

African Angels Independent School receives the first iSchoolAfrica Digital Library in the Eastern Cape

BY CAROLINE KRUGER

Located in Chintsa East, just outside East London, the African Angels Independent School was established in 2012 to provide parents from the local community with a choice of primary schools for their children.

Across South Africa, parents from low-income backgrounds generally have no choice as to which school their children attend. They do not have the financial means to send their children to fee paying schools and they cannot afford transport costs. The founder of African Angels Trust, Lou Billett, believes it is not fair that parents from low-income backgrounds are forced to accept the quality of education offered at their nearest public school. In some cases this limits the opportunities they can offer their children for a better future.

In 2012, as part of Billett's quest to provide hope, freedom of choice and equity, she established African Angels Independent School for the Chintsa community. It started with 25 learners and now in 2021 it educates 153 children from Grade R to Grade 7. Despite the pupils' limited material resources, they have the opportunity to grow into educated, productive and responsible citizens.

The school aims to improve literacy and numeracy in the belief that these are the foundation to a sound primary school education, which in turn gives children access to further educational opportunities. The teaching team at African Angels is aware of the literacy crisis in South Africa. Since the 2017 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' (PIRLS) conducted by the International Association for the

Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), much has been written about the manner in which the data gathered for the study was analysed. It has been suggested that there might in fact have been improvements in the level of reading of Grade 4 learners between 2011 and 2016 (the parameters of the study) even though none were reported by the PIRLS study.¹

While the debate rages on about how to attain a better standard of reading in our early primary education, it is clear that attaining this goal is a prerequisite for virtually everything else in education.

Improving access to relevant reading material

Through the school's partnerships with organisations like Book Dash² – whose mission it is for children to own 100 books before the age of five – the learners at African Angels have had access to locally written and illustrated story books. However, to create voracious readers, children continually need more relevant and exciting story books. Enter iSchool Africa!

African Angels Independent is thrilled to be the first school in the Eastern Cape (and the fourth nationally) to receive the iSchoolAfrica Digital Library,³ giving the children access to a huge selection of books, through the Snapplify software.⁴ The Digital Library programme includes previously owned iPads, a library from Snapplify Foundation, curriculum content, the onebillion numeracy app,⁵ and teacher training by iSchoolAfrica.

This donation was made possible by the following individuals and organisations: award winning mountaineer Saray Khumalo, author Cindy van Wyk, Momentum Multiply, Vumatel, and also Planet Fitness which broke the Guinness World Book of Records by raising the most money in an eight-hour static cycling event.⁶ The funds will be used to put an iSchool Digital Library into one school in each of the nine provinces.

Saray Khumalo, the first African Black woman to summit Everest, comments:

The digital divide has the potential to be the greatest divide of all, deepening inequalities that already exist. The digital library has a serious purpose – to bridge this divide for children who don't have access to information technology and to ensure that they don't get left behind.

The school's partnership with iSchoolAfrica, which began on 31 March 2021, is helping to address the literacy crisis so each and every child can reach their full potential.



Handover of the iSchoolAfrica Digital Library to African Angels on 31 March 2021

The iSchoolAfrica Digital Library includes:

- a mobile iPad lab preloaded with apps to support the National Curriculum Statement (CAPS)
- an iSchoolAfrica facilitator, Erna Schnautz, who works closely with teachers to help them understand and incorporate the iPads and software into their teaching practices
- training modules – some of which are South African Council of Education endorsed – give teachers points towards their continuous professional development (CPD).
- ongoing support and mentoring within the school
- appointment of a school champion for sustainability, and
- monitoring and reporting of attitudinal and performance shifts.

With the introduction of the iSchools Digital Library and the iPad platform to read from, learners have free access to the whole Snapplify digital library. Culturally and contextually relevant books can be downloaded via the school's Wi-Fi and then read off-line at any time or location. There is also access to the global, award-winning onebillion numeracy software. The onebillion programme teaches core maths concepts and supports the CAPS curriculum. Every learner proceeds at their own pace and gets immediate feedback. The impact is measurable and each child's progress is tracked.



Each tablet can be shared by multiple children each day

Each tablet can be shared by multiple children each day. The software adapts to the level of each child, with no need for individual logins. Children can access personalised learning sessions in both numeracy and literacy at their own level and pace.

The school will give learners access to these applications from Grade 1.

Access to the technology and software alone is not enough

While access to this technology will take the school some way towards improving education, it will be the integration of the programmes by the teachers into their daily teaching schedule that will accelerate learners' ability to improve their skills.



Like the developers of the iSchool Africa programme, African Angels Independent School believes that it is the development of teachers that will give the learners the digital, literacy and numeracy skills they need to escape their current poverty.

iSchool facilitator, Erna Schnautz, visits the school at least once each month to help the African Angels teachers incorporate the iSchool Digital Library into their lessons.

I am impressed by the enthusiasm of the teachers for this programme. I often find teachers are nervous to get started, but the African Angels staff were up and running before I had even finished the baseline tests. Their passion is reflected in the classroom environment, in the behaviour of the children and in the results of the baseline tests I have conducted. I have found the children to be disciplined, happy and courteous.



Erna Schnautz iSchoolAfrica Facilitator conducting teacher training at African Angels

African Angels principal, Sharon Edworthy, adds:

We are very excited about the development opportunities that the program will bring for our teaching staff. They are an incredibly dedicated group of people and we are thrilled to be able to help them with the training and mentorship offered by iSchoolAfrica, to improve their personal teaching skills, gain CPD points and develop their own careers.

A mutually beneficial relationship

Founder of African Angels Trust, Lou Billett, believes that access to good quality learning materials is 'a vital starting point' in the development of reading comprehension.

Our children's life experiences are limited, reading varied material broadens their world and helps them dream. Being able to read and comprehend just that little bit better might make the difference between being awarded a scholarship to a quality high school, or not.

We are privileged to be partnered with iSchoolAfrica, whose support and guidance will be invaluable, so we can deliver the best possible education to our children, and help them change their futures and those of their families.



Uyanda in grade 3 sanitises his desk before receiving the iPad from Principal, Sharon Edworthy

Laetitia de Jager, iSchoolAfrica programme manager, explains:

iSchoolAfrica has one key goal – to change the lives of South African youth by giving them access to the most advanced educational technology and classroom practices. We are privileged to partner with African Angels Independent school visionaries who share this vision and change lives of learners in their community on a daily basis.

De Jager says it is humbling to see the difference the school makes in every learner's life with the limited resources available to them.

The school is not just an excellent academic institution, but a happy and safe home for so many learners in the community. This wouldn't be possible if not for the passion Lou, Sharon and their incredible team have for the community of Chintsa.

The iSchoolAfrica programme, 'combined with the teachers' passion for education, will most definitely result in learners with a love for learning and an unquenchable thirst for knowledge' De Jager says. ❀

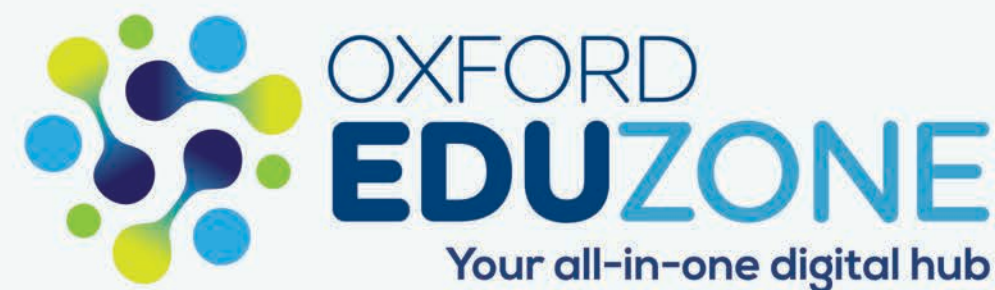
References:

1. See: <https://theconversation.com/new-evidence-supports-the-belief-that-south-africas-education-is-not-all-bad-132280>
2. See: <https://bookdash.org/>
3. See: <https://ischoolafrica.com/digital-libraries-programme/>
4. See: <https://onebillion.org/onecourse/app/>
5. See: <https://www.facebook.com/ischoolafrica/posts/3954471627922942>
6. See: Ibid.
7. See: <https://www.daysforgirls.org/social-entrepreneurship/>

Quality primary education opens doors of opportunity to those previously denied

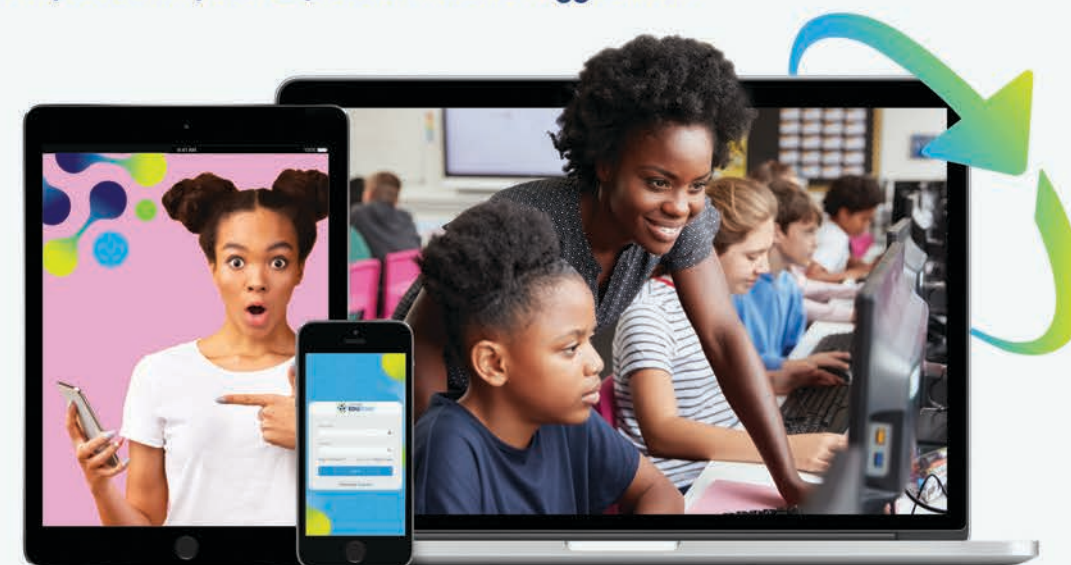
Many of the students who have graduated from African Angels have been accepted into prestigious high schools, including The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in Johannesburg and The Diocesan School for Girls in Makhanda (Grahamstown). Others have achieved bursaries through the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation and the Student Scholarship Programme, allowing them access to incredible educational (and life) opportunities to break the cycle of poverty into which they were born. Many of the 'Guardian Angels', as the African Angels graduates are called, will be the first in their family to matriculate and to attend university.

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