

School comeback builds

Cape Argus

community spirit

One principal's vision of a better life for his pupils is gaining momentum. By **LYNNETTE JOHNS**

POVERTY, gangs and drug abuse surround John Ramsay High in Bishop Lavis, but that has not deterred the principal from rising to the challenge of turning the school into the centre of the community.

It is a daunting task principal Quentin Newman and his staff face, but Newman says that if they can get this right, it will be one way of taking Bishop Lavis from a depressed suburb to one which residents can be proud of.

The school has formed a partnership with Symphonia, an organisation which believes that when a concerted effort is made to reach out to parents and the wider community, problems in education are easier to address.

Years of vandalism and safety issues forced the school to fence itself off from its large grounds. Now one of the plans is to erect 1900m of fence around this unused ground, which is large enough for a cricket pitch, and soccer and rugby fields. But there is no money to do that, which means the school is not able to offer sport as an extra-curricular activity.

When Newman was given the top job at John Ramsay in 2009, he faced the reality of a 54.9 percent matric pass rate.

The next year, under his



DETERMINED: Quentin Newman

guidance, the matric pass rate shot up to 91.7 percent.

But Newman faced many challenges, including having to tackle gangsters who vaulted over the fence to do battle on the school premises. He was so motivated that he met gangsters on their own turf and convinced them to agree that school grounds were out of bounds.

He also identified 12 unruly pupils, and when his attempts at teaching them life skills failed, he asked their parents to transfer them to other schools. This, he said, immediately brought a modicum of calmness to the school.

He credits the staff for standing by him and working extra hard to help the 485 pupils not only get through school, but also to excel.

The number of pupils is also of



John Ramsay Secondary in Bishop Lavis is troubled by gangs, drug abuse and poverty, but a project called Schools at the Centre of Community may change that.

PICTURE: MXOLISI MADELA

concern. Neighbouring Bishop Lavis High has 1 200 pupils, in stark contrast to John Ramsay, which does not offer pure mathematics or physics. English has also fallen away as a medium of instruction.

Newman says they have applied to the Western Cape Department of Education to allow English to be reinstated, and are hoping that by 2013, pure mathematics will be back.

The donation of a piano to the school also means they can form a

choir, and already 50 pupils have signed up. "We do not want to be seen as a mediocre school, we want to make the pupils hope for the future," Newman.

Last year, only 24 percent of parents managed to pay their R600 annual school fees.

Their electricity is in arrears, to the tune of R22 000, because the school has to channel money into buying basics like paper and schoolbooks.

Newman understands that parents are battling to keep their heads above water.

Many are unemployed, and most pupils are from single-parent households or live with their grandparents.

Only a small number of parents approached the Western Cape Education Department to be exempted from paying school fees. If more parents who are struggling had done the same, he said, the

department would reimburse the school.

Parental involvement is severely lacking, Newman says, and he hopes the new partnership with Symphonia will get parents and the entire community involved.

Symphonia's James Ekley says the primary goal is to increase parental and community involvement in the schools.

This year, nine schools in Cape Town will be included in the

programme, Ekley says.

Each school is partnered with a corporate, which works closely with the principal. "Each corporate has their own focus," Ekley says.

John Ramsay has been partnered with Sanlam's René Wright.

Wright's responsibility includes sharing managerial and leadership skills with Newman and his staff, and facilitating workshops with parents.

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