

31 March 2009

Ms Amanda Bresnan MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ms Bresnan

Submission for the inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

I would like to provide this submission regarding the inquiry into school closures.

To someone who hasn't been in this situation, it is easy to say, "They'll get over it", but more than two years down the track, the Flynn community is still feeling the repercussions of the loss of their school.

The loss of the school and community may have been easier to take if we knew there was justice behind the closure, but it was soon determined that there was no justification behind the government's decision. The government relied on flawed data to justify its case in closing Flynn Primary. Major flaws in the Towards 2020 proposal are, but not limited to:

- incorrect data (figures from old census data)
- schools did not get the full six months consultation as required by the Education Act 2004. (Submissions were required by early November and relevant information for schools to prepare their submissions was not provided at the beginning of the consultation process)
- at no stage was a study made of the social and psychological impact, although this was promised by the Minister at the Towards 2020 community meeting held at Copland College
- the Department of Education was not interested in any other alternatives to making savings, except the closure of schools. They did not address any concerns by the community.

Closure on enrolment numbers and curriculum

The Towards 2020 proposal stated that schools would be closing on the grounds of small enrolments and lack of curriculum opportunities, but the fact still remains that these figures meant nothing in the process. When comparing Flynn Primary's numbers and curriculum to schools in the area that remained open, their decision to close Flynn did not correlate with the proposal. Three of the four closest schools in our area could not match the curriculum that Flynn Primary offered. These schools still do not provide a second language or in one case have a librarian. The Minister promised at the Towards 2020 community meeting that schools closing would end up with more opportunities not less! This was the foundation of his reasons for closing schools.

I am still waiting for the Minister's office to telephone me back and give me the reasons for closing our school instead of the school in the next suburb, which had less student numbers and less programs. His office couldn't tell me why they closed Flynn Primary. Surely at that stage (the day we were informed of the closure), they should have been prepared to answer the community's questions. The Minister's office reply was, "I'll have to call you back", which given the large social and economic footprint the Towards 2020 proposal was to make, was simply not good enough. The community deserved a detailed and specific assessment of why schools were chosen for closure and others remained open.

School condition and facilities

The Minister stated to us at the Towards 2020 community meeting that a lot of school buildings were in poor condition. Flynn Primary's condition, when the proposal was announced, was not reviewed nor received a building condition report when all the other schools did. Failure for the government to meet this criteria in Flynn's case is a major flaw in its reasoning. Along with the building being in excellent condition, classrooms all had computers, state of the art smart board technology and had been granted a Federal government grant to have reverse cycle air-conditioning installed, which was subsequently stopped.

With such a lack of childcare facilities in the area, the decision to close Flynn with its out of hours care facility was irresponsible. Not only were the parents and students affected by the decision, staff at the facility lost their jobs. The Flynn school also provided the community with somewhere to go out of school hours to learn music, dance, judo, aerobics. Besides the pre school and primary school, there were no other community facilities in Flynn. This was the centre of our community.

Student indicators

The government, when looking at numbers in relation to the ACTAP results did not leave out the results of children at Flynn that had learning difficulties, such as Aspergers. The government manipulated the data to its benefit. If anything, it showed that Flynn Primary was a compassionate school that was willing to take on children with special needs when others wouldn't.

I am still astounded that even after the 2006 Census stated that Flynn had one of the highest fertility rates in the ACT, that on that basis alone, we did not remain open. The government is lacking foresight if this does not prove that there would be a real need for a school in Flynn. There is no point in the community participating in a census if the statistics aren't taken into consideration.

Economic impact

A one-off payment made upon transition (made *only* to families moving into the public school system) was never going to compensate parents for all the future costs incurred, especially with rising fuel costs. The government is striving to promote alternatives to driving, yet the Flynn community has changed from walking to school and the extracurricular activities held at the school, to always needing to travel by car. The government did not consider the environmental impact of more cars on the road.

If economics was such a big reason in the planning of school closures, I don't understand the rationality of closing a school that supposedly doesn't have enough students and spending money at many other schools building demountables and refurbishing to accommodate new students.

When notice was given on which schools were closing, parents had five days to find another school before the Christmas school holidays. This very limited time made it very difficult to make a decision, especially when parents and children were devastated by the closure of their school.

Social impact

My children now attend a private school because I lost all faith that the ACT government would not close more schools. My children could not go through the anguish of losing another school. They still remain very upset about Flynn Primary and one child in particular lost a lot of confidence and still grieves for the wonderful principal, the teachers and close friendships. The closure of Flynn has been a financial burden, but our new school seemed to be the closest to Flynn Primary that we could find in terms of curriculum and also provided us with peace of mind against more school closures.

We cannot help but feel cheated and bitter that the educational needs of our children and the social impact of our community was never important to the Department. We will never get over how undemocratic and shocking the whole process was, and we cannot help but feel unsatisfied that our questions and concerns were never addressed properly. If there were real economic issues that the government needed to address, the consultation process needed to be a real process that was timely and that took on board the community's concerns and views.

The community has a real need for a school and a community hub. If nothing else, the building should already be used for childcare and other community needs that are a real necessity. There needs to be a real assurance that the Act will prevent anything such as the recent school closures to be managed so badly again. It needs to be a very open and transparent process.

Yours sincerely

Maggi and Michael O'Neill