

# Bell CSI project makes a meaningful impact in Port St Johns

**The ultimate aim for any corporate social investment project donor is to see the recipients become self sufficient as the adage of teaching a man to fish, rather than supplying him with fish, rings true.**

This has indeed happened with the computer laboratory at the Port St Johns Junior Secondary School in the Eastern Cape, which was largely funded by original equipment manufacturer, Bell Equipment. Bell also actively and directly participated in the planning and management of the project with the school's principal, stakeholder representatives and the greater Port St John's community.

Rian Erasmus, the school's livewire principal, explains what has transpired since the school took ownership of the computer laboratory in 2013. "Since 2013 we have trained some 900 learners from our school ranging from pre-school Grade R to Grade 9. We also offer courses in basic computer skills to the community and have thus far trained approximately 100 community members."

Parents are asked to pay R200 per child, per annum for the use of the facility and each child receives tuition in computer skills during one 50-minute class per week. With the funds generated from these contributions and through offering a service to the community, the school has been able to appoint and pay a full-time computer teacher.

Members of the community pay R1 500 for a three-month course where classes are held from 3:30pm to 5:30pm during the week. At the end of the course, an exam is written on the computer and certificates are awarded to those who successfully complete the course and exam.

"Some of our parents were at first reluctant to pay the R200 fee, but during this past year we can happily say that 98% of our parents have paid as they realise the benefits of our teaching," Rian adds. "We had a case recently where a Grade 1 learner had to show her parents how to switch on and operate the computer through basic workings, which is a clear indication of the impact of the computer courses on our younger learners."

Rian points out the joy and amazement of many learners, who hail from rural surroundings where there is neither a television set nor even electricity, when they first switch on a computer. Exposure to the Internet has shown to improve learners' reading skills and concentration levels and teachers are also benefiting from this access. As an example, when teaching technological subjects such as the role of trees in growing timber, harvesting, processing through a sawmill where planks are cut to eventually create roof trusses for building homes, teachers are able to turn to the Internet and 'YouTube' to clearly explain these processes visually, which leads to better comprehension amongst learners.

"Having a sustainable income from this facility has enabled us to install air-conditioning and drapes for the windows to create a more user-friendly environment that is conducive to learning," Rian adds. "The wooden stools that we bought initially are not ideal as they have no backrests. Some of our community members have remarked on this in the questionnaires they complete to give us feedback, and finding suitable seating is a project for the future."

"Our computer teacher Mr Emmanuel Nortei is doing an incredible job and we are fortunate that besides his passion for teaching, he is trained in electronics as well and can thus repair any niggles we have with our hardware."

Rian further tells us that with every intake of community members for training, two people undergo training free of charge. Completing the training successfully has directly assisted community members in finding employment because of their newfound skill. In addition the income generated by the computer laboratory supplements the school-feeding scheme, so ensuring that even if state subsidies arrive late, the children do not go hungry.

Cape Regional Manager John Collins, together with Director Bruce Ndlela, spearheaded the project on behalf of Bell Equipment and have only praise for Principal Erasmus and the team, from students to community representatives, who were involved.

"It was humbling and gratifying to work with Principal Erasmus and others in the steering committee made up

of learners, teachers, community leaders, representatives of Ministry of Education and the Mayor's office personnel. All were so enthusiastic and committed to realising this dream.

"Bell is proud to have been able to supply the means for Principal Erasmus to realise his dream to educate and add real value to his students, their families and the community at large. Through Principal Erasmus's passion for education, we are confident that the computer laboratory and classroom will continue to be a catalyst to real change and progress. We also thank the MEC for sharing the dream, which is so well-aligned to her ethos and that of Bell," he said.

Rian concludes: "We remain very grateful to Bell Equipment for their generous donation and support."

Working with the company had been a unique experience for us all as we could learn from the Bell project team's professional and ethical approach, and style of execution," Rian says. "We at the school view the establishment of this computer laboratory as the start of introducing our learners and community to the digital age and our ultimate dream is to create paperless classrooms where learners work on tablets and teachers write on electronic blackboards."

Fourteen teachers in classes ranging from preschool Grade R to Grade 9, teach the Port St Johns Junior Secondary School's 550 learners.

