

## going green

# Growing great citizens through service to the environment

What kind of citizens are we? What kind of citizens do we want our schools to produce?

These are the questions that every school in South Africa should be asking today as we strive to develop engaged global citizens who help shape healthy, sustainable communities.

Developing the skills and attitudes of active citizenship at school is crucial. Active citizens help build better, democratic societies. They know their rights and responsibilities. They show empathy with others and give back to society. The SPARK Schools network, whose vision is for South Africa to lead global education, is a strong believer in ensuring its scholars are active citizens in their classrooms, communities and country by dedicating time and effort to servicing those in need.

A key area of service for SPARK Schools' scholars is environmental stewardship, which is all about encouraging young people to serve their communities as protectors of the environment. Promoting youth participation is also fundamental for environmental issues, as behaviours shaped now will have a long-term effect on issues like climate change, the depletion of resources and the loss of biodiversity.

### The importance of trees

How is SPARK Schools bringing this approach to life in its schools? One of its most recent projects saw it partner with non-profit organisation Food & Trees for Africa's (FTFA) 'Forest Protea Glen' project,<sup>1</sup> by planting 30 trees at SPARK Schools' brand new Soweto campus – the first batch of more



than 1 100 trees that will be planted in the area.

As a newer development, the Protea Glen area in western Johannesburg has relatively few trees, and a low shade profile. The project will see 1 000 shade and fruit trees planted at homes and 100 at schools in the area, and has already created work opportunities for a number of local unemployed youth, who have been trained as community foresters and educators.

Trees play a critical role in regenerating and rehabilitating environments, improving air quality, decreasing noise pollution, settling dust, improving thermal efficiency and increasing the value of properties. Recent studies have also found positive links between trees and green spaces and scholars' ability to concentrate, and a general improvement in mental health.

"Planting trees really is a long-term commitment to a community. We specifically choose fruit and indigenous shade trees that are well suited to being grown in the area, and the community will benefit from fruit production, shade and a more diverse landscape for years to come," says Emily Jones, Trees and Carbon Programme manager at FTFA.

FTFA's partnership with SPARK Schools was an easy fit. SPARK Schools' approach to environmental education ethics and principles is unique, and it's also important to plant trees as early as possible at a new school, so that scholars benefit within the space of a few years.

The scholars have taken to the tree-planting activities with alacrity. They not only participated on the tree-planting day, where trees were planted across the campus, but they learned to plant and maintain trees. They have taken to the trees on their school grounds to the extent that they have given them names, and ensure that they are watered. Through this project, scholars

