



Emmanuel Arima talks to a student at the school's construction site in Arua, where classroom learning is blended with hands-on building, farming and technical training. PHOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

# How one teacher is blending learning with real life skills

In Arua, a civil engineer-turned-educator has built a school that breaks away from traditional learning, where students spend as much time in gardens, workshops and behind the wheel as they do in classrooms.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

One kind of school is emerging. Here, the sounds of chisels on metal blend with classroom discussions, allowing students to transition from lessons in agriculture to welding or driving within the same day.

At Springs College, education extends beyond traditional teaching methods. Students grow maize and a variety of vegetables. They also rear goats and poultry and receive training in carpentry, welding, plumbing, tailoring, and catering. Remarkably, students also learn to drive before they take their final examinations.

Central to this innovative approach is Emmanuel Arima, a 58-year-old civil engineer who has never been trained as a teacher but is now dedicated to creating what he believes to be a more comprehensive form of education.

## The beginning

The concept of Springs Foundation began with the enrolment of a single pupil. In 2008, Arima opened a small nursery school near the Arua Hill grounds. At that time, the idea seemed unusual to those around him.

"My friends at the golf club asked me, 'Are you okay? How can an engineer open a school?' He recalls. Yet, only one person took him seriously. A friend told him, 'If you want a school, I will give you a child.' That child became his first pupil.

For the first two weeks, Springs Nursery School had just one learner.

"I was everything; the director, teacher, cook, cleaner, and babysitter," Arima says with a smile.

"I bathed him, fed him, sang for him, and put him to sleep." He almost gave up.

"But I told myself, when you want something in life, you do not give up."

Then a second pupil arrived, followed by a third. By the end of the first month, there were three pupils, and by the end of the term, that number had grown to 12.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Construction is ongoing across the campus while learning continues. New buildings are being erected, including an examination centre and a meeting hall. Nearby, students are caring for freshly transplanted onions as part of their agricultural training.

Arima aims to complete the full development within three years. With support from bank financing, land expansion, and a growing student body, he believes the educational model is still evolving.

## From house to classrooms

As enrolment increased, Arima transformed his own home into a school. "My bedrooms became classrooms. Each room served as a class," he explains. With his children already grown and moved out, the four-bedroom house became an improvised learning space.

By the end of the first year, the school had 36 pupils. Within two years, enrolment had grown to more than 100 children. By that time, the house could no longer accommodate the number of pupils.

"I went to the bank and asked for a loan. I needed proper classrooms," he recounts. The construction of the first permanent building, which included four classrooms, marked a significant turning point for the school.

In 2018, the school presented its first candidates for the Primary Leaving Examination, a milestone that confirmed what had begun as an experiment. "They performed very well, which gave me confidence," Arima says.

## Pressure to grow

The next step, secondary education, was never part of the original plan. It was a suggestion from the parents.

"They told me, 'We have nurtured our children here. When they leave after P7, they lose the culture we have built,'" Arima recalls.

There was also another factor: his students were excelling even after leaving the school.

"So I asked myself; why not continue with them?"

In 2022, he launched the secondary section, intentionally naming it Springs College instead of a traditional secondary school.

"I wanted it to be a college, not just classrooms, but a place for skills," he explains.

## Learning by doing

The philosophy behind Springs College is influenced by Arima's own education at St Joseph's College Ombaci, where practical subjects such as woodwork and metal fabrication helped shape his career in engineering. "I wanted to give this generation the same opportunity," he says.

At Springs College, this philosophy is evident in various aspects of student life. Students cultivate their own food, maintaining gardens filled with maize, tomatoes, onions, and other vegetables. They also rear goats and poultry to support the school's feeding programme. In addition to farming, students learn various trades, including welding, carpentry, plumbing, electrical installation, tailoring, and catering.

"In fact, we do not buy most of our

greens," Arima explains. "The students grow them. Now they are even growing onions."

Surplus produce is sold, and students actively participate in preparing meals for school events. For Arima, this is not just an extracurricular activity; it is an integral part of the curriculum.

## Why driving is part of the syllabus

One of the most unique aspects of Springs College is that students get driving lessons. This idea was inspired by a moment Arima experienced in Kampala.

"About 50 candidates were shortlisted for jobs at the United Nations. They had passed interviews and spoke multiple languages. However, the final test was driving, and only 28 could drive. Those were the ones who got the jobs," he explains.

That experience transformed his perspective. "Education is not just about books. There are practical skills that significantly impact your future."

At Springs College, students are prepared to obtain their driving licenses before they graduate.

## A campus built on land and labour

The school occupies 21 acres of land, with an additional 10 acres set aside for farming. Its location, just outside Arua Town, is intentional. "This area is a food basket, which is why I chose it," Arima explains.

The school's model heavily emphasises agriculture, not only as a means of education but also as a way to ensure sustainability. Manure is utilised to restore soil fertility, and the produce from the farm supports the school's operations.

However, bringing this vision to life is costly. The total development is projected to be around Shs14b, of which Shs8.2b has already been invested.

"You cannot build this using your own funds. The banks support us, and we repay them," Arima states.

Land was acquired progressively over time, initially two acres, then four, and later three. "At that time, land cost about Shs400,000 per acre. Now it is priced at around Shs14m," he adds.

## More than a school

Springs College is becoming a cultural exchange hub by hosting students from South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Egypt. "They even teach us their dances and cuisine during cultural days. We learn from each other," says Arima.

Languages play a central role in this model. English, Kiswahili, and French are mandatory at the lower levels of education. The reasoning behind this approach is practical. "Many people miss out on opportunities because they only speak one language," he explains. "If I only spoke Lugbara, how would I communicate in Buganda?"

## The idea of legacy

Despite the significant investment and expansion efforts, Arima emphasises that the project's goal is not profit.

"My main interest is not profit but legacy. When I am gone, what will remain? Education," he states.

He notes that the impact of the initiative is already visible beyond the school gates. One parent shared how their child used the irrigation skills learnt at Springs to grow tomatoes during the dry season, generating an income.

"When children can apply what they learn at home, then education is truly effective," he adds.