

Submission to the Legislative Assembly for the ACT Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs Inquiry into School Closures and Reform of the ACT Education System

Flynn Primary School and Community Hub should never have been closed, it was fully functional as both a popular, viable, well resourced school with a growing student population in a suburb experiencing a baby boom and a much needed community hub for the broader community. I am proud to be part of a large group of enthusiastic and capable people ready and willing to assist in restoring and maintaining this valuable asset.

Backing up the birth statistics for Flynn (highest birth rate in the ACT in 2006), Flynn Preschool had a full session of 25 children with a waiting list in years 2004, 2005 and 2006. With 37 children wanting to enrol for 2007, the preschool had the numbers to return to a double session of 50 children. Three playgroups for around fifty 0-4 year olds were housed at the school, uptake to the school was high.

My husband and I moved to Flynn in 2000 to buy our first house and to start a family. Flynn is undergoing urban renewal as older original residents move out to downsize and young couples move in, attracted by the large family homes on large blocks in a quiet, safe suburb. There are an ever increasing number of young families living here, we see them at the playgrounds, walking with strollers and are devastated that we don't know them because we have no place to meet them and get to know them.

Flynn Primary School fulfilled that role for over 30 years, as the only community facility in the suburb. It was closed without regard to its growing enrolments, the growing population of young families in the area and documented community support for keeping the school open. The Towards 2020 process contained obvious errors in information about the school and its programs, including errors in the enrolment projections, which were never adequately acknowledged, corrected or considered.

The impacts on the environment and hundreds of families' lives and budgets are ongoing (petrol costs, second car, second job). We are now forced to drive children out of our suburb every day instead of enjoying the social and health benefits of walking or riding bikes to school. Our community still needs that Flynn School and the committee should consider the many benefits of re-opening it, or at the very least keep the entire buildings and grounds for community use. A child care facility in the existing buildings would complement either option.

When we first arrived in Flynn, before we had children, we were so impressed by the sense of community Flynn Primary School fostered. There were bushdances and barbeques held at the school that the entire suburb was invited to. We met many other couples and young families there and learned about the three playgroups and other community activities that took place at the school.

In 2006 our eldest child started preschool at Flynn Preschool. It was a wonderful first six months: we walked up to the school with his baby sister, met other families on the way and stayed after drop off and pickup to chat with other families. We all looked forward to being able to do this for the next decade or more, growing as a community, having friends within walking distance for afternoons, weekends and holidays.

Flynn Primary School was a very successful pilot school for the Preschool Primary Links Program (and was acknowledged as a great success story for the Program). It meant that our family was instantly part of the primary school community. The preschoolers had a buddy in Kindergarten and a buddy in year 5 from early in the year (unlike most preschools that even in 2009 do not start these buddy programs until term 4). The preschoolers spent an afternoon in the kinder unit one week, the kinders came down to the preschool the next. The year 5 buddies would come down and read and play with the preschoolers every week. We went on excursions with the kinder class, participated in assemblies, grandparents day, the school concert, and numerous other events.

On 6 June 2006 everything changed. No one at the school could believe it was even suggested that the school would close, we were not told why it was listed and we were not given any specific or valid reasons why in December 2006 the primary school was closed. The whole premise of the Towards 2020 consultation process, we thought, was that if we provided information via the consultation process demonstrating our schools viability, that the decision to close it may not be made.

So I and many other committed members of our broader community put our family lives on hold for the next six months, disputing the demographics, documenting our schools proud tradition of inclusiveness, nurturing, academic success and its value to the community as a whole as a hub of activities for all ages, particularly 0-12 year olds. Not only that but we proposed additional programs and activities to further strengthen these assets by, for example, including more playgroups and incorporating a child care centre.

My 4 year old son was certainly resentful of the loss of family time this brought, and instead of volunteering at the preschool, to help the children paint and play, I was surveying parents, researching demographics, attending meetings, writing submissions, preschool, primary and personal. Most of all he was scared that he was going to lose that wonderful primary school that he was already a part of, he knew all the teachers and had friends in every class from kindergarten to year 6.

As the overwhelming majority of a large turn out of Flynn residents made very clear through a whole-of-suburb survey (and later during the Purdon Process) is that we need a school and community facility in Flynn with core activities running there (an isolated empty "hall for hire" would never be sufficient). With the lack of any other facilities in the suburb, it would make no practical sense to put additional housing or aged care on the site.

As a preschool parents association at a preschool threatened with closure, we were forced to do inventories, prepare to pack all the books, toys, puzzles that our children play with up and give them away by 15 December 2006 if on 13 December 2006 the announcement was made that the preschool would close. This was on top of preparing our submissions, and trying to make our family lives (and Christmas!) as normal as possible for our children. This was emotionally very traumatic, and while we saved the preschool, the primary school was closed – it was a very hollow Christmas.

Up at the primary school the lead up to the “Decision” was just as traumatic, with packing boxes being sent before the “Decision” to close was announced, stickers were put on all the furniture, and our community’s resources were promised to other schools if our school closed. Kindergarten parents were appalled by removals staff who started packing up resources in the kindergarten unit during the last week of term, the principal had to ask them to leave out of respect for the 4 and 5 year olds who were seeing their classroom being dismantled.

At 3pm on the last day of Flynn Primary School we had a final assembly, sang the school song and people stood up to talk about all the positive things about our school and community. We formed a guard of honour for the teachers outside the front door while all the media recorded it all. Then the keys on the locks were changed, as we had been told, we had needed to make sure we didn’t leave hats, lunchboxes books behind, because we would not be allowed back in. It was a very distressing end to what had been traumatic and damaging six months for the whole community.

In that final week of school we had to try to find another school that would go some way to replacing Flynn, nothing can replace the hub of your own community, and many of the programs, facilities and resources offered by Flynn were just not available at other schools.

This is likely to be the reason that Flynn kids scattered to at least 17 other schools, there was just no obvious second choice. A 2006 survey of the school population showed that 74% of children walked or rode bikes to Flynn school. Now I would say that for 95% it is physically impossible to do so, their schools are too far from home. Parents are forced to drive children to school, for me its 100 km a week (what is that going to cost me in petrol in 2016 when my daughter is in year 6?). My son resents not being able to walk or ride his bike to school, to meet other kids on the way, or go home with them for an unplanned play date – someone still has to drive them home afterwards.

Very frustrating was the fact that Flynn had before and after school care and a holiday program. Only one school in the fabricated Belconnen North West region had a holiday program and before school care, and the school was already full (could not take 180 Flynn kids).

For a family with two working parents, access to before school care is very valuable. My husband starts work at 7.30am. Without before school care I simply have to miss out on 9am meetings at work, and make complicated arrangements for someone else to take our children to school if a training course is to start at 9am. I cannot ask one of the half dozen families I know from Flynn who go to our new school to take my two children with them because most already have three children of their own to fit in their car. If we were still at Flynn there would be any number of families they could walk to school with.

As far as the “reform” of the ACT education system in those schools that did survive Towards 2020 (all ACT schools were impacted negatively in some way, even if they were not listed for closure).

Flynn Preschool was closed at the end of 2006. As a office bearer of the 2006 Parents Association, I attended the meeting on 13 December 2006, at which we were advised for the first time that our preschool would be linked to Mt Roger Primary School from 2007. We were not consulted about this arrangement and although we and Flynn Preschool Parents' Associations from subsequent years asked that this decision be reviewed, we were never given the opportunity to link to an alternative school.

Many schools who received students from closing schools were forced to convert dedicated resource rooms (e.g. reading rooms, art rooms, music rooms, home science rooms) to classrooms, to accommodate the extra children. This often meant that the particular program was compromised or abandoned because the school no longer had the space or specialized facilities to run them. Some schools needed to add demountables for additional classes.

The decision to subsume preschools into primary schools has lead to ongoing problems due mainly to the lack of understanding of the rights and roles of the individual Preschool Parents' Associations. Until 2006 ACT preschools were a partnership between the Department of Education (that provided the building, the teachers, the teachers desks, chairs and computers and the Parents Association (who own and insure all the assets, furniture, toys books, games, puzzles, photocopier, etc. and supplied all the consumables, including toilet paper, and paid for cleaning of the preschool. There are still many unsolved issues that this year's Parents' Associations are having to grapple with, as I am sure the Canberra Preschool Society have drawn to your attention.

I also understand that there is a move to introduce curriculum based learning into ACT preschools. Preschool is the unique domain of 3, 4 and 5 year old children who many studies have shown benefit from play base learning. When we were being told of the virtues of the P-3 band of the new national curriculum we were told that play based learning would be utilized to a greater degree in the K-3 classes, which I entirely support. However, preschool should continue to be based solely on play based learning.

In conclusion, I am grateful for the opportunity to express my opinions, which I know are held by many others in the community and hope that the needs of this community will be recognized and addressed. Please contact me if you have and questions or queries.

Sincerely,

Dr Jill Karotam (PhD)
Flynn