

South Africa Citizens Taking Children's Education into Own Hands

Image



Unique principal/business leader partnerships turn failing schools around

Three years ago, [Kannemeyer Primary School](#) in Grassy Park Cape Town South Africa was caught up in a negative, self-defeating spiral. Resentment towards the school was festering as teachers openly condemned each other and gossiped to parents.

Teachers also condemned the school for not caring enough about the financial situation of low-income parents, while at the same time belabouring that staff were paid poorly. Some teachers even openly encouraged parents to remove their children from the school. Political running battles were the order of the day.

Compounding this negative environment was the fact that the school was failing according to the country's Department of Basic Education, which is responsible for primary and secondary schools.

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A group of principals and business leaders from Cape Town who have been working together for more than a year.

Today, Kannemeyer looks very different. The school is part of an innovative solution that has successfully brought the school leadership, teachers, parents and other community members together to improve their children's education. A unique partnership between the school principal, Ridwan Samodien, and a South African business leader, Louise van Rhyn, has been integral to this shift.

Kannemeyer's "before" story is far from rare. In South Africa, 20,000 public schools are failing, according to the Department of Basic Education. The situation has been compounded by apartheid and the resulting transition in government leadership.

Twelve million children are set to reap the effects of these failing schools. It's been estimated that 20 per cent who leave the South Africa public education system will have qualifications that enable them to live an economically sustainable life. That means 80 per cent will join an ever-widening pool of disillusioned and angry youth.

For many, the issue is too big to address.

Not for Louise.

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"Building a nation through conversation."

“With 12 million children being affected, we as citizens cannot sit back and say this is too big, we can’t do anything,” the South African native tells *Axiom News*.

Influenced by the work of community-building thought leaders Peter Block and John McKnight, Louise and her non-profit, [Symphonia for South Africa](#), have identified where schools with a similar economic context are succeeding. They discovered that in successful schools the principal is a central figure. He or she has been lucky enough to receive some training and support and is successfully mobilizing parents and other community members to be involved in the school.

Realizing that they can’t fund the provision of training for these 20,000 principals, nor that a top-down answer will work, Louise and her group’s “citizen’s answer” has been to arrange partnerships between South African business leaders — the majority of whom are privileged to receive about 10 days of world-class leadership development training a year — and principals — who are lucky if they get 10 days of leadership development training in their lifetime.

The partnerships are unique in that they are not mentoring or coaching relationships, but reciprocal partnerships. Together, the business leader and principal participate in an accredited leadership development program. Facilitated by Symphonia for South Africa, it is funded 60 per cent by the business leaders, with donations accounting for the rest.

One hundred and thirty-three schools in six cities are now involved in the one-year program.

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Another circle of business leaders and principals in Cape Town.

The results include but are not limited to improved grades, as well as a significantly higher number of parents taking ownership for the education that happens at the school. At one school, parents sign a contract committing to take responsibility for 50 per cent of their children’s educational outcomes.

The business leaders also attest to experiencing transformation, from having new confidence in the contribution they can make to unlikely connections that enrich their personal and family lives. They also report developing more compassion, capacity for curiosity and humanity, which finds its way back into their workplaces.

At Kannemeyer there is a sense of having been given a new lease on life, says principal Ridwan.

“Our school has become a magnet for gifts and contribution as a result of the greater openness and invitation for citizenship,” he notes, listing a few of the tangible outcomes, including a brand new kitchen, a donation for a library upgrade, the prospect of a new Science lab and “ordinary parents showing up as citizens to make a contribution.”

Staff members have embraced a new philosophy of “living possibility,” he adds, and have become more open to interacting with parents and friends. Parents have even transferred their children from neighbouring schools to Kannemeyer, simply because of the warmth and welcome they experienced in visits to the school.

“Our learners also see the school as a ‘home away from home,’ as espoused in our vision,” says Ridwan.

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*Kannemeyer Primary School
parents and other members of the
community in conversation.*

The business leader/principal project is now poised for the next phase, which is scaling. The goal is to reach another 100 principals in the next year, with the aspiration of reaching principals from all 20,000 schools by 2017. The challenge is not recruiting principals — a waiting list has been compiled of those interested — but funding the program.

The greatest possibility that Louise sees in this effort — beyond transforming the education system — is that the story people are telling themselves about their home country, South Africa, begins to change.

“South Africa is a wounded country and there are many wounded people,” she says.

“Many of those who join this program come from a place of despair, feeling the country is going down the tubes, everything is wrong.

“If you’re a business leader who lives in one of the rich areas in Johannesburg and you have a story about (suburb) Alexandra as a dangerous place with dangerous people and you should never go there — that’s your story.

“And then you get partnered with a principal who lives in Alexandra and you enter Alexandra week after week and, lo and behold, you don’t killed, your car doesn’t get broken into and you realize there are actually some amazing people in Alexandra.

“So you start to tell that story to your friends. So the story of how bad Alexandra is shifted by people who have an experience of being in the community.

“People keep saying to me, you call this education, but you are actually building a nation,” Louise adds.

“We don’t want to claim that, but that’s how it feels.”

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