

Bob Richardson, 29th March 2009

Submission to ACT Government on Education, Training & Youth Affairs

Amanda Bresnan, Joy Birch, Jeremy Hanson.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my considerations to you Review Committee. I offer grassroots feedback in an attempt to influence your recommendations and rectify an easily reversible wrong.

The terms of reference has been addressed in the Hall District submission. I attempt to avoid repeating responses that can be found in the 2006 Save Our School documents. As a community active resident of Hall Village, I offer coal face community experiences and attitudes. There is a preference in my submission to support public schooling.

As Vice President of Hall Village & District Progress Association, I have attended every meeting in Hall relating to the school since the first unexpected announcement of closure. The general feeling is that little can be more urgent or of greater importance than misplaced closures of historic schools such as Hall and Tharwa and the re-opening of our Hall School.

ACT Tourism and the ACT Government understand the value to us all of Heritage sites as a tourist attraction, with all of the financial and job opportunities generated. At present, we have Heritage Week, the Canberra 100 years celebration, the Wine Harvest (Hall being the Gateway to the Vineyards).

Hall Village and school is a vital piece of the tapestry of the Capital Territory's Heritage. Why would our ACT Government agree to remove, forever, this gem of our history?

Allow me to rewind back to the unexpected announcement of closure of a third of all the public schools in the ACT. The outcry was so great, the ACT Government made the headlines in every paper in Australia and even shocked readers in Europe and the UK. The Media voicing the community's concerns, called for a re-think. This went on for months. We were approached soon after by private and independent school operators with a view to re-open our viable Hall School outside the public system. The decoupling of our school had

already damaged the community. Business was reeling, environmental school programs had collapsed(tree planting, school garden, Frogwatch, Waterwatch). Distressed parents were rushing to reposition their children elsewhere. Many were so disillusioned they left the public school system, at considerable cost to themselves. The newly appointed Minister, Andrew Barr was thrown to the wolves and did his best to spin a reply to the 'please explain'. The inconvenient truth was a stubborn disregard for transparency or the Release of documents requested by FOI. This remains a festering sore that has to be cured.

At the time each Hall School cross-border student carried \$6,800 into the ACT Education budget annually. The figure has revised upward closer to the so called average.(What ever that means) Hall School at that time had 60 cross-border students, 100 local students. Our wee rural school was generating \$612,000 annually. Not enough, said the Minister. They cost on average, \$8,000. You're freeloading. This grants figure had been agreed to by Federal, State and Territories using an agreed model. The ACT Government's inability to negotiate a deal with their Labour mates in NSW, meant the Capital's 100 year old school, operating very effectively, was to be trashed to appease the bean counters. The financial models utilised by our bean counters are open to a wide range of interpretations and were dependant upon how stubborn the perpetrators wished to be. Hall residents made an offer to make up any fiscal shortfall. (\$40,000 a year was mentioned.) The answer was 'no'. Up to this stage, we had been lead a dance that the closure was a financial decision. Now it was something else. Let's see, could it be asbestos? Could it be student numbers? Could it be a wilful and prolonged lack of maintenance? Could it be a chronic lack of teachers and a foreseeable exodus of baby-boomer teachers in the near future? Could it be extra cost associated with outsourcing maintenance and security and the increase in vandalism? Could it be a bloody mistake?

The Minister's advisers spun a response of humbug, fabricated around misinformed, antiquated financial and educational models to support their recommendations for closure. Demography projections were incorrect, local population numbers dated and costings exaggerated. It was 20th century rationalist voo-doo economics. Requests for transparency or some FOI was

ignored. We requested numbers on cross-border issues, Commonwealth Grants Commission, students' grants, bussing, student transport costings.

Hall has no public transport, despite years of requests).The ACT Gov. delayed, threatened, and ignored.So Hall residents collected in record time one of the largest signed petitions in ACT history. It was presented and ignored because some signatures were from NSW. There are huge numbers who cross-border daily and consider ACT issues important for them.

Hall has a long history of its youth following fathers and family in community service , such as the Hall Rural Fire Service, The Rugby Club etc. With the school closure and the scattering of our children across schools all over the ACT, there has been a marked decline in youth involvement in local activities. Further, Hall is disenfranchised from competing for school/community grants. These grants often drove our environmental projects. These are important for Hall because we live 'in' the rural environment.

Let's fast forward to the future.

There's a baby boom. ABC Learning and similar, private child care has sunk with the American debt market collapse. We have a tsunami of retiring baby boomers, including teachers. We have mounting evidence that private schools offer no superior academic benefits. A huge body of evidence exists which substantiates this opinion. The volume of scale cost savings attached to mega schools is mythical when costs such as litigation for violence, bullying at each strata (- cyber-bullying by student to teacher, teacher to teacher, student to student). Vandalism, damage to cars (accidental and deliberate), in and around school car parks. There is a market for small rural schools to widen choice. A percentage of children cannot relate to mega schools. Value adding for these children who would normally fall through the cracks would surpass a value added figure for graduating a student from a private school which chooses to cherry -pick students unless government funding supplements the exercise.

We must factor in, not only the damage sustained to date by the school closure but also the cost socially not to re-open Hall School. Businesses are battling to stay viable. Not to re-open the School will be the final straw and will result in loss of job opportunity and business failure. Hall, our Heritage Village

will be reduced to a dormitory suburb. The recommendations made by this committee will resonate for years to come just as the massive closures in the name of improving public education has refused to be forgotten despite a cacophony of world shattering events in our faces daily.

If the new collaborative Assembly Committees innovation is to succeed ,this will be the first battle ground. The closure of HALL school is unnecessary and wrong headed and must be corrected.