



## Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

May 2026 Newsletter

# Towards Humanist school self-reliance and sustainability



Dan Kasanda (right) visiting Peter Kisirinya at Isaac Newton Primary School

Over the years that UHST has been operating as a charity we have done our best to foster a spirit of partnership with the Humanist schools in Uganda. Actions taken to support each school emerge from a process of shared deliberation on needs and priorities in relation to the resources available both locally from school fees and from donations by UHST supporters. Our long-term goal is to foster self-reliance and long-term sustainability, such that schools no longer rely upon UHST funds for survival, and we are left to focus on providing those extras that enhance the learning experience of children in Humanist schools.

After much discussion, UHST and the schools have agreed that we will play our respective parts to:

1. Raise funds to complete the “essential” infrastructure needed by each school to comply with Ministry of Education requirements.
2. Ensure that local fee income is sufficient to cover staff salaries, school meals, educational consumables and other day-to-day running costs.
3. UHST scholarships will be phased out by 2030 and replaced by money set aside

from school income to provide short-term hardship funds and longer-term fee waivers to keep in school bright children whose parents and guardians are struggling to pay full fees. This will be supplemented by funds going directly from Humanist well-wishes around the world to school-based scholarship schemes.

4. Schools will aim to fund from their own resources:
  - a. Educational outings and field trips
  - b. Inter-school competitions e.g. sports, debating.
  - c. School furniture.
  - d. The maintenance of existing buildings and provide new buildings.

UHST will try to provide help in the interim when resources are available.

5. UHST will continue, as funding permits, to provide emergency support, help with staff training, learning resources, and other developments that improve learning opportunities.

So that we could concentrate on getting existing schools into a good state we decided some time ago to forgo the challenge of supporting new start-up schools. We hope that Humanist organisations and individuals around the world will step in to help and this is already happening.

Dan Kasanda is employed in Uganda by UHST to mentor Humanist school bursars and to audit the school accounts. On our behalf he has just spent time in each school, working with bursars and Directors. While reviewing schools' progress in using a new digital accounting system he has also reported back on the progress of each school towards self-reliance and sustainability. What follows is a report on progress and challenges in each school.

## 1. Isaac Newton Primary School



Kindergarten with new murals

We raised money during Covid to buy the site and buildings of this school from an Evangelical Christian Foundation. The school had lost the confidence of the community and only 40 children remained. Since becoming a Humanist school, under the wing of Isaac Newton High School and its Director Peter Kisirinya, the school has thrived, and enrolment has risen to 492 children.

However, in 2025 the District Surveyor declared the Hall and some classrooms to be unsafe. The school was given to the end of 2026 to bring the school up to standard, or it would be forced to close. This presented a major funding challenge.

Peter Kisirinya's mother before she died gave the school additional land adjacent to the school and generous donors have funded some fine new buildings. One UHST supporter in Greece funded 4 classrooms for Primary 4 to 7 (Junior) children. A couple from the Ethical Society of St Louis paid for 3 classrooms for Primary 1 to 3 (Infant) children, a couple from the UK paid for a staffroom and hall for assemblies and exams, and from the estate of a former member of South-east London Humanists the unsafe buildings were made safe and refurbished to create 3 classrooms for kindergarten children, offices for the headteacher and bursar, and library/reading

and computer rooms. From general funds we have been able to finish off the school by building additional Blair toilets and a new kitchen with efficient wood-burning stoves.

Unfortunately, having met the requirements, the school has faced problems getting the official documents to show that the school is government registered and a recognised exam centre. Petty local officials have been delaying the approval process in the hope of receiving inducements. In the past our schools have been able to rely upon due process, even though the time for that can be lengthy. In the current post-election climate with Uganda suffering aid boycotts over the anti-gay stance of its government, money is tight, and the pay of local officials has become irregular. Consequently, officials are increasingly trying to make up income from whatever sources they can. Organisations, such as unregistered schools, that need official approval to continue are particularly vulnerable. As things stand the Isaac Newton Primary School is holding its ground in the hope that approval will be eventually granted. However, it is a high stakes game, which risks the closure of the school.

Closure at this stage would be tragic. The community enthusiastically supports their new Humanist primary school. The PTA and alumni are raising funds to build staff housing. Since becoming a Humanist school, Primary Leaving Exam results have improved dramatically, with all students gaining grades 1 and 2 and over one-third gaining the top grade.

## 2. Isaac Newton High School



Furniture making workshop

The long running high school is also doing well. Enrolment has reached 849 students, with two unstreamed classes, named East and West, in each year to O-level and a thriving 6<sup>th</sup> Form taking A-levels.

Isaac Newton High School gains outstanding results in the Uganda Certificate in Education at O level. It is in the top 3 of the 40 high schools in its district and 46<sup>th</sup> out of 3,600 schools in Uganda for value added between primary leaving and O-level. As most UHST scholarships stop after senior 4 (O-level), many students in Senior 5 and 6 (A-level students) are recruited from other schools. They come from families who can afford to pay fees and the children tend to be weaker academically than students who have taken their O-levels at Isaac Newton school. As a result, the school's A-level results do not reflect the high performance at O-level. Most students gain two A-levels, which is the minimum standard to gain places on vocational courses, including nursing and primary teaching. However, relatively few gain the top grades required for university scholarships. Results improved in 2025. To provide a further boost, in 2026 UHST provided 15 A-level scholarships to enable Isaac Newton students with the best O-level

grades to proceed to A-level. This should see a further improvement in A-level grades in 2028.

The high school football team won the district championships and were runners up at regional level. However, they declined the honour of competing in the national championship so that the money they would have spent to travel to Northern Uganda could be used to put the finishing touches to a new sports field, which had been built with funding from two UK-based UHST supporters.

The school has good parental support. Parents of senior 4 students paid for a Geography field trip to Queen Elizabeth National Park – and those who could not pay were covered from school funds. They saw hippos, crocodiles and other animals from a boat, volcanic cones, crater lakes with salt pans, tea being picked on a plantation, various land uses in the rift valley, visited a hydro-electric power plant and a cement works. This is one example of how the school is doing its best to provide rich and varied educational experiences for its students.

#### ***Isaac Newton progress towards sustainability***

*The Isaac Newton Schools stand out as happy schools that provide decent education for local children from a poor community. They are making good progress towards long-term viability. Both primary and secondary schools meet Ministry of Education requirements on basic infrastructure. The primary school is financially sound, covering its running costs without any cash-flow support from UHST. The high school raises income from local fees and scholarship money it receives for educating bright children from more challenging circumstances.*

*In 2026 Isaac Newton High School took in 36 scholarship children from Mustard Seed School, which ran into problems in 2025. This involved the school in extra costs in expanding boarding facilities and providing beds, additional desks and chairs and feeding the children, but it also benefited from additional scholarship income.*

*The school manages to fund a vibrant programme of extra-curricular activities including a wide range of sports, a Humanist*

*club, music, dance and drama, chess and computer clubs. Children take part in inter-school sports fixtures and debating competitions.*

*They employ 3 full-time carpenters who make school furniture, desks, tables and chairs, in a dedicated workshop. As a spin off, in 2027 students will be able to take woodwork as a vocational option. In the past two years the school has managed to fund some building work from local funds including a third boys' dormitory, extensions to girls' dormitories, a private study space and, with help from the PTA, housing for key primary school staff.*

*As UHST scholarships phase out over the next 5 years, the school will need to adjust. It aims to attract direct donations from Humanists around the world to its own school-based scholarship scheme.*

### 3. Katumba Parents' Primary School



Katumba school's mountainous setting



Katumba children going on National Park field trip

Katumba school operates in challenging circumstances. It is in a remote location on the Congo border. The terrain is mountainous. Farmers must contend with torrential rain, periodic floods and landslides. On small 6-8 acre plots they grow premium cocoa which goes into the finest chocolate. However, the price they receive bears little relationship to the price of the final product. Poverty levels are chronic.

The community has long standing grievances over land rights, governance and being split by the colonial border between Uganda and the D.R. Congo. These leads, every few years, to

violent uprisings which are powerfully put down by government forces. In 2016 100 fathers with children at Katumba school were shot and killed. A further 25 fathers were killed in a further uprising in 2025. This leaves many women to bring up children as single parents. Following the 2025 events a UHST supporter generously stepped in to pay for the education of the additional orphaned children to the end of their primary schooling.

Despite these unique and extreme challenges Katumba school is a real success. Over 50% of the children gain grade 1 in the Primary Leaving Examination, compared with 10% nationally. The rest gain a very creditable grade 2. Katumba children leave primary school with good levels of literacy in English, skills in arithmetic, and a wide general knowledge, including basic science concepts. This equips them for secondary education and for paid jobs in the local labour market.

New dormitories for boys and girls<sup>1</sup> have made a big difference to those children preparing for their Primary Leaving Examinations who have long walks to school.

After further training, paid for from UHST donations, Juma Siriwayo, the school Director, has gained a Postgraduate Diploma in Education. He found the course both enjoyable and enlightening. His new-found knowledge of education is a huge benefit to the school. Although he has a first degree and a master's in biology, he now teaches English as well as being responsible for overall school management.

Juma has become a pillar of the Katumba community. He works tirelessly to improve the conditions of local people, and they hold him in the highest regard. The school, which has strong parental involvement, is run for the benefit of all children in the area and is a source of pride in Katumba community.

Three years ago, 750 children attended the school, but over a half paid little in the way of fees. Those who managed to pay were

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by the Ethical Society of St. Louis

effectively feeding the half that did not pay, and this was crippling the school's finances. The school has had to become much stricter on non-payment and even the poorest families do their best to keep children in school. Parents realise that good schooling increases earning prospects and having one successful child can provide a route out of extreme poverty for the whole family.

In 2026 numbers enrolled have fallen to 643 children but almost all are now ending the year with no fee arrears. Morale among both teachers and children is high. The school is a happy place in which to work and learn and educational standards are impressive.

#### ***Katumba progress towards sustainability***

*Completion of the school hall and the two small dormitories in 2024/6 has given the school all the basic infrastructure it needs. The monthly allowance that we send to help with teachers' salaries, school food and other essential costs is being gradually scaled down. The school receives regular supplementary support from Humanist Aid in Sweden, and we hope that the school-based scholarship programme will expand.*

*When the school left its old site and moved down to new permanent buildings it has been able to earn a small supplementary income by letting out the old site for community meetings, weddings and funerals. As a parents' school there are always willing volunteers on hand when needed. For example, when land needs to be cleared for building. The local community has made rooms available to let out to teachers and to pupils who live a long way from school.*

*Parents still tend to fall behind with school fees during the dry season but they make every effort to make up the shortfall by the end of the year. Katumba is a popular school and is making good progress towards sustainability. The school is, however, vulnerable to climate change which brings unexpected damaging storms.*

## **4. Kasese Humanist Schools**



Aerial view of Rukoki campus



Kasese students at the Equator

The Kasese Schools comprise 3 primaries and a small high school. Using money from UHST's 2028 Sustainability Appeal, all 4 schools have undergone substantial refurbishment over past two years.

Morale has improved and recruitment is growing. Staff salaries are the lowest of the Humanist schools, but they are edging upwards and staff appreciate this.

UHST has provided funds for staff development. We are helping the primary headteachers to raise their qualifications from a basic teachers' certificate to degree level.

Phiona Ngabirwe, at Muhokya Primary School was the first to gain a B.Ed. degree with our help. The knowledge she gained has increased her confidence and ability to function as a headteacher. She manages her staff team well. Children are happy and enrolment has grown to 314, making Muhokya the biggest and most

successful of the Kasese Humanist primary schools.

Solomon Masereka, head of Rukoki Primary School, will complete his B.Ed later this year. Applying what he has learned as he progressed through the course has brought steady improvement, which has been noticed by the community. As a result, enrolment has risen to 305 children.

Beatrice Gumisiriza, Headteacher of Kahendero Primary School, is hoping to follow in their wake by beginning her training for a Diploma in Education next term. The number of children at the Kahendero fishing village school has risen to 305. Since UHST funded an extensive refurbishment of the Kahendero site the school has become a huge source of pride in this poor fishing community.

Municipal Humanist High School at Kasese has been struggling to attract both students and teachers. With enrolment at only 141, it has some way to go before it will be able employ specialist teachers in every subject.

Given the low pay of teachers and unwillingness of parents to send their brightest children to the Kasese schools exam results have remained low. As pay and performance improves it is hoped that a virtuous circle of progressive academic and financial improvement will be set in. Due to its current poor standing, the high school was unable to recruit grade 1 PLE students, even when offering full scholarships. By supporting staff development and providing more learning resources we expect that exam performance and enrolment will improve. This should lead to a progressive rise in fee income and enable the school to improve staff pay and conditions.

In the past 4 years, UHST support for the school has made a big difference. Robert Bwambale makes effective use of Facebook to promote the Kasese schools and this brings in further support from Humanist well-wishers in North America.

***Kasese progress towards sustainability***

*The Kasese schools now have the essential facilities required by the Ministry of Education*

*and are fully recognised. The schools operate within the bounds of their income. However, they have had to do this by paying low salaries to their teachers. They hope that, as exam performance improves, recruitment and fee income will rise. Funds provided by UHST supporters are already making a difference. Enrolment is rising. Teachers' pay is also being increased as is their morale.*

*Robert Bwambale, the school Director, helps to keep the schools solvent by generating additional funds from enterprises such as a hairdressing salon, a car repair workshop, by growing foodstuffs and operating a nursery for trees. Children gain vocational skills and work experience by helping in these enterprises.*

**5. Kanungu Humanist Primary School**



New school hall at Kanungu



Choosing books to borrow

Kanungu school was created close to the site where a Christian religious cult leader burned to death 800 local people in a locked church. Robert Magara as a young boy lost members of his close family in the massacre. Setting up Kanungu primary as an inclusive school based

on Humanist values is part of his attempt to demonstrate a better way forward for his community.

However, from the start he has face opposition from evangelical churches in the area, who have tried to persuade local families to boycott the school. UHST has supported Robert's ambitions by raising funds for him to create a school with attractive buildings, pleasant lawned gardens, and books and learning materials. In 4 years Kanungu enrolment has risen from 50 to 358 children. This has happened as the local community recognises that the school offers higher standards of education and welfare than nearby free government schools. Last year a child at Kanungu school gained its first grade 1 in the Primary Leaving Examination. It was the only school in the area to achieve this.

The school is in an area where yields of food and cash crops (tea) are good and local incomes are higher than any of the other Humanist schools. Yet despite this and rising enrolment the school struggles to pay teachers and cover essential costs.

A growing number of parents fall behind with fee payments, and this reduces the willingness of other parents to pay. Robert has done his best to offer higher pay rates than other local schools. However, due to low and variable fee collections, teachers at Kanungu are often paid less than the agreed level and pay is irregular. This is demotivating and results in high staff turnover.

In the past few months, the school has been building up unsustainable debts to teachers and school suppliers. If the school is to survive it is essential to turn this situation around.

Robert Magara is the only School Director who did not already have a degree level qualification when he started the school. To redress this, we have started to fund Robert's studies to gain a B.Ed degree in Education and Computing. This should give him the knowledge, skills and confidence to manage the schools and deal with government and exam board officials.

### ***Kanungu progress towards sustainability***

*Since an new hall was completed and brought up to the standard required for public examinations and the library enlarged, Kanungu primary school meets the essential infrastructure needs laid down by the Ministry of Education. Enrolment has also grown to a size where it should be viable as a primary school.*

*The remaining concern is the apparent resistance to local parents to paying reasonable fee levels. This may stem in part from Robert's kinship ties to extended family members who expect special treatment from him. The school also faces competition from two nearby free government schools where charges are only made for extras such as stationery and exam fees.*

*Only if parents come to value the higher standards of education and the happy and supportive ethos of this Humanist school and are prepared to pay for it will the school become self-reliant and sustainable.*

### **Changing role of UHST**

For years our partnership with the Humanist schools has been a close one. We have tried to be on hand whenever schools have needed help. In the early years there were many unpredictable requests for emergency assistance. These days, as the schools mature and have greater control of their affairs, their needs are changing.

The essential infrastructure of the schools is in place. The schools have largely grown to a size where they can be viable. However, because they operate in poor communities, it will be a continuing challenge to ensure that fee income is sufficient to cover expenses. Nevertheless, our Humanist schools are gradually evolving into independent, self-reliant and sustainable institutions.

Like schools everywhere, the Humanist schools will always be able to make good use of additional resources. They can always be improved and the requirements for new and better learning resources are endless.

Point 5 (above) of our understanding with schools encapsulates the next phase of our support. For as long as we have funds UHST will be on hand to provide emergency support when it is needed. We will help where we can with staff development and training. Finally, we will do our best to ensure that schools are well stocked with books and other learning resources and that they can make effective use of web-based learning opportunities.

We strongly believe as humanists that young people should be empowered to become independent seekers after the truth. They must become competent and avid readers. They should be excited by learning new things and constantly question new information and ideas. We are delighted that the Humanist schools encourage reading for pleasure and advocate critical thinking. The strong tradition in all Uganda schools of debating and writing and presenting socio-dramas based upon the lived experiences of children and their families bodes well for the future. Uganda is a wonderful country. Its potential lies in the abilities and energy of its young people. Through their inclusive ethos and values of reason, compassion and tolerance the Humanist schools can make a significant contribution to making Uganda a richer and more tolerant country.

Staff and children in the Humanist schools are very grateful to UHST supporters for making all this possible. The Humanist ethos shines though in the day-to-day work of the schools.

### **Supporting the Humanist Schools**

If you or your group would like to donate to improved education and welfare in the Humanist schools or to set up a school-managed scholarship, then full details can be found here:

#### **Donations:**

<https://ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/make-a-donation/>

#### **School-managed scholarships:**

<https://ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/scholarships/>