

Publication: Go & Express - Main

Title: Farm project transforms schools, feeds community

Publish date: 08 May 2025

Page: 7

Reach: 33850

AVE: R 60491.97

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GO! & EXPRESS 8 May 2025

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Farm project transforms schools, feeds community

Former agricultural studies teacher driving programme at 15 venues

LEBO MJANGAZE

A former agricultural science teacher from Mdantsane is using his expertise to rehabilitate fallow or unused land in local schools, implementing small-scale farming projects that aim to create jobs.

Mawande Mbelekane, 42, obtained his agricultural science qualification from Nelson Mandela University years ago. His organisation, M & F Agri Investments, has donated and is in the process of donating water tanks to 15 schools.

These include Vulamazibuko High School, LM Yako Primary School, SEK Mqhayi High, Khulani Commercial High, and Glen Hill Private School.

The two-year-old project transforms unused school land into thriving seasonal vegetable gardens.

Ten percent of the crops are given to the schools, with the remainder supplied to local supermarkets and retailers.

Mbelekane stated that their aim is to advance development while creating job opportunities and diverting young people from substance abuse.

"Our vision is to have all Mdantsane schools involved in the programme, promoting the growth and development of the Mdantsane township economy while prioritising ward-based job creation to reduce the high rate of unemployment," Mbelekane said.

"We are also working to reduce substance abuse and teenage pregnancy by creating agricultural skills training and transfer opportunities to address the food security needs of the Eastern Cape.

"Each school will be assessed according to the available arable land



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for crop production. However, schools with a maximum of 2ha will receive four tanks," Mbelekane said.

"We would also like to link our programme with the life sciences curriculum, enabling pupils to gain practical experience in agricultural crop production practices, understand the application of science in agriculture, and learn financial management skills to run successful and sustainable businesses as future leaders or owners of SMMEs."

Mbelekane believes this initiative will positively change pupils' perspectives and inspire them to consider careers in agriculture.

"The schools' limited budgets often prevent them from covering the full cost of yard maintenance, such as grass cutting, through the employment of local SMMEs.

"Our project benefits the schools by enhancing their aesthetic appeal



GARDEN OF HOPE: M & F Agri Investments donates JoJo tanks to L.M Yako Junior Primary School to support the school's new agricultural project. **Pictures: SUPPLIED**

through the implementation of vegetable gardens and reducing their landscape maintenance costs, as we provide our services free of charge," he said.

"Because the schools have allocated land for us to implement the small-scale farming projects, pupils gain exposure to the agricultural industry, and those interested in pursuing related careers can receive mentorship and referrals from our stakeholders."

M & F Agri Investments is working in association with the department of education, the department of rural development & agrarian reform, Eastern Cape department of public works & infrastructure, and the Border-Kei Chamber of Business to plan further development.

"We currently have agreements with 15 schools, through their school governing bodies, principals, and school management teams to use their land," Mbelekane said.

"We would also like to raise funds for the establishment of sports fields at SEK Mqhayi High School and Vulamazibuko High School."

Vulamazibuko High School principal Charles Twalo expressed his support for the programme.

"The school welcomes this project, as it will be a significant step forward for us in terms of environmental health and nutrition," Twalo said.

"The project improves the school's overall appearance, and our nutritional programme will benefit greatly from the provision of nutritious food for the pupils.

"It also creates job opportunities for community members," Twalo said.



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