

● Once a place of learning, shell of Zwide building now home to vagrants, criminals and substance abusers

School carted off brick by brick



DANGER TO THE PUBLIC: Elumanyanweni School in Zwide is being vandalised and stripped after it was closed due to dwindling pupil numbers
Pictures: WERNER HILLS

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A building which was once the educational foundation for children in Zwide is now being picked apart and demolished by members of the same community it once housed.

Elumanyanweni Primary School in Fifth Avenue, Zwide, is being carried off brick by brick, with residents leaving little more than the skeleton.

Since its closure in January 2018 – a result of dwindling pupil numbers – Zwide residents say the building was vandalised and left to decay.

As a result, since the beginning of this year, the community has staked their claim to any material they can rip off the dilapidated structure.

On Tuesday, at least eight men could be seen removing sections of the roofing trusses and tiles, dislodging entire window frames from the walls and kicking down sections of the walls and doors.

What remains is the framework of the double-storey building, whose corridors residents say now play host to substance abusers who allegedly loiter in the abandoned structure, occasionally robbing residents who venture inside.

A vandal, who asked not be named, said he was a Zwide resident and as such did not see anything wrong with stripping the school.

"This building was left for a year and we saw how it was being vandalised and attracting bad crimes like drugs and robbery.

"And seeing that nothing was being done about the building . . . it is better that we as the community make some money from it," he said.

"Also hopefully by taking

away the roof and other material we also take away these criminals' hiding places and allow everyone to see exactly what's happening in the school."

Fifth Avenue resident and member of the community policing forum, Nomvula Magala, said she had noted more

'It is better that we as the community make some money from it'

and more people frequenting the premises.

"All of the reasons I can see for people wanting to enter such an unstable structure relate to crime and other social problems.

"The school is attracting all of these people to the area who come and drink and do drugs in the premise – it creates a direct threat for the people living in the area," Magala said.

"We do see the police occasionally patrolling the premises but they can't be there all the time.

"And this is a regular thing in the township, this building could have been used for a community centre or something," she said.

In May, The Herald reported on how Kwaford Primary School in New Brighton had undergone a transformation over the previous two years – from corridors filled with curious minds and high-pitched voices, to dilapidated drug den.

The school was closed in January 2016 as a result of dwindling pupil numbers.

Police spokesperson Captain Andre Beetge said it was common for abandoned

schools and other buildings to become hubs for criminal activity soon after they had been vacated.

"It is very common, particularly in the township area, for these buildings not only to become a venue frequented by criminals as well as substance abusers but also vagrants who move into the structures.

"And as is the case with the Missionvale school [Gqebera High School], Kwaford and now this Zwide school, everything that can be taken from the school is stolen, leaving in some case a shell or just building rubble.

"This is also a safety concern in terms of structural stability of the building."

Beetge said police had met with officials from the department of public works – the custodians of government buildings – on several occasions in an effort to better secure premises, but little had transpired.

Education department spokesperson Malibongwe Mtima said the fate of the school and its premises was yet to be decided.

"The school was officially closed at the beginning of last year due to learner numbers dwindling over time.

"The few learners left went to surrounding schools with learner support material and furniture, while educators will be placed as per the skills requisite," Mtima said.

"Paperwork officially closing it is still at head office.

"The department of public works is involved but will be visiting the area for finalisation of closure, so the process is at its final phase."

Public works department spokesperson Vuyokazi Mbanjwa failed to respond to questions.



PICKED APART: A view from inside a classroom in the vandalised school