



A Brief History of the South African Education and Environment Project

The Environmental Years

The foundation phase (1994-1998)

In 1994, former environmental lawyer Norton Tennille moved to Cape Town and launched the Southern African Environment Project (SAEP)¹, a US based non-profit he founded to promote environmental sustainability in Southern Africa. At the start, SAEP concentrated on environmental awareness, protection, and advocacy in the Eastern Cape, opposing the government-sponsored Coega Industrial Development Zone near Port Elizabeth.

They fought many legal battles, but they met vast opposition. As the Coega development project gained momentum and the struggle for sustainable development grew problematic, Norton realised that the best way to make a significant contribution to environmental policy and development would be education. In a strategic effort to make a more lasting impact on the environmental landscape in South Africa, SAEP shifted its focus to high schools.

Finding Philippi

The first transition (1998-2001)

In 1998, SAEP packed up and left the Eastern Cape, relocating to Cape Town, where they connected with the principal of Sinethemba Senior Secondary School, who provided them with access to the school, its teachers, and its students for an after-school environmental education programme.

The first year was a hit; students adored the classes, and over time they started asking for academic support in biology and mathematics. Excited by the enthusiasm, SAEP agreed and began recruiting volunteers to conduct after school tutoring sessions to assist students in areas they struggled.

In 2000, a small group of students approached SAEP for help improving their English language skills. SAEP agreed and launched an extracurricular activity programme, which involved writing poetry, creating and publishing a student newspaper, and interscholastic debating. A year later, students Bulelani Futshane and Luzuko Hina, won the National Debating Championship.

Hibernation and rejuvenation

SAEP's year off (2002)

¹ Later to change its name to South African Education and Environment Project (USA).

In late 2001, funding for SAEP ran out; Norton married social worker and current Executive Director Jane Keen, and the newlyweds took the year off to recharge their batteries. However, in 2002, SAEP's future jumped back on track. The afterschool classes resumed, and Bulelani and Luzuko, who were busy completing their matric year, approached SAEP for help improving their English, developing computer skills, and exploring academic and career options. In exchange, they offered a year of community service. SAEP agreed, and in 2003, Bulelani and Luzuko became the first 'Gap Year² Interns', operating from Jane and Norton's new home in Rosebank.

A Watershed Year

SAEP takes off! (2003)

2003 brought rebirth, change, and excitement to SAEP. Jane joined SAEP full-time as a volunteer, opting not to return to her job in social work.

She kicked off her involvement by registering SAEP as a South African non-profit, and began fundraising, which drew the attention of one of the students from the Sinethemba afterschool programme. His mother, who had started an early childhood development centre in Philippi, struggled to raise enough money to maintain it, and sought guidance and support.

Jane found it difficult to say no, and after investigating further discovered a desperate need for quality childcare in the area. Soon after, SAEP's Early Childhood Development Programme was up and running, working with ten early childhood development centres in Philippi.

The Gap Year Programme

In 2003 and 2004, most SAEP activities took place in Jane and Norton's house in Rosebank. The first five 'Gap Year Interns' came to the house every morning for English and computer lessons and to explore career opportunities. In the afternoons they taught debate to younger learners at the schools. A year later, the interns moved on to further education or training and work, and a new group arrived.

The Environmental Education Programme

Meanwhile, the environmental education programme gained momentum thanks to a partnership with the Mountain Club of South Africa, which began taking students on monthly hikes on Table Mountain to expose them to the beauty of Cape Town's natural environment. In subsequent years the UCT Mountain and Ski Club began doing the same.

Name Change and New Programmes

The second transition

2005 brought SAEP a new name. In an effort to capture the broader vision of the organisation, it became the South African Education and Environment Project.

² Later called the Bridging Year Programme

The Hope Scholars Programme

From 2003 to 2005, SAEP's high school programme expanded to include five other high schools in the area. Its initial focus primarily concerned Grade 12 students; however, in 2009, SAEP decided that the best way to help students build foundational skills would be to intervene earlier, and they launched the Hope Scholars Programme.

The new programme was a refinement of the academic tutoring that had been offered for close to a decade, supplemented by mentoring and life skills development. Students were selected at the start of Grade 9 and remained in the programme through Grade 12.

In 2013, after graduating the last of three cohorts of Hope Scholars, SAEP shifted the programme's focus to Grades 8 and 9 and began working with only two high schools. The narrowed focus allowed the programme to help learners build solid foundational skills they would need later in their academic or professional lives.

The Arts Programme

While arts had been a part of SAEP's high school programmes since 2000, in 2007, it developed into a separate programme. Students took part in visual arts, photography, film, and drama that year, and in subsequent years music and other activities were included.

ADT Teach

At the beginning of 2009 and in partnership with ADT Security, SAEP launched the ADT Teach programme. A three-year computer training programme designed to provide learners with IT skills necessary for the job market, the programme later expanded to three high schools in the Johannesburg area.

And then there were more

New and improved programmes!

Tertiary Support Programme

A number of the Bridging Year interns who had gained admission to university continued to seek SAEP's help on a range of challenges they faced. So, in 2010, SAEP established a formal Tertiary Support Programme, which mobilized financial assistance and other resources, as well as provided psychosocial and career counselling.

Impact Centre

In 2011, SAEP launched the Impact Centre, an applied research and development hub. Though small at first, the Impact Centre has experienced substantial growth since 2013, and now includes organisation-wide monitoring and evaluation, research, and knowledge sharing. The Impact Centre also acts as an incubator for pilot projects that SAEP hopes to take on.

Academic and Career Counselling

The first of the Impact Centre's pilot projects, the Career Connections programme, launched in 2013. The project, which focussed on building the capacity of high school Life Orientation

teachers was integrated into the Hope Scholars, Bridging Year, and Tertiary Support programmes in 2015.

The Primary School Project

The second of the Impact Centre's pilot project began in 2015 after research concluded that a primary school intervention would be helpful at Philippi's Siyazakha Primary School. SAEP had previously run reading clubs there with the assistance of the Bridging Year students; however, the new project sought to restructure them by working with Grade 3 students to develop home language literacy, positive learning habits, and social emotional skills. In addition, the new project hoped to address the wider needs of the school, by encouraging parent involvement, supporting the school's ability to coordinate with other non-profits, and by helping the school deal with students' psychosocial difficulties.

SAEP in 2015

In 2013-14, SAEP underwent a strategic planning process. Check out our Early Childhood Development Programme, our Primary School Programme, our Hope Scholars Programme, our Bridging Year Programme, our Tertiary Support Programme, our Arts Programme, and our Impact Centre to find out what's happening this year and beyond!