

School roof 'also a danger'

Pelham school feel they have a greater claim to have storm-damaged roof repaired than Parkside

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IS the safety of schoolchildren less important than ensuring the premier of KwaZulu-Natal is comfortable?

That is the question being posed by Pelham Senior Primary School bosses, who have battled since 2015 to get the departments of Education (DOE) and Public Works to fix damaged roofs at the school in Melville Road.

The school contacted *The Witness* following a report about the R32 million renovations proposed for the premier's official Parkside residence.

Premier Willie Mchunu on Friday said the renovations have been halted pending an independent assessment on whether they are "value for money". He also said a preliminary assessment had shown the roof was in such a bad state of repair it was unsafe.

Chairperson of Pelham school's governing body (SGB), Dalene Barnard, said she was "extremely angry and dismayed" that local government departments were willing to spend millions on the premier's residence but had no money to fix schools.

Her school has been pleading with the Education and Public Works departments to fix the roof of their hall, which was damaged in a severe thunderstorm in 2015.

The school also has two classrooms in dire need of repair that pose a threat to pupils.

To date their pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

Barnard said the school reported the roof damage to the DOE but received no feedback, forcing Pelham Senior Primary to cordon off the hall and evacuate the classrooms.

The school then called in a structural engineer.

"It was found the roof over the hall was very dangerous and in a near state of collapse, and that the roofs over the classrooms were in urgent need of repair," said Barnard.

"As the hall was deemed the most urgent, the SGB took a decision to pay for the repairs ourselves, as the school simply could not function without a hall. The hall roof was then repaired."

Barnard said ongoing attempts to have the roof over the classrooms repaired were "shunted from pillar to post" by both government departments.

When *The Witness* visited the school on Friday, a roofing company, hired by the school and the SGB, was busy working on three classrooms considered a safety hazard.

Principal Lorrel Wissing said they have been bracing the roofs over the

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classrooms to stop them collapsing.

"As time goes by, and with every storm the damage gets worse. The ceilings and carpets have now been extensively damaged, and have to be replaced, resulting in further costs," said Wissing.

Barnard said the repairs will cost Pelham R489 323,56.

She claimed the repairs were deemed too costly and too big a project to be undertaken by the DOE at district level on an urgent basis, so the project was handed to the Department of Public Works.

"Due to the fact that we have been liaising with the departments since the end of April 2015, without success, we as a governing body took a decision on November 15, 2017 that in the interests of the safety of our learners and staff we had to pay for the repairs ourselves, as we would not wait until somebody got killed or injured."

With reference to Parkside, Barnard said: "I am disappointed at where priorities lie in our province."

Education Department spokesperson Sihle Mlotshwa said there were plans in place to assist Pelham but these were called off when the department's project manager was told by the principal the school was handling the matter and fixing the roofs themselves.

"It is unfair to compare the renovations of the premier's Parkside house to fixing the roof of the school as those are two unrelated matters," added Mlotshwa.

Mbulelo Baloyi for Public Works said the R32 million being put into Parkside was an estimate of the costs over a seven-year period if the refurbishment of Parkside went ahead.

"But as the story in your publication [on Friday] explicitly states, the Office of the Premier has put the whole thing on hold," said Baloyi.

He added that Public Works does not initiate repairs for other departments and the DOE would have to request them to carry out repairs subject to availability of funds.

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