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Inquiry into School Closures and Reform of the ACT Education System

Please find attached our submission to the subject inquiry.

Your faithfully,

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Submission to Inquiry into School Closures and Reform of the ACT Education System

Item 4 – Any other relevant matters

We submit the following comments and questions for Committee consideration.

General

The Government's 2020 education proposal was ill advised and poorly executed. It has resulted in a huge impact on the children and a large amount of ill feeling in our Flynn community towards the Government. Flynn community had the school as its heart – there now is no other drawcard in the suburb. The school used to bring the parents and friends and neighbours together. Without the school, the suburb has been severely impacted. Research has shown the negative impact on the community once it loses its identity. A large range of groups used to use the school and activities were centred around the school.

School size does matter, particularly in the formative years of Primary. Larger schools for this age group will result in additional cost in the future to the community for the next generation of children. Our experience of larger schools has been that children do fall through the gaps as they do not get the remedial attention that they used to get in medium sized schools such as Flynn.

Flynn was designed with the school as the centre of the suburb with the houses around it. The closure has resulted in a negative impact on the environment, due to the need to now use a car to transport children to school. The next nearest school is outside walking distance radius. Flynn had the Pre-school, Primary School and before/after school care, all on the same site. Distance and dangerous roads preclude walking to alternates.

Our son has a dog that he used to walk to school. That chapter has now closed – the dog stays at home as he drives off to school.

After six months of the questionable consultation, the Flynn Primary School closed on 21 Dec 06, having originally opened in 1974. The name of the school was chiselled off the front entrance and the sign wishing all a Merry Christmas was also removed just days after the school was closed. The ACT Government removed the 1980 brass plaque marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dr John Flynn of Royal Flying Doctor fame from a monument at the school site. The plaque was chiselled off and the remaining monument wall cemented over. A departmental comment via ABC radio on 28 May 07 and from Minister Barr on 29 May 07 on WIN TV suggested the reason was to stop vandalism. The plaque had only been there for 27 years un-vandalised –unbelievable treatment.

Process

The Functional Review, even though presented to Cabinet can still be disclosed to the public.

- Will the Government abide by the decision of the independent arbiter to release the Review, should that be the recommendation?
- What criteria was used to identify which schools would close?
- What criteria was used to identify the timeframe for the closures?
- Why did some of the schools have to close in 2006 and yet others were identified for 2007 and 2008?

- Why was legislation passed to prevent a school opening in Tharwa, or other communities opening schools on closed sites?
- Why was Flynn identified to close in 2006, while Mt Rogers was to close in 2007?
- What was the criteria that supported this differentiation?

Independence

The Flynn P&C report submitted before closure in 2006 was very professional compared to others such as the Mt Rogers report. It is known that a member of Mt Rogers school worked in the Chief Ministers department.

- How was this conflict of interest declared and managed?
- What process was used to assess the content of the report in the decision making process?
- Was it actually read by the Minister?
- Is there any truth in the rumour that enrolments in the Flynn pre-school were deliberately manipulated (prospective parents directed elsewhere) to cause it to run as part time to reduce the feed to the Primary School, making it difficult to maintain higher numbers?
- How much was spent by the community and other political parties on FOI requests?
- What requests were denied, and why?
- Were “denial” type certificates used by the Minister as a last resort?

Pre-determined outcome

Valuations were conducted on school sites before the announcement of the consultation period. The Flynn school is a prime real estate site for more urban infill.

- Was this the primary reason for selecting closure of Flynn over schools that are even smaller, and have less land value (and no view of the mountains)?
- Why was this done, and how was this considered in determining the list of schools to potentially close?
- Why was the land at Latham School valued (front page *Canberra Times* 26 Jan 06), and then that School not identified to close even though it was closer to the Super School than Flynn?

Accounting

In Flynn’s case, less people are visible on the streets, no doubt having an impact on crime and anti-social behaviour. There is less community interaction, no walking to school, there is greater impact on the environment through driving, higher congestion on roads and upheaval of the community as some have even left the ACT to get away from the stress caused. ANU research has shown that suburbs that lose their community space and identity have an increase in anti-social behaviour.

- Has a true whole of government analysis been done on the impact of the closed schools and their communities?
- What socioeconomic factors were considered in determining which schools stayed open or were closed?

- Was there an enrolment number or a financial bottom line above which the schools were safe from closure?
- What financial bottom line saving was achieved across education?

Bad Press

The Department of Education and Training had fact sheets on their website in Jun 06 that could be classed as “in-confidence” in terms of overall student performance. The data on the DET website suggested a bias against Flynn compared with a least one other school that was not earmarked for closure. This was done for a number of schools.

- Was this deliberate?
- What criteria has been used to develop the list of schools proposed to close, and specifically Flynn?

Environment

Late in the consultation process, the Government vandalised the Reverend Flynn (Flying Doctor fame) monument.

- Was this a deliberate action to cause a distraction?

The social impact has been great as previously families survived with one or no car, but now the suburb has become a driving to school suburb. Families are forced to travel further, not walk, and this is exacerbated by the higher petrol prices – and impacting on the environment – every little bit multiplied by the closed schools is a vast impact on the ACT’s contribution to global warming. Closure of the school has reduced the community space to zero. There is no longer an identity for the people as a collective apart from an address and the same postcode. Taking the school away has taken the heart away. People do not interact with each other so we are now all strangers.

- Has this cost impact been considered?

Flynn was easily accessible on safe paths. Going further adds risk. Crossing Kingsford Smith Drive, Tillyard Drive or Ginninderra Drive are all dangerous.

- Has the impact on child safety been considered?

Media

Papers such as the Canberra Times gave very little coverage of the events.

- What was stated to the media organisations so that they did not negatively report on the school closure process?
- Was a change in media advertising threatened?

Impact on the Children

Children are still stressed by the events and do not wish to be reminded of the stressful events. Loss of friends, loss of routine, loss of the some educational programs, changing to a new environment all caused and still cause stress.

Even seeing images of those politicians today who were involved in the activity cause upset and stress levels to raise in young children still. There have been many sleepless nights and tears for children, based on our own personal experience and of those of friends.

School Capacity

The capacity figures for the school did not take into account building condition or use by alternative programs such as music, or after school care. The modern school curriculum had moved on to use the additional space, and if the school was at 100%, it would not have had room to offer programs such as music, school care etc.

- Why were the statistics so invalid and biased?
- Was the capacity figures based on current optimum class sizes and use of our open plan spaces or was it based upon superseded figures and standards?
- What price do you put on a child's education, which is measured by more than just the work at the school desk?

Flynn was doing a brilliant job for the future generations in raising well balanced, caring, sharing individuals. Not all students thrive in super schools – some thrive better in the smaller schools which can provide a more caring environment, which was the case with Flynn.

We understand the Flynn demographics were based on projections from the 2001 Census data. These figures did not show the trend that has continued of many houses changing hands for younger families.

Timetable

The closure proposal was not realistic, as the timetable did not work. Given the published six month consultation period, and the Government's final decision, proper transition without stress was not possible. The last stressful day of Flynn school will stay with us and the children for ever.

- Was there anyone in the Department of Education who expressed concern for the psychological welfare of the children, or was it a case of no-one was brave enough to speak out against the Government?
- Where is the assessment that determined that the closure process chosen was the best for the children?

A better solution would have been to have at least 12 months notice of any intention to finally close. We needed to know the answer well before the school finished lessons for the year, not in the last week.

The final decision to close just before the end of the year was traumatic for all concerned. The timetables impacted on a proper farewell, school enrolments, psychology and planning for 2007.

- Was the outcome pre-determined given that all the staff were earmarked to move at the end of the 2006 year, and if a decision to not close was made, where did we sit in relation to maintaining the same Flynn staff into 2007?