

Ms Amanda Bresnan MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601
committees@parliament.act.gov.au

Dear Ms Bresnan

**ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, TRAINING
AND YOUTH AFFAIRS - INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL CLOSURES AND REFORM OF THE
ACT EDUCATION SYSTEM**

This is my personal submission to the Standing Committee inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system. The following comments are made from my experiences as a parent of children attending one of the schools closed as part of the *Towards 2020* policy, namely Hall Primary School.

I understand the Standing Committee has a copy of the **Hall Primary P&C Association's submission to the Towards 2020 taskforce**. I was very closely involved in the preparation of that submission spending thousands of (unpaid) hours attending meetings and seminars, reading research papers, trying to make sense of the Government's proposals for the ACT public education system and in particular its proposal to close Hall Primary. It was an extremely stressful and trying time for me personally and for my family during the six month 'consultation' period and we are still being affected by this issue almost three years on.

The arguments raised in the Hall P&C submission remain valid in my opinion and I continue to state my unequivocal support for the reopening of Hall Primary. I also hereby give my full support for the arguments and recommendations contained in the **submissions to your inquiry made by the ACT Council of P&C Associations Inc and the Village of Hall and District Progress Association**. I believe the community of Hall Village and District needs a public primary school to survive and grow as a community.

Background

Some brief background information will hopefully clarify my position. My husband, elder son and I moved to Canberra from Sydney in March 1998. My younger son was born in Canberra in July 1998. We decided to move to Canberra because we believed it would be a better environment in which to raise our family. After a successful career in the NSW public service, I willingly made the decision to leave the paid workforce to raise my children as I believed and still do believe that they are my primary focus and highest priority until they become independent members of our society.

Since my elder son started preschool in 2000, I have been very closely involved with my childrens' schools and P&C Associations. I have happily given my time and effort because I passionately believe in the public education system. I believe public education is the best environment for my children to learn and develop as I want them to understand and cope with our complex society and hopefully make a worthwhile contribution to that society.

As you can see from my address above, I do not reside in Hall Village. I chose to send my children to Hall Preschool and Hall Primary School because it was a small school in a very pleasant rural village setting. Getting my sons to and from Hall Primary was no burden to me (I drove past Ngunnawal Primary and Gold Creek School) as Hall Primary provided the most suitable environment for my children - an environment which suited my childrens'

personalities as they are not loud, extrovert individuals. They felt safe and happy and were able to get to know and mix with all the Hall Primary children. The children were able to get to know all the teachers and all the teachers knew all the students.

The abrupt closure of Hall Primary at the end of my elder son's Year 5 was extremely traumatic for us all. Following extensive investigation, my children enrolled at Maribyrnong Primary in 2007. We chose Maribyrnong because it also is a small school (although it has almost twice as many students as at Hall) and is situated in a peaceful, leafy location in Kaleen. Once again, I was very happy to drive further to get my children to and from a school which I believed was the best primary education environment for them. I am fortunate to be able to do so.

I reiterate that I fully support the submissions made by the Hall Primary P&C Association (Towards 2020, 2006); the ACT Council of P&C Associations Inc (2009) and the Village of Hall and District Progress Association (2009). I now wish to submit my personal comments in respect of the Terms of Reference of your Standing Committee's Inquiry.

1. The ACT Government's Towards 2020 policy.

The planning of Canberra has previously been based on the creation of neighbourhood communities, usually with a primary school at its centre. The removal of the local primary school has a very negative impact on community cohesion and growth. I believe the current focus in the planning and delivery of educational services, with its emphasis on 'superschools' is not good for the long term social development of Canberra.

A common catch cry from the Government during the so-called Towards 2020 consultation period was that the proposal would enhance diversity and choice in the public education system. This is not the case. For this to be true, the Government would need to provide the full range of educational models in all regions, that is, P-2 early childhood schools, P-6 primary schools, P-10 schools, Yrs 7-12 high schools, Yrs 6-8 middle schools, etc, would need to be located in all regions throughout Canberra. By closing Hall Primary, my choice of a small, truly community based P-6 primary school was taken away.

I believe the current mish-mash of education models resulting from the Towards 2020 policy has done nothing to enhance the reputation of the ACT public education system. Rather it has created more uncertainty and misunderstanding than before Towards 2020. The vast array of models being implemented suggests a government and bureaucracy which is not sure how to best educate our future generations – a situation which does not engender public confidence in the system.

2. The impact of school consolidation and closures.

The effect on the Village of Hall and District of the closure of Hall Primary is set out comprehensively in the Progress Association's submission to your inquiry. The impact on the Hall community has been a negative one, both socially and financially, and the community continues to advocate strongly for the return of its local primary school.

Closure of Hall Primary at the end of 2006 meant that my elder son had to adjust to a new school for his final year of primary school and then had to cope with the transition to high school twelve months later. He is now in Year 8 and overall I believe he coped with the double upheaval quite well, I am sure the additional stress associated with having to attend a new school for Year 6 was not easy for him.

3. Community responses, including – review of consultation process, uses for closed school facilities.

The Towards 2020 consultation process was totally inadequate from my perspective. Following the dropping of the Towards 2020 bombshell to close Hall Primary, the Hall

Primary community worked tirelessly to prepare submissions arguing against the closure of the school based on the Government's oft repeated undertaking that Towards 2020 was only a proposal and that no decision would be made until after the mandatory consultation period. Our experiences during the consultation period now lead me to believe that decisions had already been made prior to the consultation process.

At a meeting with Minister Barr soon after the Towards 2020 announcement, he gave us an undertaking to meet with us again a couple of months later when we had prepared a draft of our submission to discuss issues raised by us and answer any further questions we had. However, when we requested the follow up meeting in August, September and October, we had little success. We were given a date and time, however, when we arrived at Mr Barr's office, his staff did not have any record of our appointment. We persevered in our requests to meet with Mr Barr as he promised but the only offer we were given was a meeting with Mr Barr's Chief of Staff. Our trust in the consultation process nosedived with every unsuccessful attempt to obtain a meeting with Mr Barr, a meeting which Mr Barr had offered to us!

Many questions raised during the consultation period and following the Towards 2020 announcements in December 2006 were never satisfactorily answered by the Minister or the Department of Education. What information, data, research, etc, was used to develop the Towards 2020 proposals? What did the Costello Report contain (Functional Review of the ACT Public Service) in respect of the ACT public education system? Who developed the specific proposals contained in Towards 2020 – the education bureaucracy?, the politicians and their staff?, academics? What was the actual decision-making process used? Why were Hall Primary and Tharwa Primary suddenly placed in Gungahlin and Tuggeranong Regions respectively when they had always been classified as 'rural' schools (I believe they have now reverted to being classified as 'rural' schools)?

One of the main reasons given for the need to 'rationalise' the public education system was that the ACT faced extremely serious budgetary difficulties. Following the Towards 2020 announcements in December 2006 all we heard was that the ACT budget surplus kept increasing!?

Also, following the announcement to close Hall Primary, the school community requested a Statement of Reasons from the Government, believing that we would be given details of how the Government's decisions on all the proposals had been made. We were again extremely disappointed when all we received was a document containing bland, general and quite meaningless statements about how the programs provided by Hall were being provided elsewhere in the system. We were also advised that we were not entitled to receive any Statement of Reasons for any other school that was to be closed or was to remain open?!

My distrust of the Government and its processes hit rock bottom.

Such a far reaching reorganisation of the ACT public education system required far more input, from the absolute beginning of the process, from all parents and all schools. The way in which the proposals were developed behind closed doors and then announced was divisive and cruel – the effect, deliberate or not, was to divide and isolate designated schools and set school community against school community!

Conclusion

I have tried to put my thoughts and beliefs down on paper in some sort of rational and logical order, however it is very difficult to do so. The issues involved are complex and important to me personally and my feelings of frustration and anger still surface easily when I think back over my experiences during the Towards 2020 'consultation' and since that time.

I sincerely believe that decisions were made, including the decision to close Hall Primary School, prior to the announcement of the 2020 proposals and that all my time, energy and efforts were wasted and an exercise in futility. Even though I would not have accepted the decision easily, being given the true reasons behind their decision to close Hall Primary may have resulted in my retaining at least some degree of respect for politicians and the democratic process by which we are supposed to be governed – **by** the people, of the people, **for** the people.

Yours sincerely,

JENNIFER LEWIS