

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs

Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

Please accept this submission to the above inquiry.

I believe that the ACT Government should be condemned for its decision to close Hall school. The decision to close the school was taken without any understanding of the role the school plays in a small community. The ACT Government was unable to differentiate between Hall school and any standard suburban school in Canberra. In a small community, the school is the “beating heart” of the community and sustains many aspects of community life. I think the question can reasonably be asked of Government bureaucrats and ministers “what has been the impact of the closure of Hall school on the community of Hall and district?” because it is telling that they would not be able to answer.

A Government that **cared** would not have closed the school in the first place but would certainly have put in place measures to monitor and mitigate the effects of the closure on the community. That the ACT Government did not do this indicates that they did not understand that the closure of the school would have impacts different to suburban situations in Canberra.

The school provides an essential element in the critical mass that sustains many other processes in the Hall community including:

- social networks
- economic processes

If nothing else the ACT Government should be concerned about the impact on businesses within the village of Hall as there is a direct feedback into the ACT economy from reduced incomes in the many small businesses within the village. With the majority of enrolments at the school coming from nearby areas of NSW, this means that the ACT Government is missing out on this income as parents no longer need to make visits to the village on school business – the foregone income probably dwarfs the supposed shortfall in funding per student that was claimed as the reason to close the school.

The village of Hall is listed on the ACT Heritage Register with one of the main reasons being the links between the village and the surrounding area, most of which is in NSW. In its application of economic rationalism to the school issue, the ACT Government has ignored these links and cut these ties in direct contravention of its own statements about the heritage value of Hall. Heritage value is about more than old buildings and established landscapes – it is about the social and community links forged over more than 100 years and Hall school was at the centre of these networks. Closing the school has in one action destroyed most of these links as it removed the reason that many families had to come into the village on a daily basis.

It is further evidence of a government that doesn't **care** that the Hall school has stood vacant for more than two years. The ACT Government has presided over a utterly shambolic process of deciding a future for the site. Highlights of the inept approach to managing the issue include:

- proposals to refurbish buildings on the site as a community hall – if the Government **cared** enough to find out, it would discover that a community hall already exists in the village at the showground – it is managed by the community for the community and has been for decades
- conflicting statements from various agents of government about the future of the site and who has carriage of the process – chief amongst these have been staff of the Education and TAMs agencies
- continued management of the landscaping of the site as if it is a high risk school ground eg the current tree removal program which runs in direct opposition to the heritage values of the site
- stealing the asset of the school museum from the local community and locking us out of the building when most of the artefacts were donated by the local community. The viable proposals developed for community management of the museum have been ignored.
- the government's knee jerk decision to block alternative education operators from using the asset and re-establishing a school on the site

Hall school should never have been closed. A government that **cared** would have acknowledged what a school means to a small community like Hall, it would have valued the contribution to heritage values that the school makes and it would have understood the economic costs to the local community of closing the school.

A government that **cared** would have quarantined Hall school from the school closure debate and sought other means of keeping it open including seeking increased financial support from NSW under the Commonwealth Grants Commission process.

If the government is to not operate a school on the site, it should at least remove the prohibition on alternative education operators using the site so that the demand for a school in the area can be met, the economic damage to the village repaired and the heritage links to the district prolonged.

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