

Students defy smoke, lack of supplies to learn English

August 12, 2005

Posted: 8/12/05

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As smoke from a nearby oven wafted through their classroom, 5-year-old students at the Xcel School in the Kibera slums of Nairobi, Kenya, took their first steps toward mastery of the English language.

The 30 students attend class in the same room as the school kitchen. For nearly eight hours a day, the children try to learn a new language while hearing the ringing of pots and pans in the kitchen located less than 10 feet from the table they all share.

For students at Xcel, learning must be done where resources and comfort are at a premium.

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Members of the education team from Baylor University's Africa '05 program visited the Xcel School as a way to see how an impoverished school in Kenya compare with a typical American school.

“For one hour, I was able to watch a class of 5-year-old kids beginning to learn the English language,” senior Kali Pomykal said.

Among the most noticeable aspects of Xcel was the lack of supplies deemed essential in the United States, she noted.

Senior Kristen Love said, “I was surprised to see that 5-year-old kids are in a classroom where they are exposed to a lot of smoke and other possible health hazards by having class next to the kitchen.”

All of the school’s nearly 150 students live in Kibera, the largest slum in East Africa, with more than 700,000 inhabitants. Students as young as 3 years old and as old as 15 years old attend Xcel.

Xcel is used primarily as a school, but it also plays a role as a haven of sorts to keep children away from the perils of life that negatively affect Kibera, such as gang activity and sexual promiscuity.

“We often allow a local football team to use our field to play games and practice because we know it’s a good tool to get them away from bad influences that have hurt many young people in Kibera,” school leader Vincent Odrol said.

Like many schools in Kenya, Xcel is a year-round school that has breaks during August, December and April. Even when the school is on break, Xcel serves the Kibera community.

“Many of our students have very little to eat and most of what they eat is from school, therefore we cannot close our doors completely when school is not in session. Even during the holiday breaks, students come by our school to eat meals,” Odrol said.

Xcel also hosts an art studio and hair salon. The studio allows 17-year-old Jay Wanderer, a former student, to create vivid oil paintings depicting the

Maasai, a tribal group in Kenya known for their bright red wraps and colorful beads. The hair salon is used as a vocational school of sorts to help train aspiring hairdressers.

“Xcel allows me to work, as well as display my art work, which I rely on for a living. I hope to someday take art classes to further develop,” Wanderer said.

The Baylor education team bought pencils with erasers, pencil sharpeners and other school supplies to meet needs that they felt were essential to a decent education.

“We went to Nakumatt and bought school supplies because we didn’t think it was right that the students didn’t have the mandatory supplies that we are used to having,” said Love.

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