



Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Isaac Newton Schools, Kateera, Masaka

March 2023



Isaac Newton Humanist High School's floral campus

I arrived at Isaac Newton School to the good news that the school was riding high in the newly published Greater Masaka City District school examination rankings.

At UCE O-level - 4th best of 36 schools.

At UACE A-level - very best of 21 schools.

For a full report on the results see:

<https://ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/2023/03/isaac-newton-school-excels-in-examinations/>

This year's performance was inconceivable when the school opened in 2005. At that time, it had a single building and a few dedicated but poorly paid teachers who did their best to offer basic education to orphans in an area decimated by HIV/AIDS.

The school's rise is astounding. It is a testimony to the dedication and hard work of students and staff, the ongoing commitment of UHST supporters and the vision and guidance of Peter Kisirinya, the school's Director.

I met up with Peter at Lake Mburo National Park, not far from the school. It gave us a chance to talk informally and for Peter to see, for his first time, Uganda's rich fauna.



Peter on a walking safari with giraffes

We then moved on to the school via Peter's parents' home in Kateera.



Peter's proud parents, Gladys and Mathias

The Early Days of Isaac Newton School

At the school we started by meeting high school teaching staff. In addition to the familiar old faces who had been with the school from the beginning, there was a cohort of keen young teachers who had been appointed since Covid. Peter asked me to talk, for the benefit of new staff, about the early days of the school and to give them an impression of how it had changed since then.

My first visit to Isaac Newton School was in 2006. It was a cold wet day. Although the school had been operating for almost a year with an initial group of 30 children, Peter organised a parents' meeting and asked me to conduct a formal opening.



Formal opening of school in 2006

Peter and I shared our recollections of that time:

- The school had a single building with 2 classrooms and a staffroom. It had earth floors, and bare, unpainted brick walls. The land had been cleared, the bricks hand-made and the building constructed by volunteers.



First school classroom and staffroom 2006

- The first hall was under construction. Newly made bricks were drying in stacks.
- The area's population was decimated by HIV/AIDS. Many parents of working age had died. Gravestones still stand in fields among the crops evidencing the catastrophe.

- Empty houses, whose occupants had died, were falling into disrepair. Gardens, footpaths and even roads were becoming overgrown. Crop yields and incomes were at rock bottom. Even the coffee crop had been hit by a wilt disease.



Coffee flowers

- The first parent's meeting was attended by grandparents who had become sole carers of their grandchildren. They appeared tired and demoralised.
- Despite the poverty, a simple meal of local food was provided.

The late Barry Berkley, from North-East Humanists, was the first outsider to back Peter with building funds, which were channelled through what was then the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), now Humanists International. My wife and I set up UHST in 2008 to coordinate and increase the level of support for Isaac Newton and other emerging Humanist schools. In our first year we raised £400 for books through our local South Cheshire & North Staffordshire Humanists and then gradually widened and increased fundraising year by year. Hanne Stinson, then Chair of the British Humanist Association, gave us an important break by allowing us to circulate a leaflet with the BHA newsletter. This linked us with 600 donors, most of whom became long-term supporters of the charity.

Little by little, working with Barry, we were able to help Peter to expand the school. Student numbers increased to 100, where they stuck for some time. However, as soon as the school began to gain good examination results,

student numbers expanded quickly. It was hard to imagine in those early days that enrolment would rise to the current level of almost 700 and that, in 2021, a primary school would be added. Over 18 years, INHS has become the top school in Greater Masaka City District. It has been a privilege to be able to work with Peter to help him to realise his vision of creating a great school in what was once an impoverished rural setting. What a huge achievement!

Ezra Mulwana, the High School Headteacher explained that, as the results improved, teachers' pay steadily increased. When he started in 2006 as a young, part-time teacher, he was paid 2,500 USH (50p) per lesson and was grateful to take home 50,000 shillings (£10) a month. Now things were very much better, although pay levels are still much lower than in the bigger urban schools.

Teachers outlined the further improvements they would like to see:

- A playing field for primary and secondary children.
- Fine art and pottery rooms.
- More books (and the return of the Reading for Pleasure programme).
- More computers, microphones and speakers for the large classes required for the new curriculum. Data-projectors to improve the quality of presentations.

Staff housing was mentioned by one teacher. But Peter Kisirinya explained that he believed it would be better to leave this to the local community. When accommodation is rented locally, it gives local families an extra source of income and helps them to pay school fees.

The primary school has found it difficult to attract good maths teachers. They feel that being able to offer housing would make a difference. The lives of the headteacher and deputy head would also be improved if they could find homes close to the school.

Peter's mother donated land next to her house and the community has started to raise funds to build staff houses. A number of fundraising drives are planned and an old boy of the school is mobilising former students.



Foundations for 3 teachers' houses

The first fund-raiser yielded sufficient money to buy bricks for the foundations of a block of 3 houses, each with veranda, living room and bedroom with washing area. One parent brought a load of hardcore in lieu of school fees and another deposited a load of bricks at the school. Peter said that the *harambee* (let's all pull together) spirit has gripped the community and, in 6 months, houses will have been completed for the head and deputy head-teachers, and for a mathematics teacher.



Local houses being rented by teachers

The whole venture has energised the community in support of the school. Peter's talks to them about the Humanist philosophy have been well received. They like the inclusive nature of the entire school project and that their children are happy in the school, where they learn in a caring environment based on mutual respect and without harsh discipline.

Since the first community meeting, more households have come forward to offer existing rooms or to build additional rooms to rent to teachers. Furthermore, two private

developers have approached Peter offering to build dormitories for rent. These are good examples of the power of voluntary action aided by small scale market initiatives, and it frees up UHST resources to improve standards of education and welfare in the school.

Since the early days of the school, the local economy has improved. The school has created jobs and incomes, it buys goods and services from the local community, and has brought piped water and power supplies. In an area of scattered homes, a village centre is gradually developing with shops and amenities, including a simple cinema where people can have a drink and watch films and premiership football on a large TV screen.



Developing village centre



Village cinema with satellite dish and large TV to watch football and films

Scholarship students

We always make a point of meeting with children receiving scholarships from UHST supporters. It is an opportunity to gather information for sponsors and to find out how the new children are settling.



Peter & Winnie checking scholarship information

This year 7 children joined the school from Katumba School, which is 10 hours away by coach. The children were happy. They have a different local language from those students who were local to Isaac Newton School but are happily communicating in English. The Katumba children will quickly learn to speak Luganda.



Senior 1 scholarship children

New developments

Reading Room This is nearing completion in the primary school. It has a storeroom where books can be securely kept and an adjoining room with 4 large tables where children will sit and read.



Inspecting work on Primary Reading Room

Refurbishment of the Girls Hostel in the high school is going well. The ceilings and final painting will take place in the longer mid-year holiday.

Rebuilding Kitchen Stoves – This work is finished. The three new stoves are more efficient, and consumption of firewood has fallen to one quarter of previous levels.

Planned Future Developments

Large Self-Directed Study Space to support independent and group work. Self-guided study is central to the educational ethos of a Humanist school and is a requirement of the new secondary curriculum in Uganda. The building will sit between the main classrooms and the playing field, alongside the volleyball pitch. It will have a concrete base, low wooden sides, open above, with metal uprights to support the roof. It will also be used for other school activities and meetings.

Grading Land for Playing Field – Peter and Edward showed me around the site and described the stages involved – scraping topsoil to one side, creating stepped areas for spectator seating, levelling land then returning topsoil and planting suitable hard-wearing grasses. A fixed price contract of £15,000 has been agreed with the contractor. It is eminently feasible, and the contractor has already created two playing fields on similar land in nearby schools. The field will be used by both the primary and secondary children and save all children having to walk far to play team sports.



Site for the Playing Field

Fine Art and Pottery Studios – I saw the proposed site, high up near the road where there are clear views across the valley for landscape painting. The school has two particularly talented art teachers, and Peter wants to give them the facilities they need to develop students' artistic talent.

High School Student Numbers

Senior 1	147
Senior 2	134
Senior 3	142
Senior 4	136
Senior 5	65
Senior 6	52
Total	676

64 are day scholars.
The rest are boarding.

Full-time teachers' monthly basic pay

Degree 600,000/= (£135)

Diploma 450,000/= (£103)

Below are pictures of the tuck shop at Isaac Newton where staff and students can purchase a range of essentials.



Below is the book and reading room in the Isaac Newton Humanist High School's Library & Information Centre.



ISAAC NEWTON BOARD MEETING

A useful small meeting was held to review the progress of the school. The meeting included: Peter Kisirinya (Chair), Ezra Malwanu (Headteacher), Moses Kamya (Director, Mustard Seed Humanist Schools), Steve Hurd (Director, UHST), Dan Kasanda (UHST Auditor).

The Primary School

Name change: Transfer of school from Kalungu County to Greater Masaka City has held up the name change from the former evangelical *His Grace's Primary School* to *Isaac Newton Humanist Primary School*. To register the new name, the authority requires a full architectural plan of the school. Peter is trying to get a copy of the original plans to save the cost of redrawing.

Staffing: The school has 12 teaching and 6 non-teaching staff. Most taught at the original evangelical school, but they have stayed on and are embracing the humanist ethos. The main change has been the elimination of corporal punishment, which has been stopped under pain of instant dismissal.

PTA: There is enthusiastic community support for the school and an active PTA.

Primary Leaving Exam (PLE) Results: In the first year as a Humanist School, results improved dramatically.

Pay: is now regular and has been increased markedly. This has raised teacher morale substantially. Under the old regime, the highest paid staff member, the headteacher, earned 180,000 shillings (£40) per month. Monthly full-time pay is now:

Headteacher	630,000 (£145)
Deputy	580,000 (£133)
Teachers	400,000-500,000 (£92-£115)
Cleaner	120,000 (£28)

School food: has improved greatly. The staple of posho (maize dough) and beans is supplemented by rice and millet, with boiled egg on Sundays. Sweet potato is served, but the many Banyankole children refuse to eat it, saying that in Ankole it is regarded as food for dogs. High food costs, since Ukraine, continue

to be a problem. The experiment of renting land to grow food saved the school money but only because UHST paid the land rental. This is unsustainable. It is better to buy food in the market and leave school staff to focus their efforts on educating children.



With Director, Headteacher, Bursar & Auditor

Accounting Report

The accounting challenge had increased with the growth in student and staff numbers.

Dan Kasanda, our auditor, plays a valuable role in training the school bursars. Each now has a laptop with *Quickbooks* and *Tally* software.

Quickbooks will require an annual multi-user license, which will cover all the schools and provide secure cloud storage.

Dan praised the work of Winnie Nakiranga, the school's bursar. Her accounting degree, gained while working at the school, is a huge advantage. The other bursars have had no formal training, but Dan has advised that they be enrolled on courses to gain professional qualifications.

When the new system has been fully implemented at Isaac Newton (target – end of August) it will be extended to other Humanist Schools. This will make it easier for them all to carry out:

- Monthly reconciliations with the bank
- Daily reconciliations of cash

Producing the Annual Report and Accounts, and interim financial reports and cash flow, will be streamlined and overall accountability will improve.

PAYE Arrears - Dan is appealing the Uganda Revenue Authority's claim for PAYE on the emergency staff hardship payments that UHST made throughout Covid. This occurred because the money was paid to teachers through the payroll system. He has had a first meeting with URA and feels he should get a waiver of at least 50% of the claimed tax.

Supporting the Humanist Schools

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 (07773 972601).

Donation forms can be found at:
<https://ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>