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Title: Eviction looms for 168 disabled pupils, 10 teachers

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Eviction looms for 168 disabled pupils, 10 teachers

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Almost 200 pupils with autism and intellectual disabilities will soon be without a school after the Eastern Cape department of public works instructed the nonprofit organisation that runs it to vacate the premises.

The Second Chance Youth Skills Development Programme, which operates the school in Amalinda, East London, has been informed by the department that the premises — a three-bedroom house with lounge and kitchen — are unsuitable for disabled children.

This is the culmination of a four-year wrangle after the department red-flagged the school's use of the site, situated in a residential area, for commercial purposes.

It deemed the school premises "unsuitable for children, especially disabled children" during an inspection in April 2021.

One of the bedrooms of the home is used as an office while the other two serve as classrooms.

Second Chance and the department had entered into a month-to-month lease agreement in February 2018, but the arrangement was that the property would be used for

residential purposes.

A letter of demand from the office of the state attorney, acting on behalf of the public works department, which was stamped by

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the sheriff of the court on December 3 2024, gave the school seven days to vacate the premises.

However, its management did not heed the order, apparently due to non-availability of an alternative site.

According to court papers, the department submitted an earlier letter, in October 2023, cancelling the lease, which was allegedly ignored.

"You were informed that functioning a school in the subject property is prohibited as it poses a health hazard to disabled children.

"You have been given various opportunities to vacate the property. However you have failed to do so, you continue occupying leased premises unlawfully," the letter said.

The school's manager, Zukiswa Madikane, said it was notified on Tuesday by the department to vacate the premises despite having no alternative, and threatened with further legal action if it failed to do so.

Madikane said communication with the department had deteri-

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Department kicks education NPO off premises

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orated after the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

"The site was vandalised and the school asked for it to be renovated so that we can use it for children with intellectual disabilities to have a second chance once they are removed from the school system.

"In 2012, we were handed the site and a few years later we were told to rent the property.

"It was during Covid-19 that we were hit the most and a lot of our learners did not return.

"We only had 21 students returning and we had some challenges of payments," Madikane said.

Provincial public works spokesperson Siya Mdodi confirmed the NPO had been told to vacate the house.

"After numerous defects that were reported to the department, the district took a decision to terminate the lease in 2021 and requested the NPO to look for an alternative space, because the house is not suitable and zoned to run a school or used for commercial use.

"The department received a letter from BCM notifying the department about [a] health hazard that is caused by the sewer spillage from the septic tank in the property because of the over-utilisation by the pupils.

"The department intends to close the school as soon as possible, as numerous notices were served long ago," Mdodi said.

He said officials had advised the NPO to apply to use one of the closed state schools owned by the department.

"Unfortunately, no application was received from the school as advised."

The school now has 168 pupils, with 10 full-time staff members.

It was opened as a Saturday school in 2009 by a group of women who had worked at special needs schools across the province, before expanding in 2012.

Court papers show that the school was in arrears on its R1,200 rental agreement, which stipulated that the rent would be increased by 10% annually.

The school is said to have been in arrears by R32,642 during the period when the lease was valid.

"We didn't know we had to pay an increasing fee annually, however we continued to pay the initial fee," Madikane said.

Social development department records indicate that the school's application for skills development funding had been approved as part of a programme for disabled youths in East London.