the money going?**

Half the net income of the school goes towards financial support for the boys in the form of fee mitigation and scholarships. The rest goes to support teacher training, salary increases and physical infrastructure development. We also need to save for the future. To maintain this balance between expenditure and savings, the financial reserves of the school needs to keep increasing in order for the same level of support and investment to be provided

in future. Because we do not control interest rates or new academic or infrastructural requirements, we have no guarantee that the school will earn interest on its money at the same rate every year. Yet, the school must meet its vision commitment to provide the best all-round education in the country. If we are to make the investment in vital infrastructure that needs to be made for Doon and achieve a level of financial independence, the Board of the school needs 110 crores in reserves for 2020. We are nowhere near that number. Much of what we have achieved is due to the Old Boys in India and around the world, who have given generously. The balance has come from school fees and tight cost control.

### **Wrangling in the Community**

I have heard criticism that school fees are too high, that Old Boys are being deprived of the opportunity to send their sons to school; that the school has too much money; that the school has become a rich boys' school - too academic and too focused on international placements, etc. More worrisome to me has been the relationship between the Old Boys' Society and the IPSS/Board of Governors. The relationship was competitive and confrontational. Rather than work together to achieve the plan, we were working at cross-purposes. To state the obvious, if there was no Doon School there would be no Old Boys. The primacy of keeping and perpetuating the ethos and values of the school must be fundamental to the functioning of the Doon community. This primary responsibility lies with the Indian Public School Society, who must be assisted by the Doon community in upholding these values. There can be no ambiguity of these values



and ethos. A strong trust-based and transparent relationship between School and its alumni has to be the foundation on which Doon moves forward. I have personally tried to ensure that this is the case in the IPSS. I am pleased to say that under RPN Singh's leadership, the Old Boys' Society has reciprocated. A change for the positive in this relationship has been very visible and welcome. His efforts need to continue to be supported. I am also proud to say that no Old Boy's ward has been turned away from School for reasons of lack of financial support.

As to the other criticisms, I have attempted to lay out the facts. The school charges fees equivalent to the quality of the education provided. Market surveys show that the fees we charge are still well below what the market will pay for the quality of education being provided at Doon. We have been prudent and communicated our fee increases well in advance to parents. The school provides financial aid to all those who apply and pass the means test. Additionally, these means tests are constantly being updated to ensure fairness and transparency, and are adjudicated by an impartial third party. We want your son, nephew or grandson to enrol at The Doon School. It is important to our tradition that generations of family members attend Doon. However, they also need to be well-prepared for the increased competition in gaining admission to School.

### **Progress is a Two Way Street**

Finally, to the task ahead. It is my strong belief that if we are a member of any Society and are elected to serve that Society in any capacity, then we serve as a Trustee. And our responsibility as a Trustee is to endeavour to leave that Society in better shape, form and governance than before we were elected. There have been weaknesses in the overseeing of School in the past. As a society we have acknowledged them and made the corrections required. One task has been to ensure that these lapses don't happen again. This has been done by ensuring that the highest standards of governance and transparency are adopted and implemented by the Board of

Governors and that those elected to serve on the board contribute, and shoulder responsibility and accountability. We must adhere to delivering the Doon School Development Plan, clean up longstanding issues of the past, continue to move the school forward in every facet of its functioning and ensure that The Doon School continues to be the leading school in the country. Repairing the relationship between the Board and the Old Boys and making it a collaborative effort is a key component of the desire to maintain our leadership amongst schools. No school in India and very few globally have such a dedicated and passionate alumni network scattered around the world. As a community we need to continue to keep ourselves open to suggestions that help us meet and deliver our goals. Differences in opinion are normal in these complex times. However, they cannot be allowed to drive a permanent wedge between us, or become ossified.

My passion and my task have been made much easier by a committed board that ensures overseeing, and eschews interference; by a headmaster who has patiently been building a culture of performance and delivery, and by the support of the teachers, boys, parents and many, many old boys. If we are to continue to lead, and have our place amongst the great schools of the world, we must not allow the school to slip again, ever. It will be almost impossible for us to recover. This is a message that needs to be taken to heart by the entire Doon family.

***It takes a long time to build a reputation, but requires very little to destroy it.***

So rather than sit at home and read about what transformations are taking place at School, come and visit Doon and see for yourselves. The same bright boys, khattias, toe jam smells, uniforms, chhota hazri and a truly beautiful and well-maintained campus await you!