



STILL A LONG JOURNEY TO REDRESS HISTORIC MISCONCEPTION

Fundamental role of school halls in achieving equal opportunities

Garden Cities, through its Archway Foundation, has built 42 school halls in the Western Cape in the past 10 years, to provide the essential facility to more than 42 000 children. But nearly one million in the region remain without a hall.

The 94-year-old company that develops quality suburbs throughout the Cape Peninsula has concentrated its corporate social efforts on school halls because of the historically low position they occupy in the hierarchy of perceived educational importance. In contrast to the perception in some quarters that school halls are low priority, educators are adamant that without them, they cannot do their work effectively.

Research into the effect on schools that have received Archway halls has entirely endorsed the belief that they are essential. Improved academic performance and creative ability are two of the benefits, along with community social upliftment.

'It's still a long, long road, but one that must be travelled to the end so we can have some assurance that education, at least in the Western Cape, will achieve a standard that ensures equal opportunities for all our children,' says John Matthews CEO of Garden Cities and the Archway Foundation

Essential as school halls are to the success of academically oriented schools, so is the need enormously greater for those schools for the performing arts. But until a year ago, the 20-year-old Chris Hani School in Khayelitsha – that for the past five years has specialised in the performing arts - did not have one.

The senior pupils of the Cape Town school perform at South Africa's most prestigious events and in its most famous auditoriums and theatres but only now, with their school hall will they reach full potential, their headmaster Madoda Mahlutshana believes. Mahlutshana now sees his dream of his school becoming a centre of excellence in education, as being 'inevitable'.

In the two years since he has been head of the Chris Hani School, it has doubled its matric pass rate, standing last year at 83% and expected to climb significantly this year. With the addition last

year of the Archway hall - which he calls the school's greatest achievement - all things are possible, he says.

Already the senior pupils are performing at the ArtsCape and Baxter theatres, with which the school has partnerships. They take part in the Cape Town International Jazz Festival and the Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, and have participated in the Swedish World Children's Prize. The school achieved the top position in the Provincial School Choir competition last year.

The hall, to which the WCED also contributed, makes the difference to having absolutely nowhere for the children to showcase their developing talents, or gain the experience of performing on a proper stage in front of the audiences that are essential to the advancement of their art.

But with all this effort and dedication both by the young people and their teachers, the school buildings remained one of the legacies of a time in the past and one that has perpetuated right to this day - under-resourced institutions of learning for disadvantaged communities.

Colleagues at the 41 other schools that have benefited from the Archway Foundation echo Mahlutshana's fervent belief that school halls are absolutely essential to successful education - a clear vindication for the decision by Garden Cities to channel significant sums from its annual earnings to this purpose.

'It was particularly invidious in the case of the Chris Hani school, specialising as it does in the performing arts, that it didn't have a hall. But no school should be without one,' says Matthews. The Foundation has called on corporate partners to participate in the project and there have been significant collaborations on which the Archway hopes to build.

It also continues its dialogue with the Western Cape Education Department, and has built halls already allocated by the department but lacking the resource for their construction. As a mark of the progress in thinking around the essential role of school halls, new WCED schools are all planned with the inclusion of a hall.

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The Archway Foundation hall at the Chris Hani School

