



Kisumu orphanage grows;
Vispa Emmanuel School has a new, permanent block as it expands into a secondary school.
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Education

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Fastest growing group of schools eyes 135 academies

GROWTH

Devolved government courses at MKU

By JAMES WAKAHU

In a bid to help local government establish proper county governments, Mount Kenya University's Kakamega campus has started offering devolved government-friendly courses.

The Kakamega campus principal, Dr Philemon Bureti, said the introduction of such programmes had been necessitated by growing interest from Government employees.

Dr Bureti disclosed that the courses offered would be at the level of certificate which would take six months, diplomas (one year) and bachelors degrees (four years) in order to capture all cadres of staff in the devolved government structure. He said apart from full-time studies, there is an option for evening and weekend learning for private and Government employees with tight schedules.

The don said the worker's decision to study such courses is timely, noting that devolution requires to be fully understood by all Government officers. "As a university, we recognise the central role and complexity of devolution and would strive to provide quality courses to employees willing to undertake courses in devolved government systems," he added.

Bureti was addressing a forum of youths drawn from Western Kenya region at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology's main hall. He said the new Constitution is a revolutionary step in Kenya's history that would lead to radical transformation and bring unprecedented fortunes. The lecturer said such devolved courses offered at the institution would address the challenges of lack of capacity building that the new counties are likely to face. "The new Constitutional dispensation requires a new level of skilled manpower particularly for the Government that would ensure smooth service delivery to the citizens," Bureti pointed out.



Bridge International has 85 academies with 26,000 pupils located in major slums, writes MWANGI MUMERO

Businesses across the globe are coming to terms with the huge profitability of the low-income segments of societies

A recent award given to a Kenyan based private education chain, Bridge International Academies, shows clearly the potential these enterprises hold in terms of service delivery and profitability.

Bridge International Academies was recently placed second in the outstanding small and growing business (SME) category, during the Africa Awards for Entrepreneurship event

held in Ghana.

All Africa-based entrepreneurs entering the competition were to have revenues of over US\$ 500, 000 (Sh43 million), have been profitable for at least two years, are independent (not a subsidiary of a large organisation), have employed a significant number of people and are fully registered in their home country.

Started at the height of the post-election vi-



Nairobi and its environs has 23 academies in various informal settlements

olence in early 2008 by two Americans and a Swiss-Canadian national, this education business has grown to post revenues of over \$500,000 while only targeting the low income informal settlement population.

"Even with the political instability of 2008 in Kenya, the country had a huge, needy and potential market, a pool of highly educated professionals and clients looking for quality affordable education for their children especially in low income slum areas," observed Jay Kimmelman, the Chief Executive officer and Co-founder, and one of three investors who decided to risk their seed capital and set up the private education academies.

The primary school academies, mainly based in the low income areas, have grown from the first one set up at the seedy Mukuru Kwa Njenga slum, in the outskirts of Nairobi to 85 academies countrywide. Nairobi and its environs have 23 academies in informal settlements of Dandora, Kawangware, Githurai and Mukuru Kwa Reuben.

"By charging low fees, using technology to cut costs and identifying the needy areas, Bridge International Academies has grown as a business within a space of four years. We are rolling out new academies to attain a number of 135 by January 2013", observed Dr Shannon May, a Co-founder and the Chief Strategic Officer.

Bridge International Academies founders from left, Mr Jay Kimmelman (CEO), Dr Shannon May (Chief Strategy Officer) and Mr Phil Frei (President) at their offices in Industrial Area, Nairobi. INSET: A teacher using a tablet in class.

PHOTOS: MWANGI MUMERO

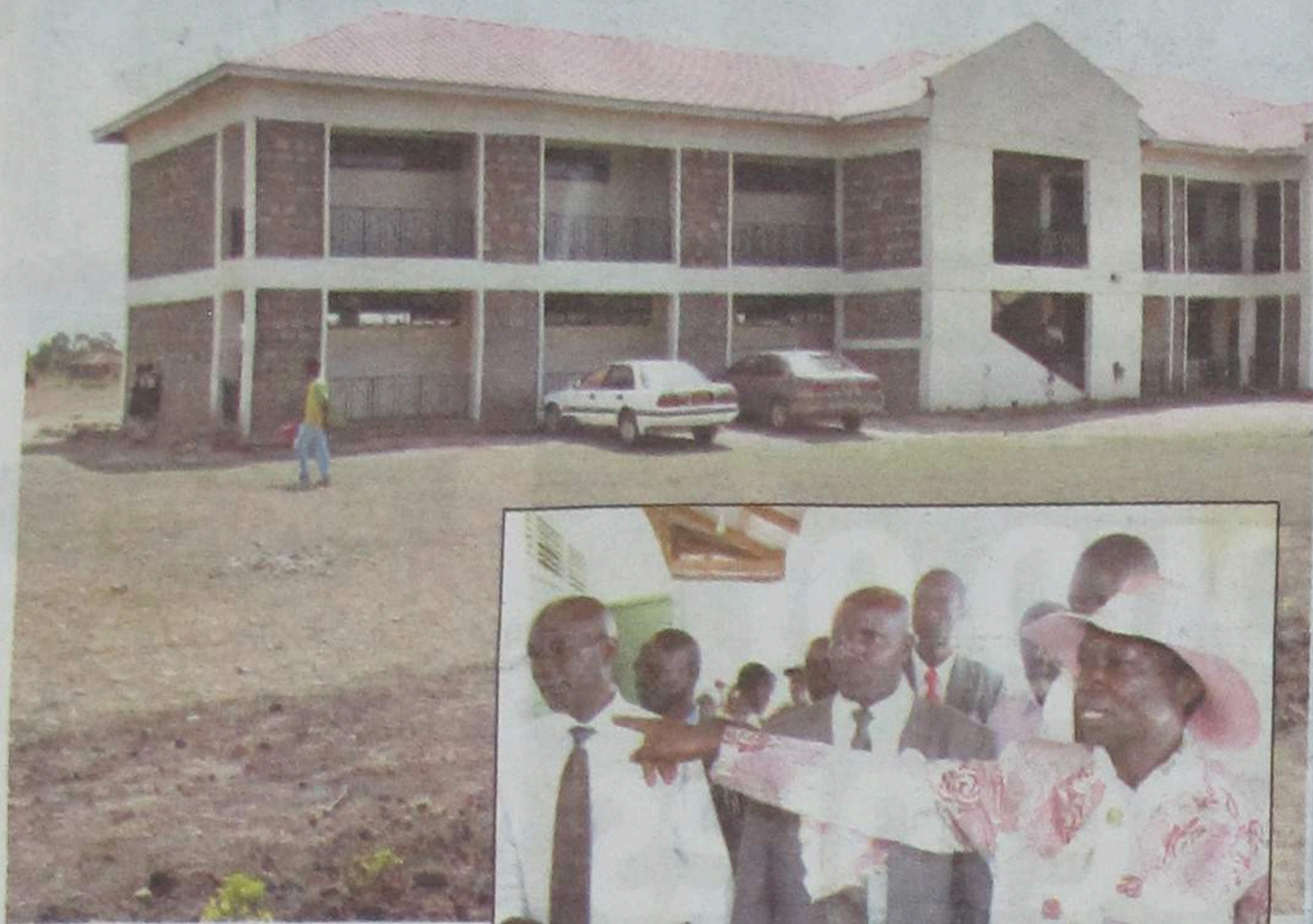


PHOTO BY FRED ODIERO

The new block at Vispa Emmanuel Schools and (INSET) the school's director, Hellen Ochieng shows the visitors around during the official opening recently.

Orphanage expands into a primary and secondary school

After years of languishing in structures constructed using corrugated iron sheets, parents, teachers and students of Vispa Emmanuel Schools now have a reason to smile. The school has now completed construction of permanent buildings, courtesy of friends and well wishers.

The director of the institution, which is located near Rabuur trading centre in the outskirts of Kisumu town, Hellen Ochieng, says that they have operated from the iron sheet structures since 2009 when the institution was first

established. Ochieng, who is an adherent of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, says that a number of friends from Northern Ireland assisted them in coming up with the new structures. She says after she retired from the banking industry, she had ventured into the project via an orphanage.

"The project has progressed steadily since then into a full secondary school facility with over 120 students to date," she says. Ochieng, who is also an evangelist in the church, says they had 20 candidates who sat for the Form Four examinations this year and that they hope to do well. Ochieng says that the

institution initially started with 20 orphans at inception before the number shot to 65 and above. "The school has one library even though we need an additional, bigger one," says the director.

In future, they intend to make the school a boarding facility. She says that the institution is now running two streams, with a teaching staff of 11 teachers. The director says that the old school section will now be transformed into an early childhood development and education centre within the new institution. The other portion will also be converted into a temporary store and kitchen and a dining hall as they plan for

even bigger things to come in the near future. Ochieng says that they have a very good relationship with the local community whom she says has been very cooperative. She, however, calls on more well wishers to come assist the new institution. The director says that most students at the institution come from surrounding areas of Kochieng' within Rabuur. The centre has over 350 orphans attending the primary or secondary school sections. One of the challenges they face is the management of the new orphans who take time to adapt after the death of their parents.

— By FREDRICK ODIERO

Growing fast using technology

13 Currently, the 85 academies have 26,000 pupils with 85 per cent coming from the low income, informal settlements in major urban centres –from Nairobi, Nakuru, Kisumu and Nyeri. The academies have a staff of over 11,000 with just one per cent being expatriates.

While the term 'academy' in Kenya denotes a high cost institution mainly for the rich, Bridge schools charge just Sh420 per month, a very low figure even by local standards. "We do market research, identify viable areas to set up an academy, then buy or lease land and then construct our classes using local artisan and technology. Classes are also constructed to mimic the local buildings to minimise theft," noted Kimmelman, an American national.

In most areas, classes are constructed with iron sheets, timber or clay blocks to fit with surroundings and minimise vandalism. Equally desks and other facilities such as toilets are construction to fit into the existing local standards.

According to Kimmelman, the parents are the clients and the company has to provide quality education for the business to continue growing. He says that company's turnover relies purely on the fees payments with no other source of funding. "We engage positively with our clients to identify areas of weakness and make changes to suit their

needs. While our students follow the 8-4-4 system, we have developed teaching materials that make learning student friendly, making our students outperform others in five years of study", says Kimmelman.

He added that globally, persons earning less US\$2 (Sh170) per day spend a whopping \$42 billion (Sh3.6 trillion) on education of their children, making this huge market hard for investors to ignore.

On a tour of their facilities, we saw well structured departments each dealing with different aspects of the business; from research, legal, real estate, construction, academy operations, human resource, marketing, Information technology and finance.

But it is the use of technology that has helped cut costs in operations and staff. "By virtual of where our academies are located, we encourage our clients to pay school fees via Mpesa or through a bank account at Equity Bank. So far, over 84 per cent of clients pay through the mobile phone platform with the rest through the bank," noted Phil Frei, President and Founder of the group of schools.

He added that each academy has a manager and teachers –with no other staff. The manager and teachers are connected to the headquarters by a smartphone, with the relevant software developed by the company. "The smartphone applications connect staff in far-flung academies in real-time. Is-



Bridge International Academies; Teachers and pupils at GOC Kona Mbaya Academy in Eldoret.

PHOTOS BY
MWANGI MUMERO

such as payroll, academic performance, parents, fees payments and other issues can be solved quickly without involvement of extra staff such as bursars," said Frei, a Swiss-Canadian national who is also in-charge of information technology (IT) in the project.

The company also has a call centres at their Nairobi office to handles queries and issues emanating from the academies. On their part, teachers have tablets where the curriculum, lesson plans, students' assign-

ments, attendance and parent's information is accessed quickly and efficiently.

Each academy has 22 teachers when fully operational and by January 2013, 15,000 new tablets are being released to these staff who have to undergo six week specialised training. "We hire staff from the neighbourhoods of these academies to create jobs and a sense of ownership. We also use local constructors and source materials locally to reduce logistical costs," said Dr Shannon.

Murang'a High parents demand justice for their children

A group of parents at Murang'a High School are seeking for the Government's intervention through the ministry of Education to get justice for their children who are allegedly being victimised for participating in the planning of a strike. The parents claimed that their children were sent home with letters after resuming studies after a strike in which the whole school took part. The students allegedly defied their Principal's order

to remain in school even after their colleagues from other schools went home at the climax of striking period by students witnessed in most parts of the country in October and November last year.

The letters indicated that the students broke light bulbs, defied the Education minister's order and planned an attack against the school watchman should he refuse to comply with their demands. According to one of the parents who sought ano-

nymity, the suspected students were denied the chance to sit for their end of year exams. He also alleged that the school, which is a national institution, is reluctant to give students give their own versions of events as a way to get away of expelling them so that they can replace them with others 'at a fee'.

"Our children are being set aside as sacrificial so that the school can bring in others at a fee of

Sh50,000 and this is known to us and everybody around here," he remarked.

The parents, some of whom have been driving all the way from Mombasa and Kisumu, said they spent a week at the school earlier this month and no final decision had been made. "We have been incurring huge expenses for nothing," they said. Efforts to talk to the Principal Matia Kabiru or his deputy were fruitless.

— WANGARI NJUGUNA