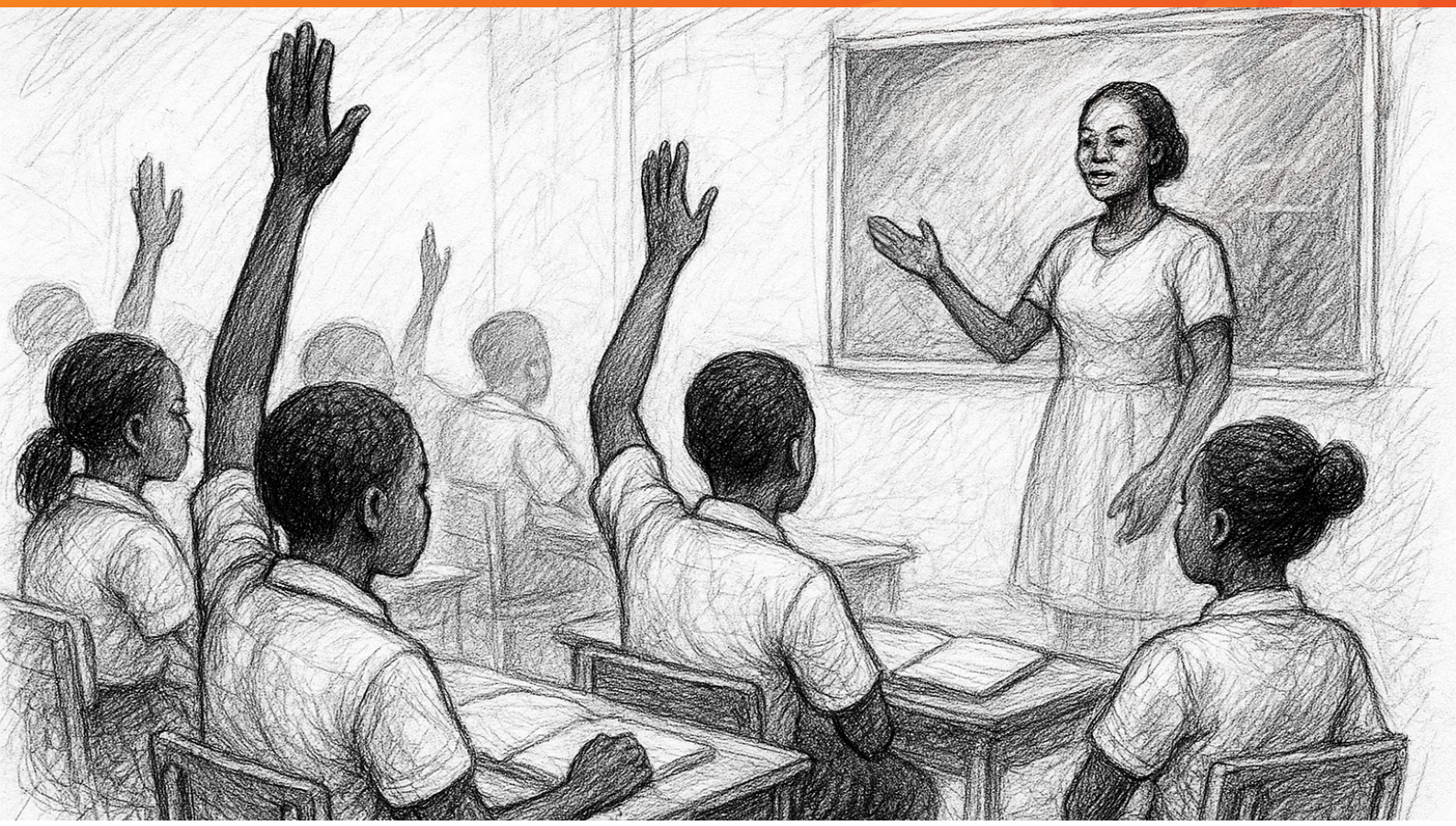
African Centre for School Leadership

Leadership that Transforms: How Kisimiri became Tanzania's Top School

Case Study

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The African Centre for School Leadership is a coalition of partners in Africa coordinated by:

Association for the Development of Education in Africa

ESSA Education Sub Saharan Africa

vvob education for development

Introduction

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the quality of school leadership has emerged as one of the important qualities in school improvement and system resilience[1]. While access to education has expanded significantly, many schools, particularly in rural or underserved areas, continue to face systemic challenges: teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, low morale, and weak accountability systems. In such contexts, the head teacher's role extends beyond administration to transformation. One that shapes school culture, mobilises communities, and inspires teachers and learners alike.

Within Tanzania's education reform agenda, emphasis has been placed on leadership for school performance improvement[2], underpinned by national priorities such as Education for Self-Reliance[3]. These frameworks recognize that effective leadership is not only crucial for improving academic outcomes, but also about cultivating purpose, values, and a shared vision for quality education. It is within this broader landscape that the case of Mr. Emmanuel Kisongo, former Head of Kisimiri Secondary School and now Acting Director of Secondary Education at PO-RALG, stands out. His leadership journey captures the essence of what the African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) seeks to document and amplify, that is, locally driven, values-based leadership that transforms schools and strengthens education systems from within.

ACSL works with local partners across Africa to strengthen school education systems by generating evidence to strengthen policy development and/or reforms, and practice. By surfacing and amplifying stories like Kisimiri's, the programme contributes to a collective understanding of what works in school leadership and how purpose-driven, learner-centred approaches can deliver measurable improvement even in challenging environments.

As a core coordinating partner in ACSL, Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA) is especially invested in stories like Kisongo's because they bring to life ESSA's mission: to leverage evidence in advancing high-quality education across the continent. ESSA's commitment to being evidence-driven, fostering innovation, and elevating context-responsive solutions aligns closely with how Kisongo transformed vision into results in a rural school community facing significant challenges.

Context

When Emmanuel Kisongo arrived at Kisimiri Secondary School in Tanzania's Arusha Region, he wondered if he was lost. Having been transferred from one of the well-established and leading schools in Tanzania, he arrived at an institution with severe structural and pedagogical challenges. Mr. Kisongo said the school had only nine teachers for 2,500 students, little infrastructure, and no reputation in national academic performance. He was the third head since school was established. Transferred from a well-equipped urban school, Mr. Kisongo faced an institution barely functioning as a school.

"It was really not a school but something to establish,"

Mr. Kisongo, currently the Acting Director of Secondary Education at President's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government Tanzania (PO-RALG), recalls.

[1] VVOB & UNESCO. (2021). School leadership competences in Sub-Saharan Africa

[2] Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) (2021). Education Sector Development Plan 2021/22–2025/26

[3] Julius K. Nyerere, Education for Self-Reliance, 1967.



Emmanuel Kisongo

Leadership Intervention: Re-centering on Purpose: Students First

Mr. Kisongo knew that he had to transform the school from "zero to standard" in his words. He had noticed that nothing was happening there, simply a group of people waiting for a miracle to occur. Therefore, he called a meeting with all staff and students. The students came. None of the teachers did. He did not lose hope.

With the students, he discussed in-depth school-related matters and Tanzania's long-standing Education for Self-Reliance policy[4] explaining what it meant to stand on one's own feet and compete in the global market. This conversation became a cornerstone for a new school culture based on shared understanding. While teachers initially disengaged, he persisted by creating accountability systems, teaching classes himself, and gradually rebuilding trust and commitment among staff.

"I believe the most important person in school is the student. They know why they are in school,"

said Mr. Kisongo.

His strategy emphasised two stages of transformation:

1. **Cultural and attitudinal change**, where responsibility and discipline were embedded in everyday practice.
2. **Academic and institutional improvement**, achieved through patient but systematic focus on results at both O-level and A-level.

Building a Learning Environment

Over the following weeks Mr. Kisongo focused on changing attitudes, which was his first strategic priority. He wanted to promote a conducive environment for learning to occur. Gradually, teachers re-engaged. He taught classes where needed and organised systems so that everyone, from staff and students, held specific responsibilities.

Measurable, National Transformation

The outcomes of this leadership turnaround were remarkable. Within three years, Kisimiri saw real gains at O-level, and within six months, progress was visible at A-level. National recognition soon followed: in 2016 the school topped Tanzania's advanced-level national exam results (ACSEE), repeated the feat in 2018, and by 2024, remained one of the country's top-performing government schools[5] [6].

These achievements represented a remarkable, sustained climb from near-obscurity to national recognition.

[4] Julius K. Nyerere, Education for Self-Reliance, 1967.

[5] The Citizen – Kisimiri Secondary School reveals the secret behind their performance in Form Six exams

[6] Iziraa – Kisimiri Secondary School former national champion continues to impress (2024 perspective)

Beyond Academic Results: Embedding Values

Mr. Kisongo pushed the boundaries of success beyond grades. He insisted that values, ethics, and life skills were integral to true education. Under his leadership, mentorship and behaviour-focused initiatives became part of the school culture, ensuring that excellence was defined not just by academic scores, but also by character. Even with consistent top academic performance, Mr. Kisongo pressed for more.

"We are assured that a Form six graduate can easily get first-class degree. But of what point if values and behaviour are not addressed?"

Lessons for School Leadership

For today's education leaders, Mr. Kisongo offers concise advice:

- Know why you lead. *"Understand why you are the head of a school."*
- Own the results. *"A coach is responsible for the results."*
- Stay a permanent learner. "*So that you remain a game changer."*

Mr. Kisongo's story provides transferable lessons for education leaders:

- **Student-centered leadership** can reenergise even the most fragile institutions.
- **Persistence and accountability** are critical in environments where teachers may initially resist.
- **Transformational leadership** combines measurable results with values, building institutions that are sustainable beyond one leader's tenure.
- **Personal leadership philosophy**—knowing why you lead, owning results, and committing to lifelong learning—is essential for systemic change.

Why Mr. Kisongo's Story Matters

This case study exemplifies how **values-driven, inclusive, and results-oriented leadership** can reinvent a failing institution into a national leader. It illustrates the power of leadership ecosystems that prioritize sustainability, equity, and holistic development. Kisimiri's journey under Kisongo demonstrates that even in resource-constrained, rural contexts, transformational leadership can create lasting, nationally recognised change.