

Annual Report 2023



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Overview

Ikusasa Lethu follows the philosophy of “it takes a village to raise a child”, and our village is comprised of our current learners and alumni, their families and personal support networks (friends and teachers), the Alexandra Schools and District facilitators and co-ordinators, the St Mary’s pupils, teachers and surrounding community, our programme teachers, facilitators and support staff, as well as the growing network of partners who give their time, expertise and resources to our programme. This multi-dimensional ‘village’ interlinks to form a network that can support and empower our learners.

Our academic programme is carefully curated to address the significant foundational gaps our learners face when joining us at the Grade 8 level. They often have foundational learning gaps in Mathematics from as early as a Grade 4 level, with similar gaps in English. By employing knowledgeable and experienced staff and forming our curriculum around the needs of our learners, we can shrink the learning gaps year by year so that our learners succeed in attaining Matric results that stand them in good stead for the future.

The St Mary’s ethos is *Love, Community, Integrity*. It is our intention to instil these values in our *Ikusasa Lethu* learners so that:

- they learn their own value and abilities, empowering them to thrive in the world after school and grow as individuals
- they feel a sense of belonging which reaches from their homes and schools to our alumni events
- they can instil the values of integrity, drive and passion for learning in those around them and promote a culture of self-love and personal responsibility for their future.

In a technologically-focused future, we know our learners will need as many skills as we can possibly teach them. Our online programmes supplement their core knowledge in the majority of their subjects and our inclusion of increased education-focused screen time teaches them the skills needed to excel in an online environment. Many of our new learners have never touched a desktop computer or laptop when they first arrive. Our intention is to provide a space where they have the freedom and guidance to become comfortable with this vital technological tool.

Our main aim is to be instrumental in guiding our learners towards being as successful, balanced, and capable as possible, by instilling confidence and critical thinking skills over and above the academic base we provide. We are interested in the spirit and drive of each learner and their willingness to take their education, and future, into their own hands.

We have worked hard to make the *Ikusasa Lethu* Saturday school a space where knowledge, skills, resources and lives are shared with senior school learners who display passion and drive. We continually challenge ourselves to create a culture of learning where our learners can develop a clear vision for their own futures with our support. Over the years, we have striven to create a strong sense of belonging within our learners, enabling us to walk alongside them in their journey from grade to grade, into tertiary education and into the working world. We promote critical thinking and care for our community in a holistic manner.

2023 Matric Results

We are extremely proud of our 2023 Matric cohort, who were our first ever group of Grade 9 learners in 2020. They have overcome countless barriers to reach this point.

- 68 learners attended *Ikusasa Lethu* on a consistent basis.
- 95,58% attained a National Senior Certificate.
- 75% of the learners who passed achieved a Bachelor degree pass.
- 22% of the learners who passed achieved a Diploma pass.
- 3% of the learners who passed achieved a Higher Certificate pass.

Our learners garnered a total of 36 distinctions. Sisonke Mrhwebi attained 7 distinctions, with an average of 85%, and has been admitted to the faculty of Chemical Engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand on a full scholarship. Ndivho Nkhumeleni, our top learner (pictured below with her mentor), also attained 7 distinctions, with an average of 89.6%, and she has been admitted to the faculty of Actuarial Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand on a full scholarship. Ndivho was the top learner for the whole of Alexandra in 2023. This is the first year in the history of *Ikusasa Lethu* in which we have had two learners with 7 distinctions each.



Our community

Our youth continue to be burdened by a myriad of challenges, including ever-rising unemployment. Securing quality education is key to breaking cycles of poverty for many communities, including the Alexandra community. Most teachers in Alexandra schools operate in difficult circumstances ranging from overcrowding, psycho-social challenges, limited resources and, in some instances, lack of regular development in both content and pedagogical knowledge. All of these contribute to the limitations of providing all learners with holistic support.

Our partner schools are combating extreme challenges within their systems on a daily basis. They find themselves teaching classes in excess of 70 learners per class. This is owing to a number of factors, including the fact that schools are assigned a specific number of teachers according to the number of learners. Our observations based on interactions with our partner schools are that more learners are choosing to take science subjects, flooding the sciences with huge class numbers.

These same learners are living in home circumstances that are emotionally, mentally and physically taxing. The majority have younger siblings or other family members for whom they are expected to care. Many live with extended family, or without a guardian, and others live in orphanages or shelters. Continually living in survival mode makes it nearly impossible for learners to think introspectively and consider self-love, self-care and personal development or growth.

The instances of teens falling prey to mental exhaustion, resulting in depression, anxiety, and even suicide, are becoming more prevalent every year. Our youth are operating on autopilot and, as a result, are running blind through schooling careers and



completing matric without the time or resources to consider where their careers could go and, more importantly, where they would want them to go. Many of them do not get the results they need to qualify for the courses they would choose, simply because they were unaware of the requirements and could not implement the necessary interventions in time. They have no guidance, auxiliary education or support which would enable them to make well-considered decisions in these critical and formative years.

Our *Ikusasa Lethu* team

Robyn Knowles has been involved in the *Ikusasa Lethu* programme for the past nine years. She began as an English teacher but moved into the position of programme co-ordinator in 2020. She took up the position as head of *Ikusasa Lethu* at the beginning of 2022. Robyn holds a degree in counselling psychology and has done work with women's crisis centres, rehabilitation clinics and LGBTQI+ support groups around Johannesburg. She is a strong advocate for the importance of mental and emotional health among our youth and believes that learners can perform to their potential academically only when their mental and emotional states are considered and supported.

Our academic staff

We place great importance on sourcing the most experienced and passionate teachers for the *Ikusasa Lethu* learners. We pride ourselves on a very strong team of educators who teach the same subjects at St Mary's School, Waverley, King David's School and other top performing schools in Johannesburg. This team of teachers is supported by a strong administrative team as well as the St Mary's team.



Pictured above: (left to right) Lebogang Mohlahlana; Nokukhanya Molobye; Lebohang Makhalanyane
Pictured below: (left to right) Dereck Donora; Andrew Murewa; Olipa Nkhoma; (front) Allen Dendere.



Andrew Murewa, who teaches at King David's School, teaches our commerce subjects on Saturdays, provides mid-week lessons for Grade 11s, and is a facilitator on our professional development programme. He has built relationships with several commerce educators in our feeder schools, and they use WhatsApp groups to assist and support one another throughout the year.

One of our alumni, Mr Muzikayise Nomathole, is a teacher on the *Ikusasa Lethu* programme, and attended *Ikusasa Lethu* as a pupil from 2014 to 2016. He benefited greatly from the programme, went on to study education, and is now giving back to his community as a Natural Sciences teacher.

Our *Ikusasa Lethu* learners

Our learners are selected mainly from five schools within Alexandra: Minerva; East Bank; Kwa-bhekilanga; Realogile and Alexandra High. The selection process happens through several avenues. We visit the schools regularly to build relationships with the Principals and subject teachers, who are in the best position to identify learners who will benefit from our interventions. Every year we receive emails from our alumni requesting spaces for their siblings and extended family. These requests are also given preference as the families are already part of our community. Applications for new learners are generally submitted by enthusiastic learners or their teachers. Teachers often identify learners who have the drive to succeed but are struggling, owing to gaps in their foundational learning or disruptive home situations. The applications are carefully sifted for candidates. Applicants are required to write a 100-word motivation explaining why they should be accepted into the programme, and this is instrumental in our selection. Once a learner joins us, they are with us for life, progressing with us from one grade to the next. If a learner leaves for any reason, they are replaced by someone on our waiting list.



Pictured: Simangaliso Qonya (Gr 12 2023)

Programme structure and operations

There are, on average, 375 learners enrolled or returning annually. Junior classes (Grade 8 and 9 learners) are supported in English, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Economic Management Sciences (EMS), Computer Literacy and Life Skills. All learners have English lessons during three of every four-week cycle and computer literacy and study skills monthly. The classrooms, computer room and multipurpose facilities at St Mary's are utilized for the programme, which is in operation every Saturday from January to October, including during the school holidays. Senior learners (Grades 10 to 12) are offered two streams, namely Science and Commerce. The programme also caters for learners enrolled in Computer Application Technology (CAT). In addition, the Grade 11 learners are invited to our supplementary Mathematics, Physical Science and Accounting classes which are held at Kwa-bhekilanga and taught by our teachers in the afternoons on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays respectively. Although these lessons are optional, we generally

have nearly perfect attendance for them. We also provide transport money for the learners who need to get a taxi to and from Kwa-bhekilanga classes.

We have, on average, 25 learners per class, which allows our learners to receive the individual attention required to fill their foundational gaps and for our teachers to develop individual relationships with the learners. The *Ikusasa Lethu* programme gives learners the tools to improve their marks by between 10% and 40%. Our pass rate is consistently higher than the national average as it has been over 90% for the past three years.

School bags, books, study guides, stationery, calculators and lunches are supplied for all our learners. Each learner receives a muffin or fruit, sponsored by the St Mary's community, at our morning break and two hotdogs at lunch. A few years ago, we noticed learners taking their lunch home for their siblings. It is for this reason that each learner receives two hot dogs rather than one. Each learner is given a water bottle and can fill this with Oros throughout the day. The water bottles are a new introduction which eliminates the use of polystyrene or cardboard containers. The learners are provided with the most up-to-date textbooks, study guides and recent past examination papers. We do not attempt to mimic their school classes by covering the whole Gauteng Education Department syllabus as this is unrealistic and does not focus on the areas of the need for intense interventions. Each class subject completes a baseline test at the beginning of the year to identify areas of concern and gaps in previous learning. Staff then use this information to design interesting and exciting lessons to bridge these gaps and instill a love of learning.



The pupils are required to sign a contract at the beginning of the year, accepting our code of conduct, committing to regular attendance and to completing homework given by the teachers. The pupils contribute a R200 registration fee in January, however, exceptions are made in special cases.

Introduction of Grade 8 learners and the resulting interventions

At the beginning of 2023, we were able to introduce our first cohort of Grade 8 learners. From these students, we learned that the state of foundational Mathematics and English was worse than we expected.

To address this issue, we will be introducing the **Bridge Builders Intervention Programme** in 2024. This initiative uses online testing to isolate the gaps in learning and then facilitators design bespoke games to teach learners the missing concepts in fun and engaging ways.

Psychosocial interventions

We have partnered with 5th Place Consciousness since the beginning of 2023 to address the mental health needs of our learners. They have implemented two main initiatives, as well as have run various supplementary workshops throughout the year.

- Peer coaching: 5th Place has now completed training the first cohort of peer coaches to assist our learners. Peer coaches are *Ikusasa Lethi* alumni who are studying or have studied psychology or psychology-related fields and want to give back to our community. They undergo a rigorous training programme with trained professionals and then take shifts on Saturdays to provide a safe space for our learners, offering understanding and empathy for learners going through emotional upheavals.
- The Superhero Programme: This is a voluntary after-school programme for high-risk learners and was introduced to pre-empt the emotional and mental stress they will experience in the senior grades, as well as give them the tools to deal with trauma and their own emotions. The mental wellbeing of the learners is monitored throughout the year to produce measurable results of the effectiveness of the course.

Matthew and Chantal (5th Place Consciousness facilitators) with their first cohort of Ikusasa Lethu alumni trained as peer coaches. (right)



2023 highlights and enrichment programmes

We have built up a small **library** over time and two staff members assist us in the running of this. We are permanently open for donations and the English teachers often send their learners to the library to exchange books. Our Grade 8 classes have a library period in which to exchange their library books and give reviews in class to encourage others to develop a love of reading and extend their vocabulary.

Life Orientation programmes are compulsory for all the grades, focusing on career choices, mental and emotional health, sexual health and education, sexual orientation, identity, study strategies, and any other issues which come to our attention throughout the year. These sessions are held in the last two lessons of the day, once every six weeks.

The Sizanani mentorship programme provides mentors from the Johannesburg community to the pupils on the *Ikusasa Lethu* programme every year. Sizanani is a registered NPO, working exclusively with *Ikusasa Lethu*, which raises funds for tertiary studies and arranges career guidance and speakers for our Life Orientation programme. Field trips, job shadowing and assisting the matriculants with online applications to tertiary education are all done by Sizanani volunteers. Recently, we have had an increase in our alumni returning to mentor and volunteer on the programme. At present, 127 of our learners have mentors. Preference for mentorship is given to learners with less stable home environments so we can support and monitor their emotional and practical needs. We are currently focusing on obtaining more mentors from the St Mary's community.

Holiday programmes are an annual component of *Ikusasa Lethu*. In 2023, we held two holiday programmes, one in March at the Jabula Recreation Centre, and a second one in June was hosted at St Mary's, allowing us to make use of the cultural and sporting facilities. Many of the St Mary's teachers, who usually do not have the capacity to be involved in our classes, volunteered time during their half-term break to teach enrichment workshops.

We do our best to incorporate the practical components of the subjects the learners cover, which include using pizzas to learn fractions, and learning how to grow their own vegetable gardens to encourage upcycling and sustainability. In 2023, all learners were given young tomato and spinach plants to nurture and grow at home.

In 2023 we were finally able to introduce a school uniform, comprising a grey branded golf shirt and a matching hoodie. This has long been a dream for us and immediately amplified our sense of community and belonging for our learners and staff.



Online support platforms

Ikusasa Lethu now considers itself a blended learning programme, with in-person learning on Saturdays and during the school holidays, as well as assessments, consolidation and afternoon lessons through the Lightbulb platform.

Ongoing participation by our learners in both Lightbulb and Reflective Learning, monitored by the class Mathematics teachers, allow pupils to progress at their own pace and ensure that their foundation, of especially Mathematics, constantly improves.

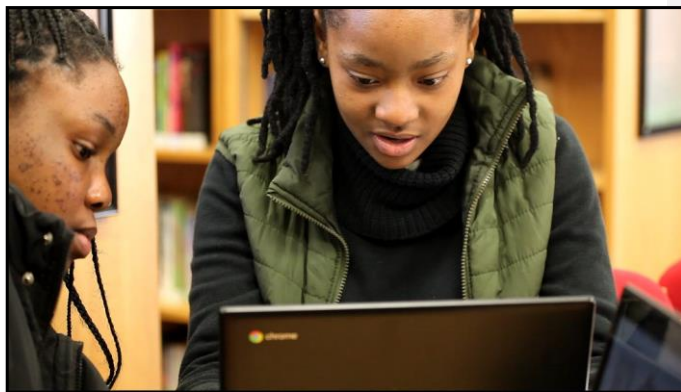
Reflective Learning - Mathematics intervention platform

There have been two main catalysts for our innovations over the last few years, namely, the national decline in Mathematics results, and the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, we enrolled our first Grade 9 pupils as a reaction to the very concerning national trend of the annual decline of Mathematics results. The lack of foundational Mathematics learning early on increases to an almost unmanageable deficit if left to be addressed in the senior grades only.

This has been confirmed by the diagnostic tools of the Reflective Learning platform, whereby pupils, beginning Grade 9 classes with us, were shown to have a Maths level as low as Grade 3. This situation has been exacerbated by Covid-19, resulting in two years of extremely disruptive learning. The *Ikusasa Lethu* programme has made this issue a priority and, with the use of Reflective Learning, we are gradually seeing an improvement in our learners' ability, especially in those who make full use of our resources. The introduction of the Reflective Learning platform has allowed learners to work on their problem areas in Maths every day during the week and then ask for help and learn further at Saturday classes. In 2023 we expanded the *Ikusasa Lethu* programme to Grade 8 pupils to allow for earlier interventions in English and Mathematics.

Lightbulb education platform

With the onset of Covid-19, the *Ikusasa Lethu* programme adapted quickly. We were able to offer online learning on the Lightbulb platform and continue to teach all our subjects within the Saturday school structure, over Zoom meetings. We had not yet grasped how to utilise the Lightbulb platform as a streaming service. However, if the situation were to repeat itself, we would be able to use Lightbulb to stream data-free lessons, share resources, hold discussions, and run assessments, which means that the school could continue to function for the learners with access to devices. Lightbulb also holds free online classes in the afternoons for most grades and subjects, which has been a great resource for all our learners.



Commented [LD1]: Learners vs pupils throughout report

Support systems

We have a number of additional initiatives which are run on an annual basis or have been introduced recently:



- We have partnered with Dynamic Vision optometrists to assist our learners who in need of glasses. Keneuwe(left) was the first learner to receive glasses, thanks to this collaboration. We recently identified Okuhle Mzumbe, in Grade 9 who was struggling to see. After an extensive eye examination, she was identified as having a script of -11 and -15. She was only 13 years old. Further intervention will be required as she matures but, for now, she is finally able to function at school.

- Our learners' parents/guardians are invited to a Parents' Day during which we show them the day-to-

day operations of our programme and hold solution-focused discussion sessions.

- We have a full-time nurse on staff to manage any health concerns of the learners. She is also a trained counsellor.



Co-curricular opportunities

- Sizanani facilitates a talent show every year, where our learners can showcase their talent and passions. We managed to do this online during the Covid-19 lockdown by encouraging our learners to submit performance videos.
- After-school Art therapy sessions take place annually.
- A computer coding course for Grade 10 learners has begun for the second year. This is run and facilitated by BBD Software. The course culminates with a prizegiving and the learners' presentation of websites which they have created from concept, with the best coding, design and concepts receiving prizes such as laptops.
- We took part in the Eskom Expo for Young Scientists for the second consecutive year in 2023.

Collaborating with the Alexandra Education Committee (AEC)

Ikusasa Lethu has developed its relationship with the AEC with the aim of mutual learning and progress. We hope to introduce our promising male learners to their initiative in order to secure scholarships for them. At present, we are able to do this for only very few female learners. The partnership extends to working together in engaging district officials, sporting activities and, potentially, in other programmes such as digital skills.

Partners and mentorship culture

Although *Ikusasa Lethu* has a strong focus on academic achievement, we believe these achievements are made possible because of our multi-faceted approach to our learners. We take an active interest in the progress of our learners when they leave school and enter tertiary education and the working world. During their time with us, our learners are exposed to numerous experiences through our contributing institutions. Grade 11 learners are invited to job shadow at a wide range of companies with whom we have built relationships. This includes companies in the fields of digital marketing, engineering, computer sciences and law. These companies have also shown an interest in taking on interns and learnerships. This is an area which we are constantly developing as we widen our network and increase awareness within and beyond the St Mary's community. In 2023, our Grade 11 learners went on a full day experience to Corruseal where they learned the different professions involved in the overall company and saw the practical aspects of producing packaging (below).



We encourage our supporting institutions to become as personally involved as possible. Their employees are invited to join our mentorship programme, which aims to pair as many of our learners with mentors as possible. This arrangement provides our learners with emotional support and enhances their sense of community. There are mentor induction sessions held every few months and the programme arranges group activities such as museum visits, camping trips and hikes.

With the assistance of the Sizanani mentorship programme, we are able to follow up with our alumni and often assist them when they have personal or financial difficulties. The lack of post-graduate funding is a primary challenge for our alumni.

Contributions by the St Mary's community

As part of ensuring that the St Mary's girls live the values of the school, we have partnered with the school to encourage them to participate in community service activities by assisting with the *Ikusasa Lethu* programme. This includes taking registers, preparing and serving lunch, as well as tutoring or mentoring in some instances.

St Mary's girls between Grade 8 and Grade 12 bake muffins on a weekly basis, which gives our learners a treat at first break and removes some strain from our catering costs.

St Mary's School has always supported us by holding collection drives of pre-owned clothes, tinned food, stationery and other necessities. The Lent collection and hand-out event is always a highlight for our learners and fills a need going into winter.



We are thankful for the ongoing support of our community and donors. If you would like to become a donor or get involved in any way, please send an email to:

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Or

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