

Pupils, teachers are living in fear of gangsters

Mkhuseli Sizani

Pupils and teachers at Arcadia Secondary School in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape say they fear for their lives as gang fights erupt around them. The school, which has 940 pupils, is crumbling from vandalism and neglect.

School principal Gregory Prince said: "This a broken community and our pupils come from broken families."

Gang fights overflowed from the community into the school.

"We even catch pupils selling dagga to other pupils and others carrying knives," he said.

He said the matric pass rate had dropped from 93% in 2003 to under 40% in 2016. "The increase in drugs in the area has affected our school performance and behaviour of our pupils. But study camps and awareness campaigns have helped us to improve. Last year, our matric pass rate was 63%," Prince said.

In 2017 "gangs started to shoot one another in front of the school gate. Luckily no one was injured. We had a situation where a pupil was handed a gun through the school fence but we called the police".

In another incident, he said, a Grade 11 pupil had dropped out of school after apparently being threatened by a gang when he failed to shoot another gang member.

Prince said the school needed a brick wall or a better fence. The present fence was often vandalised. The school had deteriorated to such an extent that it was not fixable, he said. The bottom part of the walls was rotten; window panes and doors are broken.

In September 2017 the department of education and the department of public works assessed the building.



UNDER SIEGE. Arcadia Secondary School in Port Elizabeth is crumbling. Picture: Mkhuseli Sizani

2017 when gangs began shooting one another near the school

"They said it was not fixable and recommended that a new school building should be built."

"Then in May this year, Premier Oscar Mabuzyane promised to speed up the building process. But we also have not heard anything from him since then," said Prince.

Pastor Greg Coltman, safety and maintenance officer at the school, said six classrooms had been completely shut. Six others were still being used but had no electricity. Ceilings were broken and birds were nesting in the rafters.

"Boys enter through the fence

and break into the classes to catch the doves. Then the ceilings fall down. Electric cables, plugs and the lights were ripped out. Furniture was broken and 11 of our CCTV cameras were stolen in 2017," he said.

"All these cases were reported at Bethelsdorp police station but no one has been arrested."

Social activist Christian Martin said the gangs had torn communities apart.

"Since January this year until October 4, 80 people have been killed in the Bethelsdorp police station precinct due to gang-related incidents," said Martin.

"Arcadia is falling apart. Not even rats hide there anymore because they don't feel safe."

Basil Booysen, recording officer of discipline at the school, said: "To raise a boy here is dif-

ficult. Today, he is a daddy's boy, tomorrow he is a gangster. They carry knives to school and even smoke dagga in classes."

Mvusiwekhaya Siewetsha, spokesperson for the premier, said the premier had meant that he would speak to the relevant MEC to speed up the building of the new school.

Provincial education spokesperson Malibongwe Mtima said Arcadia is on a "priority list of our district's medium-term infrastructure expenditure budget for 2019-2021. So within this three-year period, a new school will be built".

Police Colonel Priscilla Naidu confirmed the opening of two cases of malicious damage to property in April and October this year, but said the dockets had been closed "due to lack of information". - *Re-published from Groundup.org.za*