

Ms Amanda Bresnan MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
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Dear Ms Bresnan

I would like to provide this submission to the Standing Committee inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system.

My children were students at Hall Primary School and I was President of both the Hall Primary School P&C Association and Hall Pre School Parents Association in 2006 (I remain President of the Hall Primary School P&C which is still functioning).

I fully endorse the Hall Schools Board and Parent bodies submission presented to the *Towards 2020* process in 2006 and believe that many of the impacts we expressed concern with in that submission have been realised. Such impacts include a decline in student numbers at the preschool were the primary school to close and the preschool to remain open (as it did).

Please also note my full endorsement of the submissions to the current Standing Committee that have been presented by the Hall and District Progress Association and the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Association. As many of my concerns have been expressed in both of these documents, I have limited my submission to my personal experiences.

When my family moved to Canberra in mid 2002, I had two primary school aged children – one in year 2 and one in year 4. We considered a variety of schools (including some of the larger and more modernised ones) before settling on Hall. We have never lived in Hall but have rented in nearby suburbs since moving to the ACT.

We chose Hall for its smaller size and community spirit. We felt that the programs and level of learning it offered was not compromised by the smaller student numbers but the level of community spirit was unique to Hall and could not be offered elsewhere (with the exception of Tharwa which was not in commuting distance).

I also have two younger children which were fortunate enough to attend Hall preschool. It was difficult for me to get them there as I work and the preschool has part-time days; however, the importance of them attending the preschool attached to the primary school they would be attending far outweighed the difficulties of getting them there.

In 2006, I had one child in year 6, one in Kindergarten and one at the preschool; therefore, when the primary school was closed, my two younger children were forced to change schools.

I am pleased to say that both of them have settled into their new school very well; however, it took a good 12 months for the youngest to be fully settled. Her best friend went to another school and she was somewhat lost for that first year (we had lost the advantage of her attending the preschool attached to her intended primary school).

I would also like to stress that our new school made us very welcome and we are very happy with the staff and community – we have all made new friends and are very involved with the school.

My children are happy and settled, have wonderful friends and love going to school; however, they still miss their old friends and Hall itself (as we do not live in the village we rarely get there). The physical location of Hall was very unique and my children miss this.

As for myself, I have tremendous respect for the staff and families at our new school and I have made the effort to be involved – I am comfortable. But there is a missing element of community spirit that I have not been able to find at our new school.

While everyone is friendly, at the end of the day we all go our separate ways. At Hall, it was not unusual to find people milling about up to an hour after the bell had rung. This level of community feeling was not just between the student families, it existed between staff, students, families and the villagers alike. It extended to the evenings and weekend functions. When school events were on, they were attended by more than just the direct school community but by the entire Hall and District community.

This is what I am missing most (apart from the obvious lack of contact with families who moved to other schools).

During the *Toward 2020* process, we (Hall P&C) were promised a second visit by Minister Barr – despite our best efforts this did not occur. On our first attempt, we fronted the Legislative Assembly only to find that they had forgotten to put us in the appointment book (we got to speak to staff but very informally). On our second attempt we did manage to get more of a formal hearing but not with the Minister. In hindsight, I feel that this inability to meet with the Minister a second time was due to the decision to close Hall having already been made; as such, I do not feel our submission was seriously considered.

The Hall P&C had expressed to the Minister that the families attending Hall would not move to Gungahlin schools if Hall were to close; yet one of the reasons for closing Hall was stated as being due to the vacancies in the Gungahlin schools

(implying that Hall students would fill those vacancies). Of note, Hall had never been considered to in the Gungahlin cluster up until the *Toward 2020* process began.

Toward 2020 spoke of providing diversity and choice, but I believe that it has resulted in less. In closing Hall and Tharwa, it has taken away the uniqueness that these two schools had to offer and limited the choice for many who prefer the smaller, rural schools.

I also feel that the many consultations that have taken place since the school closures have been pointless. I do not have confidence in any consultations being conducted by the ACT Government (and this does not just apply to those regarding schools). I feel that the Government is acting out the consultations only because they have to but there is nothing to force them to act on the outcomes of those consultations. They have the power to say we consulted but we are going to do it our way regardless of public opinion.

If nothing else, I would like to see the consultation process strengthened. In particular, when the public opinion is strongly against what the Government is proposing (such as the school closures), then the Government must be forced to change its proposal and revisit the consultation (not change the proposal and act promptly as it did in 2006).

Thank-you for giving me the opportunity to put forward my views. Please contact me if you have any questions about this submission.

Yours sincerely

Penny Haisman