

● **Bethelsdorp Comprehensive High School principal ensures pupils and staff have a brand-new building before he retires**

Leon's leaving a lasting legacy

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While most principals are content to build up their pupils, Bethelsdorp Comprehensive High School principal Leon Arendse is building and leaving a lasting legacy for his pupils – a new school building.

And while the 59-year-old will officially complete his six-year tenure as principal on December 12, he has opted to stay put, in an unofficial capacity, at the school where he has spent the majority of his 38-year teaching career.

This, he says, is to ensure that the R8m structure he has fought so hard for is completed.

The project had ground to a halt earlier in 2018 due to the non-payment of contractors by the department of public works and education.

“My biggest achievement during my teaching career is probably reinitiating the construction of the new school building,” Arendse said.

“Decades ago when the school was established, promises were made to house the pupils in the temporary structure for only 15 years.

“However, more than 45 years passed with no plans or progress on the new building.”

After being informed by a former principal and his mentor, Raymond Yuren, of the ini-



TOP MARKS: Teachers and school staff form a guard of honour for Leon Arendse, who is retiring Picture: EUGENE COETZEE

tial plans to build a new school, the history teacher started researching the plan following his promotion to principal in 2012.

“I discovered a paper trail dating back decades of the original plan to build a school. “Thereafter, for about two years I spoke to [education and

public works] department officials, politicians and anyone who would listen about these plans,” Arendse said. “Eventually I got approval

and in 2016 the department visited the school and building started the following year. “There were lots of issues but we have a new contractor

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Leon Arendse
BETHELSDORP COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

who says that by early 2020 the job will be done.

“And being able to give a school to these pupils and the community after all these years, will help to re-establish the school as a lighthouse in the stormy seas facing this community.”

The Aspen Heights resident said he had moved in 1981 from Johannesburg to Pietermaritzburg, where he took up a position as an Afrikaans teacher at Haythorn High School.

A year later, he moved to Port Elizabeth to be with his then girlfriend and now wife Maevia and subsequently acquired a post at Bethelsdorp Comprehensive High as a history and Afrikaans teacher.

Thereafter, he moved up the ranks in his career and personal life.

The father of three and grandfather of two said it had been a privilege for him to be part of, and able to influence, the lives of so many in the Bethelsdorp community.

“This used to be the top school in the northern areas, but we face many challenges including gangsterism, violence, vandalism and the ever-deteriorating state of the school,” he said.

“Despite all of that, we have managed to maintain a certain standard.

“The biggest reason for this is the work ethic of the staff, who constantly give their all to ensure the betterment of the pupils and the school as a whole.”

Matric teacher Michelle Fourie described Arendse as a passionate, understanding and people-focused leader who had greatly contributed to the school's success – particularly in helping it become one of two northern areas schools that have maintained a 75% matric pass rate in the past five years.

“He is really passionate about improving the school, its pupils and the broader community,” Fourie said.

“He is always willing to listen and will be sorely missed when he is gone.”

Arendse said after his year of oversight on the building project, he intends to take his wife – in their newly bought bakkie – to travel the country.

He will also remain involved in several historical research projects and other community work.