

Good morning!

While our occasional newsletter gives a broad picture of what's doing on at Big Brother & Sister Mouse, I thought it was time to write to some of our strongest supporters with more detail about how we are, as I guess we say, 'evolving.'

We continue to hold book parties and to set up reading programs, as we've done for many years, but much of our attention is going into our new school, Big Sister Mouse. There are important reasons for that shift. Describing all this involves a more detail and sometimes bluntness than is appropriate in a public newsletter, so we want to share it with you, but please don't forward it to others. Some things here could be seen as critical, and that isn't always popular.

We once thought that if we could demonstrate an inexpensive, relatively easy way to improve education and literacy, others would be quite eager to know, and to do it. By the summer of 2015, when we finished the second evaluation of our daily reading program in schools, it was clear that few people really cared too much about whether that reading program, or anything else, would improve literacy and education. All eyes, both government and foreign charities and NGOs, were mostly watching the money -- their focus was pleasing donors, and keeping the cash flowing.

We could have continued indefinitely, and quite comfortably, with the book parties, but it would never be enough to reach more than a fraction of schools. Meanwhile, overall, we could see education quality getting worse, and a growing attitude of "We'll wait and see what somebody does for us. And best of all, we can get them to pay us to let them do it."

Originally we saw our new learning center (now Big Sister Mouse) as a place where young adults would get both practical skills -- writing, computers, communication -- and also broader skills -- planning, perseverance, working toward a goal, solving problems. Some of them could one day work at Big Brother Mouse, helping us develop new techniques. That's still part of our goal, but meanwhile, the success of our primary school has set us thinking in new directions.

In our primary school (we offered grades 1 and 2 last year; in Sept. we'll add grade 3) we found that:

- Children were eager to learn, and did so quickly, if they got the right combination of useful guidance in limited quantities, plus a lot of time to work things out for themselves.
- It was very hard to persuade teachers, who have experience only with rote memorization, to provide either of those two things.

Yet although we're still working on that, the results are exciting. Yesterday I saw three children, about ages 10-11, quite absorbed in reading our 200-page Lao adaptation of Mark Twain's *Prince and the Pauper*. I just stood for a minute or two and gazed, I've never seen such a sight in Laos before.

While we can't be sure where the school will lead, there are several reasons we think it's important.

1. It's providing a much better education to the students who attend. Though this is a drop in the bucket as far as the total population, it's hugely important for those who get it. They learn not only academic skills such as reading and math, but through our varied activities, they're developing other skills and interests.
2. We're developing techniques which are effective in this time and place. I've often written about the games we use; that's just part of it. Our young-adult students recently held a short debate while children watched; next we'll have children do the debating. We've also got abacus lessons, simple computer programming, dancing, number games, puppets, storytelling, painting, and more.
3. Slowly we are figuring out how to train teachers to get away from rote memorization. This has been our hardest job, but as a few teachers get it, they will be a model for others. Also, as teachers see that different methods do work, that should help. (Or so I keep telling myself.) Perhaps most important, this week we created a set of questions to ask and traits to look for, as we hire teachers for the new school.
4. Meanwhile, word is getting out that there is a school which children like attending, where they learn to read in a single year. Luang Prabang already has expensive private schools (\$50 to \$800 per month); we're the only one I know of which is within reach of ordinary families. (We charge 150,000 kip, about

- \$18, per month. Including snacks!) The other schools have a heavier focus on teaching English, which is all that some parents care about. From anecdotal evidence, we're equal or better on other counts.
5. And we're creating avid readers. Some of our young adult students are already talking about how they could encourage reading if they return to their village; in ten years, we'll have hundreds of young adults who have been reading since early childhood. It seems reasonable to hope that some will look for ways to spread their love of reading.

Where will all this lead?

Very possibly, a major function of Big Sister Mouse will evolve to be teacher training. Normally, you must finish 3 years of Teacher Training College to be certified to work as a teacher. The education department told us early this year that for those with teaching experience (such as in our school), there was an alternate, much faster and simpler, course through which they could be certified. (Apparently this was a remnant from some years ago, when they were rapidly increasing student enrollment, and had teachers already in place but without the 'proper' certification.) When we tried to arrange that training last month, they said it was no longer available. Siphone pursued it more, now it seems possible again. We won't be sure till it happens.

Most broadly, we're giving people a vision of what a school can be, that education can be enjoyable and exciting, that it can encourage rather than kill creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking, and that children who attend such schools will even end up knowing more facts, and with more of the traditional academic skills, than in schools where the focus is on a teacher who stuffs facts into those heads. Teachers use rote partly because that's all they know, but also because, even when they can see it's not working, they just can't conceive of any solution except to do more of the same.

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One more important observation: After we opened the learning center, early June 2016, we offered free activities every day for children who came by. We didn't have a sustainable plan for that, it was simply a beginning step to gather experience as we figured out what the new facility could do.

During that first month, we had 10-15 children some days, but other days we had none at all. At one point, word got out that a ghost had been spotted on our land one evening; for several days, nobody came. Then reports circulated that some children had been robbed while walking home; for most of a week, we had just a few kids a day. (We investigated the robbery story, it was a complete figment of someone's imagination. As for the ghost, we're keeping our eyes open.)

This summer, with parents paying a monthly fee, we've got some 85 children coming every day -- ghost or no ghost. It's almost enough to cover our daily expenses, and next summer, it should reach that point. (It would not be nearly enough if we had to amortize costs of land and building. But I paid for the land, and donors made the building possible.)

This reinforces what we've seen in other ways: Free sounds nice and generous and nobody will complain, but that doesn't necessarily make it the best approach. When people pay, they value it. Also they feel a right to expect us to do a good job. And it moves closer to being a model that we can sustain here, and which others, perhaps some of our graduates, can do elsewhere.

So, in a very long nutshell, that's what we're up to. We hope you'll have an opportunity to come see it in person before long.

with best wishes from all the mice,
Sasha
Big Brother Mouse
Books that make literacy fun!
www.BigBrotherMouse.com