How Dignitas Uses School Uniforms to Empower Schools and Increase Family Engagement

The Context

Dignitas partners with schools in Nairobi, Kenya. We focus on schools in informal settlements (commonly referred to as urban slums) as these communities are significantly underserved by the public system. Our core programming aims to improve educational quality through teacher training, professional development, and coaching. Dignitas also recognizes many schools in marginalized communities lack the basic level of infrastructure and resources necessary to begin improving education quality.

Families in these communities have limited employment opportunities and it is not always possible for them to provide all the materials required for learning, such as textbooks, stationery, and school uniforms. Therefore, to complement our core work in improving educational quality, Dignitas partners with Tailored For Education to distribute uniforms in partner schools.

Why uniforms? Uniforms are compulsory in Kenyan schools and a prerequisite for school attendance. They ensure children have comfortable clothing for learning and foster a sense of school identity and belonging. However, uniforms can present a barrier to education for families who cannot afford them.

Tailored For Education

Founded in 2011, Tailored For Education strives to increase school enrollment in marginalized communities by providing children with school uniforms. Based in the United States, Tailored For Education works through partner organizations like Dignitas and currently distributes uniforms in nine countries throughout Africa, Central America, and Asia. The uniforms are locally sourced, benefiting the local economy.
A Partnership Begins

In 2012, Tailored For Education (TFE) contacted Dignitas about the possibility of partnering and distributing uniforms to schools in Nairobi’s informal settlements. TFE had the donors and funding to provide uniforms, and Dignitas had the local relationships with schools in marginalized communities. The two organizations undertook the first uniform distribution together in 2012 in Mathare.

Every child deserves an excellent education and the lack of a uniform should not stand in their way.

Increasing Family Engagement through Uniform Distributions

Literature shows that family engagement is one of the most important elements of a child’s school success (Family Engagement Institute, Foothill College). However, in the context in which Dignitas works, schools do not prioritize family engagement, while many families have limited time and resources, and feel unprepared to support their children.

By the second phase of uniform distribution in 2012, Dignitas recognized the opportunity to use uniform distributions to encourage greater school sustainability and increase family engagement. We wanted to avoid any unintended consequences of traditional ‘hand-outs’, as well as capitalize on the opportunity to encourage the school community to support itself. In 2013, we introduced a new approach that encouraged a small contribution from each family and greater involvement of the family on distribution day.
The Dignitas Approach to Uniform Distribution

1. **School Selection:** Dignitas identifies partner schools with the greatest need and selects them for distributions.

2. **Student Measurement:** Dignitas visits the school to collect student measurements and engages local tailors and school shoe suppliers to prepare the uniforms.

3. **Family Contribution:** Families are requested to contribute 50 shillings per child to the school and suggest areas of school improvement on which the funds could be spent. The 50 shilling amount is a nominal contribution (the equivalent of 50 cents) and affordable for families, but encourages greater family engagement and investment in their children’s education.

4. **Distribution Day:** Families are invited to visit the school on distribution day to assist with collecting and fitting the uniforms. Students excitedly receive their new uniforms and the school community celebrates together.

5. **Project Selection:** The school pools the family contributions into a fund and then consults the parents and wider school community on how the money should be spent. Dignitas encourages schools to use the funds for tangible infrastructure projects or learning supplies, and not for ongoing expenses like salaries or bills.

6. **Project Facilitation:** Dignitas facilitates the implementation of the projects and uses the experience to coach schools on accountability, sustainability, and financial management.
Projects Supported by Parental Contributions

Overall, families have been willing and committed to contribute as a way of investing back in the school community. While the contribution is a small and affordable amount for families, when pooled, the amount goes a long way in supporting school improvements. Each school has different needs; families work with the school leadership to identify the best use of the money raised. Here are some of the projects that families have supported:

The parents at Rens Community Centre raised 10,200/= ($USD 97) and purchased wooden seats for the Kindergarten children. The seats are durable and custom made for small children. Since the project, the school reports that there has been an increase in teacher-family interactions and parents have been visiting the school more often.

At Sifa Children’s Centre, the parents raised 9,300/= ($USD 89). Some of the funds went towards stationery items, such as exercise books and pencils for the students. The rest of the money was used to purchase sanitary towels for older female students. In the informal settlements, girls often skip school during their menstrual cycle as they do not have access to affordable sanitary pads. The school has been inspired to see how they can now create a sustainable project to support the girls.

The parents at Vigil School raised 16,000/= ($USD 152). The school has a lunch program but previously students were using their hands to eat. With the funds from parents, Vigil purchased enough eating utensils for the entire school, as well as 39 small plastic chairs for the kindergarten children.

At Nimlad Kids Centre, the parents raised 16,600/= ($USD 158). The school identified two priority needs: a printer, to produce and copy key documents, and teacher guide textbooks, to assist teachers in lesson planning and improve overall lesson delivery. The remaining funds were used to purchase stationery items.

The parents at Umoja Primary School raised 15,100/= ($USD 144). During the rainy season, classes were regularly disrupted due to leaky roofs. The school used the funds to fix the roofs. In addition, the school management used other funds to build an additional classroom to reduce congestion in other classes, demonstrating further commitment to school improvements.
Lessons Learnt

Previously, Dignitas would only distribute uniforms to students demonstrating the most need. However as of 2014, we made the decision to provide uniforms to the entire school population to increase a sense of school belonging and ensure consistency. We have also introduced a 5% overhead cost for each school when we budget, to address the high student turnover in the informal settlements and additional students that join the school after Dignitas has collected total numbers and measurements.

"I am very happy today... All my children have received a new pair of uniform and shoes, now I don’t have to worry about that. I am very grateful. I have no words to express my happiness. May God bless all the sponsors of this project.

Thank you very much!"

- Mama Mary, parent at Rens Community School

In partnership with Tailored For Education, Dignitas has distributed over 4,000 uniforms between 2012 and 2015.

About Dignitas

Dignitas is a leading education development organization. We use an innovative training and coaching approach to empower schools and educators in marginalized communities to transform students’ opportunities. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, we partner with low-cost, private primary schools in informal settlements to improve education quality.

The DIGNITAS IN ACTION SERIES documents how we apply education innovations and best practices in Kenyan schools. We are dedicated to capturing lessons learnt and sharing them with like-minded organizations, educators and communities of practice. For more information, please contact info@dignitasproject.org.