

GEM helps school to top performance in KwaZulu-Natal

With a few key changes to school operations, by a dedicated principal and deputy principal and a student body committed to learning, Vuyiswa-Mtolo is a model of achievement amongst 161 secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

The school was initially built as a primary school in the 70s by the Mayor of KwaMashu in memory of his wife, it was later upgraded to a secondary school, and in the 1990s gained notoriety for its poor academic performance, especially in final grade of high school – Grade 12. The provincial Department of Education shut the school down in 2000 when the school received a 0% pass rate for matric, the school-leaving exam. The press descended upon Vuyiswa-Mtolo, portraying the school as a pitiful example of the country's crisis in education.

Today the school has much to be proud of: At the end of the 2001, the matric pass rate had jumped to 25%. In 2002, the matric pass rate went up to 53%. Two years later, it had reached an impressive 83%. By 2005, the school came fourth out of the province's 161 secondary schools with a whopping 98.89% pass rate. In just five years, Vuyiswa-Mtolo had gone from being written off by the Government to becoming one of KwaZulu Natal's best performers.

GEM has transformed the lives of the 46 club members, the school population as well as the surrounding community. 'Our school used to be a school of thugs. The school was vandalized. No windows, no doors, even the toilets were broken,' says 15-year old Nokuthula, another GEM member, "Big boys from the community used to collude with male students and come to the school to steal our cell phones, sandwiches and teachers' jewelry at gunpoint." Following meetings between the school and the community, the wrongdoers became the schools' allies. "Now these boys act as our security guards," says one of the GEMMERS. "Although we have had so many challenges, there have been so many achievements," says Mrs. Makhathini.

Determination goes a long way

Vuyiswa-Mtolo has much to be proud of. Teachers and students have come together to build their school, one step at a time, with their sheer will to succeed. Their efforts have been publicly recognised and the school has received numerous awards – certificates for academic excellence, first runners up in national school competitions, winners of soccer tournaments, participants in parliamentary debates and entrants in a competition for young entrepreneurs.

What is astounding, is that with everything they have managed to do, the school is still without the basics. It does not have a library, there is no computer room, a school hall is desperately needed and the sports ground consists of an uneven grassy patch that turns to mud when it rains. It goes to show that when there is vision, passion and commitment, a lot can be done with very little.