

Historic school falling apart

Russell pupils, staff 'in grave danger'

NOMPILO KUNENE

RUSSELL High School, which has heritage status, is so dilapidated it poses a "grave danger" while government departments refuse to take responsibility.

This has been revealed by Fiona Bulman, of the school's Old Girls Association, and the school's governing body.

Bulman said the school is — apart from the City Hall and the Legislature building — the only building built during the colonial years in the city that continues to be used for the purpose for which it was established.

"For 139 years the school has been educating girls to become young women but the state of the building right now is appalling and is putting a strain on the process of teaching and learning."

She said the school has tried since 2013 to get the KZN departments of Education and Public Works to help fix the leaking roof, rotting beams and other infrastructure but their pleas fell on deaf ears.

In 2014 the Old Girls Association submitted an application for funding to the National Lotteries Commission, accompanied by a report by heritage architect Robert Brusse. They received a response in July 2017 that the application did not succeed.

Bulman said summer storms over years caused the roof to leak and the ceilings to become mouldy, crumble and collapse, though from outside this isn't visible.

Brusse estimated four years ago the cost of repairs would have been around R3 million, but today will cost more.

Bulman said there is a risk of injury to pupils and staff. Incidents have occurred where pieces of concrete ceiling have fallen onto school desks.

A portion of the library has been cordoned off as the roof could collapse at any point.

Accounting teacher Burger Maritz said that on a Monday morning last March he and his pupils walked into their classroom to find the concrete ceiling scattered on desks and computers.

"Fortunately when the ceiling came down we weren't in the classroom but we don't know when it might fall

AMAFA PLANS TO TAKE ACTION

JACO van der Merwe said Amafa had reported that their attempts to meet with high level delegates from DPW and Education were unsuccessful as each "passed the buck".

He said Amafa would now declare a formal dispute in terms of the Intergovernmental Relations Framework Act to determine who was ultimately responsible to repair what is a heritage building.

If the matter was then still not resolved they would have to go to court.

He warned that criminal action is a possibility. "The reality is that there is criminal liability that rests whenever a person responsible for a property fails to act or do anything about it. There are a number of people from both Education and Public Works departments who have known about this but have done nothing," he said.

— Witness Reporter.

again."

Grade 12 accounting pupil and head girl Mpilo Radebe said the damage causes distractions while learning.

"When it rains, drops of water come down and I sometimes find myself staring at that huge hole in the roof," she said.

Dina dos Santos, deputy head girl, said the dilapidated building is an embarrassment.

"We avoid inviting pupils from other schools to our social events because we

"For 139 years the school has been educating girls but the state of the building right now is appalling and is putting a strain on the process of teaching and learning."

are afraid they'll look down on us."

Thulani Khoza, chairperson of the school's SGB, said because the school is a heritage building it is protected by legislation and they can-

not simply raise funds and fix the school as others do.

"We ask those responsible to help us ... We have been requesting this for too many years now," he said.

Bulman said after numerous at-

tempts by the school to get the departments of Education and Public Works and Amafa Heritage KZN to intervene, they turned to attorney Jaco van der Merwe from Tatham Wilkes for help.

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ABOVE: A portion of the Russell High School library that has been cordoned off as it may collapse at any time. **RIGHT:** Thulani Khoza, chairperson of Russell High's School Governing Body in front of the 139-year-old school building. **PHOTOS:** IAN CARBUTT

Education 'will follow up' on issue

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ON February 27 Van der Merwe sent a letter (seen by *The Witness*) to the South African Heritage Resources Agency, Amafa Heritage KZN, KZN's Department of Education, Department of Arts and Culture, the Department of Public Works and the KZN Premier's Office, detailing the problem and the school's correspondence with various departments over the years.

All to no avail.

The DPW said they had to receive an instruction and budget from the Education Department to act, and the Education Department said they would "liaise with the director for infrastructure" but nothing happened.

Education Department spokesperson Sihle Mlotshwa told *The Witness* they will follow up the matter "because we do not want to expose pupils and teachers to such dangers".

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ARCHITECT'S FRUSTRATIONS

HERITAGE architect Robert Brusse shared his frustrations at the lack of responsibility by government departments. He said Russell High is a listed building and is architecturally and historically of importance.

"The KZN Public Works Department does absolutely *NOTHING*. This school is just one of hundreds in KZN with such problems. It is only when one goes to court and challenges the department that they start making any effort to address such issues," he said.

He said he was "incredibly angry" and accused government officials of not doing what they are paid to do.

"I have also included in my report that pupils going in and out of the library, unbeknown to themselves, are being exposed to grave danger."

He said "when and not if" the roof collapsed everyone would "act surprised" despite having been forewarned but chose to ignore it.

"The government cannot disclaim responsibility." — WR.