

Vele Secondary School wins award for sustainable architecture

Vele Secondary School in the Limpopo Province - which was funded in part by US television presenter Oprah Winfrey - could revolutionise the way schools are designed in this country.



The school, which is being celebrated in both green and educational circles, recently won the Afrisam SAIA Award for Sustainable Architecture, an honour it shared with another rural South African school, Lebone II College in the North West Province.

In an impressive turn-around Vele's matric pass rate rose from 38% in 2009 to 84% last year - an increase which has, in part, been linked to the improvements made to the school campus.

Oprah's Angel Network donated R5 million towards the project with the Department of Education funding the majority of the construction costs which saw the school radically altered from a typical dilapidated rural learning facility into a pioneering South African educational and community resource.

Overcrowded and cold

Samuel Makhado, principal of Vele Secondary School, said before the building operations began the big problem was the overcrowding. It was also so cold in the morning that the learners had difficulty concentrating on their studies. The building is designed in such a way that on hot days the classrooms are cool and on cold days they are warm. The learners are able to concentrate better and the improvement in the pass rate is proof of this.

The building includes a rainwater-harvesting installation, solar energy and green roofs planted with indigenous plants from the region. The permaculture food and medicinal garden, situated in the heart of the school provides sufficient vegetables and fruit for the school's needs. The medicinal garden serves as a source of medicinal plants for the community.

Derek van Heerden from East Coast Architects who were responsible for the project was delighted that the school has been

recognised in this way. "It is fitting that schools display the new realities in the time in which we are living. This is the generation that will have to repair our mistakes." Van Heerden said they had sought and received feedback from learners, teachers and community from the outset. "This has had a massive impact on the eventual outcome with the whole community embracing the school which is already having a positive effect on education."

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