



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Isaac Newton Schools, Kateera, Masaka

July 2022



Aerial view of Isaac Newton Humanist High School

Introduction

Isaac Newton is the oldest and most developed of the schools we support. Founded in 2005, it is the longest running Humanist High School in the world. The school had humble beginnings. Peter Kisirinya, the school's Director, inspired his local community to provide land and make bricks to construct the first classroom. In its first year, the school enrolled 45 pioneer children. 17 years later, the school has 750 secondary age students and 275 in its new primary school.

A few months before our visit, Peter sent us the above impressive drone's eye view of the school. Members of our visiting party, Steve and Hilary Hurd, Christine Smith, Glenda and Derek Miller and Krystal White (from the Ethical Society of St. Louis) could not wait to see how the site had developed since our last visit. We were not disappointed; the school's appearance is stunning. To see such a fine school in a poor rural setting is almost unknown in Uganda. It is a testament to the commitment of UHST supporters, who have provided ongoing support to the school.



Steve, Derek, Glenda and Krystal

When the 2021 exam results were published, Isaac Newton High School ranked 5th out of 36 schools in the wider Masaka City District. It was, even more impressively, 46th out of 3600 schools in Uganda for the value-added improvement in children's performance from entering the school after primary education to leaving after O-level.



School sign board

The school is a beacon for Humanist education. As knowledge of the school's success has spread, it has become a school of choice for parents from Kampala and other parts of Uganda, who are beginning to make a positive choice in favour of liberal, inclusive, Humanist education for their children.

The Secondary School

The school is on a pleasant, large site on the side of a hill with views across a wooded and farmed valley. In the afternoon it is cooled by the lake breeze from nearby Lake Victoria. The site is fenced, bordered by hedges and has many trees growing within its perimeter, which provide the children with shade during the heat of the day.



Enjoying the luxury of her own bed in a safe place

In addition to 350 day students, 400 children live on the school site. Two girls' dormitories, divided into family rooms of 8, are enclosed in a secure compound with toilets, wash and shower rooms. There are drying lines for clothes. Steps have been built in the form of a terrace, where the girls sit and watch TV in the evenings and at weekends. On the other side of the school site, there are similar boarding facilities for boys.



Boys proudly take Krystal to see their dormitory

The school has a large cookhouse and servery where children collect their meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and take them to the new

hall which is used for dining and for school events.

Teaching takes place in 3 and 4 classroom blocks; O and A-level science labs, each with a prep room; a computer lab where children become proficient in the use of Microsoft Office; a fine new Library & Information Centre, where students borrow books, carry out research in groups, and access computers to obtain information; there is also an art room and land behind the school is used by growing crops and for stock rearing by students studying agriculture.



Girls research lightning strikes in the Information Centre

There are offices for the Head teacher, his deputy and the school bursar and a spacious staff work room. At the main gate there is a reception and a small office where families pay school fees. A few teachers sleep in the school. There is a room in each of the 4 dormitories where hall wardens stay and an overnight room where teachers stay on a casual basis. The school Health Centre, which caters for small routine medical problems, has en-suite accommodation for the school nurse.

The latest development at the school has been the Library & Information Centre. We were very impressed by its design and construction and were delighted to see children making full use of the new facility. The computers contain a wealth of information from encyclopedias and other non-fiction sources. A RACHEL server has been installed, which contains a huge off-line Wikipedia, many e-books from world literature, educational videos (e.g. Kahn Academy science programmes) and feature films. These materials can be accessed around

the school site by wifi on teachers' smart phones. The Information Centre has a screen and two data projectors, which enable teachers to give illustrated talks using Powerpoint and to demonstrate computer software techniques.

A large new hall is a fantastic addition to the school. As well as being used for dining, we saw it used for a formal debate on the necessity for the Covid lockdown and for a performance of traditional dance and music. It is also used for teaching groups as part of the new problem-based national curriculum which has been introduced for Senior 1 and 2 students and will work its way up through the school.



Performance of music and dance in the new hall

The school has 150 children in each of the 4 O-level years, and 75 in each of the 2 A-level years. Recognising Isaac Newton as one of the top schools in Masaka District the District Education Office has been encouraging the school to admit more children. Uganda National Examinations Board has raised the capacity of the school as an exam centre to 150 O-level and 75 A-level exam entrants per year.

Before this happened, the school had agreed to settle on 600 students. However, we and the school are happy with the plan to raise the target school enrolment to 750. It has the infrastructure to take this number, but it will need more funds for books and learning materials in all subjects.

The Primary School

The new Isaac Newton Humanist Primary school is within three-quarters of a mile of the secondary school, in the heart of Kateera village. It was a former evangelical Christian school which failed financially during Covid. Local people asked Isaac Newton School to take it over and run it on the inclusive lines of the high school. We bought the school in April 2021, at a cost £25,000, which was good value. There were classrooms for Primary 1 to 7 classes and a headteacher's house. UHST raised money through an appeal to supporters to buy the school and to bring it up to standard. The classrooms required repair and painting. We funded the construction of 3 kindergarten classrooms, new toilets and a kitchen with efficient wood-burning stoves and a food store. The whole site also needed a perimeter security wall.



Kindergarten children in smart tartan uniforms

The previous evangelical school raised money from United States 7th Day Adventists to fund the education and boarding of a dozen orphan children brought over from the Ssesse Islands in Lake Victoria. As the children had nowhere to go when the school closed, Isaac Newton has continued to take care of them, but in a less-than-satisfactory boarding house in the village. Funding from the U.S. has stopped, but the

school is determined to see that the orphan children complete their primary schooling.



Sleeping arrangements for orphan children

Primary teachers took us to observe and, in some cases, participate in their lessons. Irene, an impressive young English teacher, taught children aged 5 or 6 how to name and talk about domesticated animals in English. She wrote and spoke a word and the class repeat it in unison three times. The approach generates a high level of participation. Children learn together with no child left behind.

Other members of our group saw very impressive lessons in mathematics and science. The teachers and children were in good heart and the school has created a very positive learning environment.

At the end of the visit, the primary children could not wait to perform for us. One group enjoyed singing and dancing to the song "Don't Worry, Be Happy".



Music and dance performance

School Annual General Meeting

During our visit the school held its AGM. Those present included: Peter Kisirinya (Chair), Winnie Nasiringa (Bursar), Ezra Mulwanza (Headteacher), James Luyobya (Parent), Richard Kasumba (Parent), Steve Hurd (representing UHST). In attendance were Hilary Hurd and Krystal White.

1. The accounts, which had been audited by the UHST accountant in Uganda and approved by UHST's Independent Financial Reviewer in the UK, were received and reviewed. It was noted that Covid had hugely reduced the school's fee income, but the situation was improving as local incomes and savings slowly recovered.
2. Many families had accumulated arrears of fees and the school planned to send up to 70% of children home before the end of term unless their parents made some progress in paying.
3. The purchase of the primary school from an evangelical foundation for the sum of £25,000 was reported. The school had recruited well and fee income was covering day-to-day running costs of wages, food and fuel.
4. Mains water has become too expensive. The school has returned to pumping water from the well in the valley to a header tank. A pipe has been run to supply the primary school with water from a standpipe.
5. Two children in the school became sick with paratyphoid. The problem was reported to the regional health authority, but the source could not be traced. As a precaution, school water is now routinely chlorinated – initial problems getting the right dosage have now been solved.
6. The school has installed a 3-phase meter which enables it to buy electricity at a lower commercial rate. Both the primary and secondary school are now on mains power, with supplementary electricity from solar.
7. After a period of uncertainty the National Social Security Fund has charged the school for payments when the school was closed during Covid. This is a huge, unexpected burden. UHST has covered half the cost and the school will pay the remainder in instalments.
8. PAYE could have imposed a similar burden but only 4 teachers earned the qualifying amount of 330,000 Uganda shillings (£70) a month during the lockdown. So the arrears are affordable.
9. Ezra, the headteacher, reported that during the Covid lockdown he had to resort to making and selling bricks from the local soil. Somewhat sobering was the news that he earned more than he received as a headteacher, but the work was hard and he has been happy to return to his day job.
10. At the advice of our accountant the school plans to change its accounting procedures in 2023. The accounts will be digitised using Quickbooks. UHST will pay for a laptop for Winnie the school bursar. Financial data will be stored in the cloud. This will make it easier to produce and audit the annual accounts. It will also facilitate monthly reconciliations of receipts and payments against the school's bank statements.
11. The headteacher reported that the police and parents had to be brought in when a new teacher from an evangelical school hit a child across the face and broke a tooth. The parents agreed that, as the teacher taught well, he should be reprimanded but allowed to continue teaching. It seems he has now adjusted to the no violence policy of Isaac Newton School and the injured student is now enjoying lessons with the teacher.
12. It was reported that one girl became pregnant when she was at home during the lockdown. Arrangements have been made for her to return to school when the baby is born.

13. Masaka City Council has recently donated 1,200 insecticide-impregnated mosquito nets to the school. So, it will be possible to protect every child in boarding from being bitten by mosquitos at night. Malaria cases in the school remain very low.
14. There is now some overcrowding in the dormitories since children have joined the school from other local schools that went bankrupt during Covid. There is no immediate prospect of relieving pressure on the dormitories, due to the low level of school and UHST funds. The school has, however, agreed that any further increase in numbers will be restricted to local day students. No more children will be allowed in boarding.

School priorities

Isaac Newton Schools is the nearest of all the Humanist schools to becoming self-sustaining. If all external support ended, the school would undoubtedly be able to keep going. However, there is not a school in the world that could not make effective use of additional funds. At Isaac Newton there are some essential requirements in the coming year and other improvements that would benefit the education and welfare of children in this path-breaking Humanist school.

1. While local families continue to struggle to pay school fees there will be a shortfall in funds. The school, in common with the other Humanist schools, will need ongoing help to support school spending on staff, school food and firewood.
2. High inflation rates have eroded the value of the money that UHST provides for scholarships, which enable bright children from needy circumstances to attend the school. Scholarship no longer cover the full costs for boarding students. Scholarship levels have been static for some years and UHST will need to review their level for 2023.
3. To meet the needs of larger numbers of children both the primary and high school

need more money for books and learning resources.

4. The first girls' dormitory needs to be refurbished. Ceilings need to be fitted throughout to reduce mosquito and disease transmission between the family rooms, the floor and walls need some repair and the whole building needs to be painted inside with anti-mosquito paint.
5. Housing is needed for some full-time teachers in the primary school.
6. Improvements need to be made in the small boarding house for orphans and we need to make provision for boarding for Primary 6 and 7 classes who need extra support as they prepare for their Primary Leaving Examination.
7. Sport is important in the school. They have land for a school playing field, but money needs to be raised to grade the land to make it level.

If you feel you or your group would like to help us to support the Humanist Schools in Uganda, or to sponsor a student then please contact stevehurd@uhst.org (01782 750338).

Donation forms can be found at:

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