South Africa’s public schooling system is one of the most expensive in the world, yet delivers such poor outcomes that it is trapping people in cycles of poverty and unemployment. Finweek investigates Partners for Possibility, a civic effort that aims to teach public schools how to reboot, and to change the lives of learners in the hope of bringing equal education to all by 2022.

“There was a time when we were just teachers, when we were just getting our students through the grade. We didn’t see our place in the bigger picture,” enthuses an excited Ridwan Samodien, the headmaster of Kannemeyer Primary School in Grassy Park, Cape Town.

“In my view, there are so many teachers and leaders of schools who are plugged into the mundane. There are too many people who are just salary collectors,” he says.

Samodien, who is entering his 34th year in teaching, and who has been at Kannemeyer Primary School for about 20 years, is not what you’d call a “salary collector”. Thanks to a mentoring programme called Partners for Possibility, he’s rebooted his approach to the role he plays in education in the country.

SA’s education system is in crisis, and Partners for Possibility is a civic programme that has taken a very different approach in an attempt to change this. Before getting into what that is, and how it works, let’s take a look education in SA.

THE DISMAL STATE OF EDUCATION IN MZANSI

Nelson Mandela once said that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. In SA that ‘weapon’ has lost its power.

At the end of February, education researcher and academic Nic Spaull eloquently outlined the problem this country faces during a speech he gave at Durban Girls’ High School: “After 20 years of democratic rule most black children continue to receive an education that condemns them to the underclass of South African society, where poverty and unemployment are the norm, not the exception.”

Said Spaull, who is currently completing his PhD in economics at Stellenbosch University’s Research on Socio-Economic Policy group: “This substandard education does not develop their capabilities or expand their economic opportunities, but instead denies them dignified employment and undermines their own sense of self-worth.” His doctoral thesis will examine the quality of primary education in 14 Sub-Saharan African countries.

“Today,” he said, “half the country lives on less than R25 per day. They are in abject poverty. With less than R25 per day they need to buy food, clothing, shelter, transport and all the other basic necessities needed to live free from deprivation.”

Spaull quoted another shocking
number during his speech. “Ten million South Africans live on less than R10 per day.”

His speech focused on urging the youth at the school to do something regarding this issue. “It is my hope today, that sitting in this hall, there are those who will use their energy, efforts and ambition to finish the unfinished business of South Africa.” In 2011, the Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit at the University of Cape Town (UCT) compiled a paper called The Policies for Reducing Income Inequality and Poverty in South Africa. In it, the authors drew a direct correlation between education and poverty. “Education plays an important role in predicting an individual’s position in the income distribution,” the paper reads. “Education is the key variable in determining a) whether an individual finds a job in the first place and b) the nature of the employment and the level of income remuneration.”

In short, if you send your child to one of the 20 000 dysfunctional public schools in SA that are moreover located in black townships, your child’s prospects will not be as bright from an employment and economic perspective as those of a child who goes to a functional school.

Changing Futures

The results that the school are achieving are telling. “Our latest results, 2013, show that our Grade 3s scored 74.2% for numeracy and 70.8% for literacy, with a class average of 69.8% and 61% for mathematics and literacy respectively,” Van Rhyn says. “In 2007, the average class for maths was just over 40%, which means an increase of 20% has been achieved. Literacy at the school has also made a big upward jump. The school is now taking district achievement awards for its improvements in numeracy and literacy.”

I have been headmaster for 14 years, and since becoming a part of Partners for Possibility programme it has made me aware of the key role I must play in our country’s history,” says Samodien. “Giving the crisis that the education system is in, the change is critical. We must see what we as principals can bring to the party to grow community and to contribute toward building South Africa. This is what I have learned over the past couple of years.”

“We all need to be turned on to what it takes to change this country,” Samodien says. “I heard a beautiful quote the other day that goes something like this: ‘The greatest gift someone can give to the under-resourced school is a caring heart.’ The big difference that Louise has made is because of her caring heart and her love for this country. This is what has made the difference. And if teachers and principals can be more caring we can make a difference.”

The results show the impact the programme has made on the school. Other improvements have also been made – the library has been revamped, a ‘reading adventure’ room has been installed, and donors helped set up a canteen as well as a Science garden, and donors helped set up a Science garden.

Taking Action

The country’s education system is failing its people and is perpetuating cycles of poverty that trap people in an inferior existence. Changing this can’t be left to government because it is a crisis of such magnitude that business and civic society needs to pitch in and help. Entrepreneur Louise van Rhyn decided to do something and has started a movement that is sustainably changing public school outcomes.

Van Rhyn has made it her life’s work to further the growth of quality education for all. “I am extremely privileged. I have had the opportunity to live, work and study in many different countries around the world. I’ve studied and worked with many iconic leaders and have had many amazing opportunities to develop and grow my professional practice,” she said in an interview for the site Extraordinary Women.

“I returned to South Africa with my family after living in the UK. I wanted my children to grow up in South Africa, but soon realised that this decision came with responsibility. If I wanted them to flourish, I had to do what I knew I had to do to what I do now,” added Van Rhyn.

She met Kannemeyer Primary School in Northern Cape’s Kamiesberg. “I was so drawn to the school. Other improvements have also been made – the library has been revamped, a ‘reading adventure’ room has been installed, and donors helped set up a canteen as well as a Science garden. The parents made the food and we gave the teachers gifts and flowers. Parents wrote notes of appreciation. That changed everything at the school. The teachers sat and had tears running down their faces. They didn’t know, didn’t realise, that they were appreciated,” says Van Rhyn.

This is one of a multitude of positive changes that have been introduced to the school, to help make it a centre of excellence. And this is one of close on 200 schools that have been brought on board to achieve the goal of providing quality education in all schools in SA by 2022. What’s important about this initiative is that it is growing both in communities and nationally, so the successes are being replicated. In the education district that Kannemeyer falls under, called Grassow Park – comprising Grassy Park, Lotus River, Parkwood, Wynberg, Pelican Park and Strandfontein – a community of eight high schools and 23 primary schools have banded together to assist one another so they all flourish. “The schools’ success is likely to be mind-bending and Samodien serves on the programme’s executive committee.”

A major breakthrough has been an initiative between UCT and The Dell Foundation that sees teachers doing advanced maths to sharpen their skills and understanding of the subject. This is likely to boost maths literacy and outcomes at the schools even further in coming years.

“Previously the schools were very insulated and separate from one another. What Partners for Possibility has done is to create a network or a community of principals. This is new thinking for public education. Previously every class, every teacher would do what they needed to do – which was to work in silos,” says Van Rhyn.

“Because of our past, because of apartheid, we had this notion that ‘nobody cares about us’. People would drown in their own sorrows and then become dependent. This was about waiting for someone to come and rescue us. But when the lights go on, people realise that they don’t have to wait for anyone. What they need is that in the classroom they can change the world.”

One way this attitudinal change was brought about was to show how important their heroes’ portraits were to them. “The parents weren’t sure about this, but we had the appreciation evening. The parents made the food and we gave the teachers gifts and flowers. Parents wrote notes of appreciation. That changed everything at the school. The teachers sat and had tears running down their faces. They didn’t know, didn’t realise that they were appreciated,” says Van Rhyn.

Shaleesha Harris, the principal of Typhon Primary School and Haeusle colleagues, the deputies and Samodien welcoming Partners for Progress to their school.

Shaleesha Harris, the principal of Typhon Primary School and Haeusle colleagues, the deputies and Samodien welcoming Partners for Progress to their school.

In CASE YOU’RE NOT CONVINCED, THESE STATISTICS SHOULD SWAY YOU:

- of the some 20 000 dysfunctional schools in SA, only 5% of the children who enter schools in Grade R or Grade 1 make it to tertiary education.

- Most of the children who pass through dysfunctional public schools do so without becoming functionally literate.

Turning Black Schools into ‘Beacons of Hope’

“Decentralising the South African school system did not solve the problem. That is still an educational and analytical understanding of what need to have,” says Normanling Mkhize, a lecturer in the department of history at Rhodes University, in the documentary Some Children are More Equal Than Others: Education in South Africa. “Deracialisation is not transformative. What is transformative is changing the structural problem of the way the school was set up in the first place,” she says.

The country’s problem is that black public schools are for the most part, intellectually and financially impoverished – that they are not centres of excellence. That they fail to help the majority of South Africans to realise their potential to become independent, active citizens who contribute to this country’s growth.

“We should have done is to go to the black schools and turned them into ‘beacons of hope’,” says Mkhize, who explains that one of the first tasks of democracy should have been to fix the structural apartheid that exists in SA’s education system. Transforming standard urban and rural schools that harm black advancement should have been democracy’s first order of business.

Today, all that matters is changing these schools to contribute to the growth of South Africa, and by doing this, Partners for Possibility offers a glimmer of hope in what is a dire situation. It is already changing the lives and futures of some.

Ripple Effect

What’s important about this initiative is that it is growing both in communities and nationally, so the successes are being replicated. In the education district that Kannemeyer falls under, called Grassow Park – comprising Grassy Park, Lotus River, Parkwood, Wynberg,