

High standards in difficult circumstances

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On approaching the school at 44 Frances Street, in the heart of Johannesburg, you are greeted by brightly painted buildings and clean facilities amid the many blocks of flats surrounding the premises. Once you arrive you are showered with greetings by neatly dressed pupils.

This is the United Church School, rated among the best in the Independent Schools Association of South Africa stable because it has consistently produced and maintained its 100% matric pass rate.

Because of its location in the heart of Yeoville, once renowned for being a cultural melting pot but now characterised by urban decay, the pupils deal with poverty, crime and drug and alcohol abuse.

Founded 21 years ago by former private school teachers, the school offers classes from grades R to 12. It has 515 pupils, 25 teachers and three boarding facilities.

St Mark's Presbyterian Church, located in the same street, is an affiliate of the school and provides a venue for the weekly assemblies.

Helenne Ulster, head and co-founder of the school, said the idea was to create an independent learning facility that would "enable us to put our own stamp on it, where we can love, nurture and care for" the pupils.

"We wanted a school that would feel like a second home where the pupils would feel loved, respected and intimately cared for," Ulster said.

Asked to share how her school gets it right "notwithstanding the incredible dynamics", she said "the magic" was the pupils' resilience.

Discipline is maintained through a balance of care and respect, which has to be earned. Pupils are taught and encouraged from day one to have self-respect.

There is consistency in the approach to uniform and behaviour, as well as an open-door policy.

Ulster said the teachers constantly monitored and interacted closely with pupils to accommodate, assist and overcome any social or personal dilemmas they might experience.

The school employs a full-time social worker, who provides assistance to the pupils and communicates with the parents, teachers and support networks that Ulster has developed and implemented.

The school has taken a decision not to fail children who cannot speak English. A number of pupils come from neighbouring African countries and struggle with the language. They are provided with support in the first year to help master it

A lack of English is not considered a hurdle and the school's policy is to concentrate on a holistic approach to the educational experience. The results are exceptional, with pupils becoming fluent in reading, writing and speaking English.

The school takes pride in its maths and science departments and has built a centre for these subjects.

Ulster acknowledges the integral role that maths and science play in education, but also encourages a more holistic approach to the learning process.

An accomplished musician and radio presenter, she encourages pupils to take part in arts such as drama, dance and music as well as other extramural activities.

Pupils have learned to play musical instruments and some have even joined the National Youth Orchestra, another of the school's extraordinary partners.

The school regularly invites high-profile personalities from all walks of life to motivate pupils.

The assemblies are the pinnacle of each week and shared experiences give pupils a platform for learning and insight.