

Submission to ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

Opening statement

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry, but the title of this inquiry is clearly misleading: it is not an inquiry into school closures. The so-called 'community minded' Greens have waded through the destruction wrought on committed and hard working school communities by the Labor party in its ill-considered and misleading 'towards 2020' document. In fact, I understand that agreement to not challenge the 'towards 2020' school closures was an explicit part of the agreement to which the ACT Greens signed on in their shameless attempt to grab hold of political power.

Of course, these are the same communities that the previous Greens' representative, Dr Deb Foskey, so ably supported through the 'towards 2020' process of school destruction. Dr Foskey also demonstrated the highest levels of political principles by taking the fight to the Government in Assembly and suffered considerable abuse from the same Ministers that the Greens class of 2008 now seems so keen to support. I can only guess at the level of Dr Foskey's disappointment knowing that one of the prime reasons for the unprecedented Green vote in the 2008 election was her outstanding performance in keeping a majority Labor government accountable for its actions.

Having read the flimsy agreement between Labor and the Greens, I am left wondering what happened to the accountability. The education component of that agreement contains three single sentence statements two of which are dedicated to playgroups and, swimming and water survival skills. While these are laudable aims, I have no confidence that the Greens have given any comprehensive consideration to education policy and instead have vacated the field to the Labor party in the rush to conclude the agreement.

On broader accountability, the agreement contains a clause with the effect of binding the parties to remove provisions in the FOI Act which currently allow for conclusive certificates except where the material contains information pertaining to national security. If the Greens actually intend to give effect to this provision and not just pay lip service to it, then they should immediately demand the release of all documents relating to school closures under 'towards 2020' including the functional review conducted by Michael Costello – I'm not holding my breath.

Terms of Reference

1. The ACT Government's Towards 2020 policy

The factors outlined under this term of reference look woefully inadequate. Is it the case that there is no examination of the whole policy including the biased and misleading 'towards 2020 renewing our schools'. That document was replete with biased language "...Cook Primary School and Cook Preschool will close from the end of 2007" in what was supposed to be a consultation document. It also contained critical misleading information that despite repeated attempts was never corrected leading to the conclusion that it was deliberately written this way. The most fundamental example of this was the statement in the 'renewing our schools document' that "enrolments in schools such as Giralang, Cook and Southern Cross have declined over recent years, with only 40 per cent of school capacity being utilised". Cook Primary school's enrolments were not declining and 91 per cent of the capacity of the school was being utilised. In addition, the 40 per cent figure is not

arithmetically correct – disturbing for a document released by our Education Minister. These errors were pointed out to the Government and the Department of Education and Training a number of times, but they made no effort to correct them leading to the only conclusion that the text was deliberately written that way.

The Government bias continued in the release of its ‘towards 2020’ consultation (released in December 2006) document where it failed to mention that the Cook school community had put forward a number of proposals to improve the cost effectiveness of an already very cost effective school in its submission to the ‘towards 2020’ proposal.

The decision making process was also based on demographic projections that were based on entirely backward looking input variables such as the previous census and took no account of increasing birth rates that were emerging through such factors as the Commonwealth Government’s baby bonus. The inquiry urgently needs to look at the demographic projections underlying ‘towards 2020’ as well as independent projections based on more up to date data.

2. The impact of school consolidation and closures

The Inquiry needs to recognise that school closures were actually a case of a government bullying primary school students. This has had a devastating impact on my daughters who were deprived of a continuing education at a school in which they were very happy and which cared for them as individuals.

Apart from a small handful of schools that had very low capacity utilisation and needed major capital works there was never any case for school closures. The Government’s manufactured budget estimates were never realised and were substantially revised upwards in every publication following the June 2006 budget and the savings estimates were a gross over estimate. A fact admitted by the Chief Minister when representatives of the school community met with him and he stated “if in fact there are any savings from closing Cook primary” and this was after a diatribe on the importance of doing something about the secondary sector when he was meeting representatives of a primary school.

3. Community responses

Clearly our public submission was ignored we were one of two schools to lose both our primary school and pre-school, our recommendations for improvements were completely ignored in the Government’s consultation document that picked up suggestions of other schools. The Government completely ignored its own rationale for ‘towards 2020’ when it decided to close our school. We had stable enrolments, had 91 per cent capacity utilisation, were cost effective with buildings in good shape, and had made substantial contributions to our own improvements such as a shade cloth and electronic smart boards. The decision was so far away from the government’s own policy rationale it would be easy for an independent observer to conclude that the decision had a significant element of vendetta.

4 Any other relevant matter

I would be very willing to appear before the Committee to provide further information.

Brendan Morling