Creative projects and programmes in SA schools are having an impact in all sorts of areas – from sports to maths, to reading and even leadership. Here’s one idea that can be replicated nationwide.

**Bikes boost education**

On the dusty roads of Somalia Park, Vosloorus, a boy in school uniform cycles by on a bright yellow bicycle. Further on, another sturdy yellow bike carries an older woman and a load of vegetables. The bikes are a rather incongruous sight in this impoverished informal settlement, but it turns out they are not uncommon, thanks to Qhubeka, an NGO that uplifts communities through the provision of bicycles.

It’s easy to be disheartened by the state of SA’s education system, but there are many creative and successful interventions in schools. These are just three.

It’s a strange notion at first. With so many needs to be attended to – housing, nutrition, health, education – surely bicycles would be way down the list? Qhubeka founder Anthony Fitzhenry explains that, in fact, transportation is a fundamental element of development, giving people access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities. Having a bicycle changes lives by increasing the distance a person can travel, what they can carry, where they can go and how fast they can get there.

Consider, for a moment, that 12 million of SA’s 16 million school children walk to school. Five hundred thousand walk more than two hours each way – that’s four hours of walking a day. When a child has a bicycle, commuting time to school is reduced by up to 75%. ‘That means more time for homework, chores, family and fun,’ says Anthony. ‘The child is also less tired and better able to concentrate at school.’

Fifteen-year-old Sakila’s day starts at 4am, when he collects water from a communal tap and brings it back to his single mother and five siblings. He does some chores, helps the younger kids get ready for school, and at 6am he leaves to walk an hour to school. He spends half an hour doing homework (nigh impossible in a tiny home with no electricity). School ends at 1pm, he spends another half hour on homework and walks another hour home. He has just enough time to help with chores before it gets dark. Despite his long day – and the fact that he is in a class of 100 kids – Sakila is averaging 60%.

When asked how a bicycle is going...
to change his life, he answers: ‘I’m going to become a doctor.’ He’s worked out that with a half-hour commute (and a lot more energy) he’ll have an extra hour and a half to study, which he hopes will enable him to up his grades to 75 or 80%.

This dream looks achievable in light of Qhubeka’s research, which shows that marks improve by an average of 25% for children who ride a bike to school. Schools where children ride bicycles see attendance rates rise by 18% on average.

Qhubeka is World Bicycle Relief’s programme in South Africa and has distributed more than 40 000 bikes here, 26 000 of them into schools. Working with partners, Qhubeka encourages entrepreneurship. Participants in their programmes can earn a bicycle by growing 100 indigenous trees to 30cm or collecting 1000kg of recyclable waste.

Richard Maxhama of Somalia Park is a Qhubeka ‘tree-preneur’. Growing trees has earned him three bikes. His kids use them to go to school, and Richard uses one in his own small business, buying and selling fruit and veg. Katlego* (11) was so inspired by the programme that, together with her family, she has grown 600 trees, which earned her six bicycles. She rides one to school and the other five are rented out to help pay the family bills. Not surprisingly, she says she wants to be a chartered accountant!

The Bicycle Education Empowerment Programme is being extended this year. Anthony says the programme will target Grade 10 learners, giving each child in the grade a bike. The only condition is that the recipient maintain his or her attendance rate and improve marks. ✤

*Under Qhubeka’s Child Protection Policy, no surnames of minors may be published.

Youth helping youth
IkamvaYouth work with township youth in Grades 10–12 to equip them for tertiary education and employment. Any student can join; the only proviso is that they attend 75 percent of the sessions. IkamvaYouth’s Nyasha Mutasa says learners are empowered to identify their problem areas and discover knowledge through peer-to-peer tutoring. In the past two years the programme has seen a 100% pass rate and 77% of the learners have accessed tertiary education, learnerships or employment.

Debaters and drama queens
Thanks to the R40m Peermont School Support Programme, aimed at turning functioning public schools into centres of excellence, seven East Rand public high schools have participated in two annual enriching programmes – the programme’s Public Speaking Festival and Performing Arts Festival. Programme convenor Clifford Elk says it’s enormous fun, ‘but much good learning comes out of it: the learners collaborate, they work to a deadline, they compete, they get recognised’.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
• ikamwayouth.org • qhubeka.org • www.pssp.co.za