

# leap in the dark

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## At the age of 45, with two-year-old twins at home, John Gilmour resigned from his comfortable job as a private-school principal in Cape Town.

And then he set out to raise money for a whole new kind of school -- a not-for-profit that would raise the levels of education in some of country's most devastated schools.

The community Gilmour initially targeted was Langa, where educational results were dismal. In 2003, about 650 learners from Langa wrote matric. Of those, only 350 passed and just six got university exemption -- not one with maths and science higher grade.

But in the past four years, since Gilmour opened his Leap Science and Maths Schools with initial seed funding from the Shuttleworth Foundation, the school has achieved an average matric pass rate of 94%.

All of last year's matrics passed, with five distinctions in maths, including a 92% score. They were the first batch of students to go through the full four years of the programme. So far, 70% of Leap's matriculants have gone on to study at tertiary level.

In 2007, Gilmour opened a second Leap school in Guguletu followed by another in Alexandra, Johannesburg, last year.

Although the destination of social entrepreneurs is entirely different from commercial ones, their behaviour mirrors the other in terms of innovation and their doggedness in the pursuit of their goals.

Gilmour says he had to fight hard against his upbringing before he could take the risk. "I think our colonial education in South Africa taught us to be cautious: look after your family, look after yourself, and help where you can, but charity begins at home," Gilmour says.

He describes a long journey in which his consciousness and risk appetite evolved together with the other predilection he shares with typical entrepreneurs -- innovation.

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As a young teacher in Pinelands, the white suburb next to Langa, he started teaching cricket in the township as a charitable, but safe, outreach.




At first it was satisfying to discover and coach talented sport stars, but something was lacking. "As a sports coach, here I am looking at the delivery of skills, skills, skills, thinking everything else will somehow transfer. And now I've been to funerals of those boys -- shot while stealing, killed while driving drunk."

The seeds of his not-for-profit started germinating when Gilmour first initiated the busing of Langa pupils for extra maths classes to Pinelands, and later the busing of Pinelands teachers to Langa, none of which made a real impact on the devastated Langa schooling system.

A vision slowly formed of a school for adolescents based on three innovations, including the rejection of the notion that the poor cannot achieve academically and that cognitive and emotional development go hand in hand. "It is a mistake to think that you can just cram kids' heads full of stuff and they'll be fine," he says. "The whole entitlement issue in this country is because we assume that if we create opportunity, kids know what to do with it."

The third innovation is to regard the peer voice as more powerful than the adult voice among adolescents, and to use it as an educational tool.

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### MAP

Today, all 160 learners at the first Leap school in Pinelands attend a daily life orientation class where they discuss issues among themselves, including the school's crucial code of conduct.

Teachers facilitate rather than pontificate. Classes are small, on average 16 learners a teacher, and double the time is spent learning science, maths and English compared with other schools; the school day stretches from 8:15am to 5:15pm.

Interestingly, Gilmour's main problems are exactly the same as those faced by commercial entrepreneurs -- finding finance and the right staff.

Corporate social investment funding is available for science and maths education, but difficult to secure. "People are looking for cure-alls. Understandably, they want optimal spend. Very few corporates can take a long view on it.

They're looking for quick delivery, so they do a lot of decorating, brochure development, reading materials, because that's instant and you can see it."

Gilmour says he also struggles to find teachers who are willing to practice the Leap school's facilitative teaching methodology, which requires letting go of old-style pedantics.

So he designed a five-year teacher-training programme integrated into the running of the schools with the aim of turning 10% of Leap matriculants into teachers.

Where profit is the holy grail for commercial businesses, sustainability is the aim of social projects such as Leap. Gilmour ultimately wants to see the government taking over the schools and extending the model.

At present, the state contributes R4 000 to the R30 000 that it costs per learner per year. This subsidy may grow as government recognises Leap as a "focus school", a new legal category that is being developed. But Gilmour isn't banking on it.

Leap is building an endowment fund, and has established a trust through which the project can participate in BEE deals.

Not your typical non-profit mind-set waiting for the next corporate or government donor to arrive. Which is exactly the point.

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