

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

"A society will be judged on how it looks after it's most vulnerable members"
- William Dean

The Tharwa Community has been significantly impacted by the loss of the Tharwa Primary School. What once was a vibrant, resilient rural community for over 100 years has been dramatically weakened and disconnected from Canberra. The members feel that they have been unfairly targeted by the ACT Government and had vital services withdrawn with no consideration of the impacts on the community. The centre of the village lies empty most days with little signs of life. The community has turned in on itself, each family looking after themselves, trying to get on with things. The resilience shown from the 2003 bushfires is all but gone.

Having the Pre-school still operate provides a small amount of activity, but because parents only have their child there for one year, few are reluctant to make a commitment to contributing to the community. Before people would actively be involved over the 7 years of schooling offered in Tharwa, with relationships developed and social capital built up. This is no longer the case. Parents with more than one child choose to go into town rather than have their children at two schools.

The students from Tharwa had a difficult transition. Their student files were lost for a whole term with the transition notes for the new teachers. They were only found by the Department after the story was reported in the Canberra Times. As a result students with special needs missed support for that first term. Parents were frustrated that all the time and effort made to ensure a smooth transition was wasted.

For those children who excelled in the small bush setting, it has been difficult conforming to the big and impersonal nature of the bigger schools. Tharwa used to attract students who struggled in larger schools, often exhibiting behavioural issues, and provided a nurturing environment where these issues disappeared. These children now struggle getting the attention they need to make the most of their Primary education.

Despite numerous requests to ACTION and Department of Urban Services there is still no public transport/school bus available for primary school students. The existing secondary bus service leaves Tharwa at 7:45 and would get to the primary school at 8:15 where the students would be unsupervised. This is not appropriate for a 5 year old. Students have been told that they are not to be at school before 8.55am and must leave promptly at 3.00pm as there is no supervision provided outside of these hours. This means that all students from the Tharwa area must be driven to school, putting financial pressure on parents as well as limiting work opportunities. Children who walked to school now spend upwards of 1 hour a day in the car getting to and from school.

One of the benefits promised of a larger school was the increased opportunities available to students. Our experience has been the opposite. The number of excursions, cultural opportunities or additional activities available to the students in the new school has been close to zero compared to what was offered at the Tharwa Primary School. Constant feedback and suggestions in parent teacher interviews and to the school executive looking to improve the options available to students has not gained anything.

The Tharwa community engaged in the consultation process with a spirit of openness and a belief that their suggestions would be considered in making a better school system. It quickly became evident that input was not considered and the end result had been predetermined. New information brought to the department was not considered. Attempts to request information under FOI was refused under Ministerial privilege about whether or not this information was looked at by the government.

The Tharwa submission experienced breaches of confidentiality during consultation process. Information discussed in confidential meeting with David Peebles (senior advisor to Minister Barr) in September/October was used to prevent the community from opening a community school after the closure. Mr Peebles was aware of the community intention to open the school as an extension of an existing school prior to submissions being sent to the department. Legislation was then passed at 5.00pm the night before the final announcements of school closures preventing the opening of an extension of an existing school without Ministerial approval.

Carole Harris Director of Schools Southside personally came to the closure announcement of the Tharwa School (despite many other larger schools in her district being closed). After the announcement when parents talked about their backup plan to open a community school, Mrs Harris said that this was not possible, omitting to mention the fact the legislation had been changed the previous evening at 5.00pm without discussion in the Assembly. Up until that change the Education Act allowed the proposed action by the community to partner with an existing school and open a new extension of the school.

The Tharwa Pre-school was merged with Condor primary school, which was never part of the submission about the Pre-School, yet the Primary school was not offered the same option (which was part of the Primary school proposal). When an FOI request was made to reveal the reasons why the Pre-School was offered this option it was refused on the grounds the "decision was a positive one for the community and did not need explanation".

The main reason admitted for the closure of the Tharwa Primary school was given around cost. This was later denied by the government (although other reasons were never given). Yet no opportunity was given to the community to show how costs could be saved in running the School. For over 100 years the school had a teaching principal. Then the Department said you must have a separate non teaching principal. This was then used as one of the reasons that the school was "too expensive" to run, without giving an opportunity to return to a way it had been run for 5 generations.

Cost per student was used as measurement by the Chief Minister, yet as demonstrated in the Tharwa Communities submission and increase of only 10 students would make the school one of the cheapest in the ACT.

The cost of the closure were severely underestimated. The fact that two sets of people came out to mow the grounds one for the Pre-School and one for the abandoned Primary School were not considered as it fell into another Departments budget – hence a saving for the Education Department.

The Department of Urban Services has demonstrated that it has no idea on what to do with the old Primary School Buildings. No suitable tenants have been identified that would

be compatible with the part-time Pre-School, as the building have been left empty for over 2 years. This is despite an expensive consultation process which would have funded the old Primary School a number of years.

Please see www.savetharwaschool.com for more issues raised by the community during the consultation process.

There is a strong local demand to reopen the Tharwa Primary School. The local population of children under 5 is at it's highest level in 35 years, and very healthy numbers in the Pre-School (now the Tharwa Bridge has been reopened). The demographics undertake for the Towards 2020 only used figures up until 2010 with no regard to future population of the region. The school can be reopened could be done by having the school as part of Charles Condor School. It would be cheaper than extending Charles Condor school with two demountable classrooms, as the Tharwa buildings are appropriate for classrooms. Overheads of running the school will be minimised by sharing the School executive and administration. Two teachers and a part time administrative assistant would be needed to re-open the school.

Opening a school would give a reason for young families to move to the area giving an opportunity for renewal of the population. Currently the community sees families with older Primary age students moving away for opportunities, leaving an ageing population. This is exacerbated due to the limited availability of housing available in the area. A community with no ability for renewal will eventually die out.

The Tharwa community represents one of the most geographically disadvantaged area in the ACT. The access to facilities and support are lower than almost any other part of Canberra. Opportunities are severely limited by living in the oldest surviving community in Canberra. As Canberra's 100 birthday draws closer one of the few things that existed before Canberra is being destroyed by neglect. Unfortunately Canberra will not realise what is lost by losing its last rural communities until it is too late. It was not so long ago that Canberra was referred to as the "bush capital", now it is the suburban capital.

With a cost effective investment, opening the Tharwa Primary school joined to Charles Condor school and the Pre-School at Tharwa, a significant amount of hope will return to the community. The building is ready, the community eager and the benefits would be greater than any other use.

It is difficult to write this submission as there is so much more that can be written, yet there is a feeling that we have done this twice before and not been heard. This issue has created a deep distrust in the ACT government and its processes in governing the Territory.

I would much rather make a personal presentation to the committee and answer questions on the impact on the Tharwa community. This would be at the committee's convenience. It is not too late to make things better.

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