

Remarkable turnaround for Oprah-funded school

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VELE Secondary School in Limpopo is the talk of educationists and green architects all over SA.

This week the school, which was funded in part by Oprah Winfrey, won the Afrisam SAIA Award for Sustainable Architecture, an honour it shared with another rural SA school, Lebone II College in North West.

In an astonishing turnaround, the school matric pass rate rose from 38 percent in 2009 to 84 percent last year – an increase which has, in part, been linked to the improvements made to the school campus.

Oprah's Angel Network provided about R5 million towards the project, with the SA Depart-

ment of Education funding the majority of the construction costs.

Thanks to Steve Kinsler and Derek van Heerden of East Coast Architects and the participation of the community, Vele Secondary School has been transformed from a dilapidated rural school into a pioneering community resource.

Samuel Makhado, principal of Vele Secondary School, was delighted with the win.

He said before the building operations began that the big problem was overcrowding in the dilapidated classrooms. It was also so cold in the morning that the pupils had difficulty concentrating on their studies.

The building, he said, was now designed in such a way that



AWARD-WINNING: Vele Secondary School in Limpopo.

on hot days the classrooms were cool and on cold days they were warm. Pupils are also keen to come to school every day because of the appealing environment and truancy numbers have decreased significantly.

Before the design for Vele began in 2007, pupils were given

cameras and taught to map the area, including their routes to school. They identified hazards – including leopards, baboons and snakes – as well as special sites in the landscape.

Their photos inspired the school's design and the selection of its building materials.

Stone construction for walling, facing and paving was used extensively and local masons were engaged – most were graduates of the school. Stone was collected from road verges and from areas being cleared for agriculture, thereby reducing the reliance on imported brick and/or cement-based materials for these areas.

The contractor twinned experienced masons with younger workers who had expressed interest, thereby ensuring continuity of this beautiful craft.

Design features of Vele include a rainwater-harvesting installation with a total storage capacity of 150 000 litres and 50m² of solar panels, which provide electricity to 80 computers. Passive and low-energy design also

create naturally lit and ventilated classrooms.

Vele is part of the Creating Schools programme, which enters into partnerships with provincial departments of education.

Further partnerships with local communities ensure sustainable management and use of the school. Energy-efficient design and water conservation strategies reduce the running costs of the school. Robust materials and detailing reduce the maintenance costs.

The school meets the Education Department's norms and standards and to ensure replicability of the model, it is built within the budget allocated to a typical Limpopo school using standard documentation.