

Ms Amanda Bresnan MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
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Dear Ms Bresnan

The ACT Playgroups Association would like to provide this submission to the Standing Committee inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system.

As you may be aware, ACT Playgroups is the peak body for community-based playgroups in the ACT. We have over 2,200 family members (and more than 3,000 ACT children). We support over 200 playgroups across the region meeting each week in preschools, schools, halls, churches, libraries and other community venues.

Playgroups are informal sessions where parents, caregivers, babies and children aged 0 to 5 come together in a relaxed and friendly environment. Playgroup helps children have fun, make new friends, and develop new skills through informal play. Playgroup helps parents and caregivers make friends and share ideas and experiences.

Playgroups are fundamentally a community activity. Driven by community members, without funding or intervention, playgroups are generated by parents and caregivers for parents and caregivers (and their children and their community).

Playgroups deliver much needed support and assistance to parents and carers at a very stressful and difficult time in their lives.

The importance of playgroups has been recognised through research and by many organisations, including through the provision of funding to the peak body for playgroups in this region by both Territory and Federal Governments, and by other community agencies.

In line with the terms of reference of the inquiry, we would like to put forward the points set out below:

2. The impact of school consolidation and closures with a focus on community experiences and attitudes; student learning experiences; and financial, social and environmental impacts.

Prior to 2006 almost 85 percent of ACT Government pre-schools hosted community playgroups. That figure is now closer to one quarter. Not because there has been a reduction in the numbers of playgroup members or groups or the suitability of pre-schools as safe and appropriate playgroup venues. We believe that this reduction is entirely due to the closure of preschools and the flow on effect that this has had on the availability of neighbouring sites.

The closure of ten preschools in the ACT has had a significant impact on the wider community that accessed these sites. Over fifty playgroups have ceased operation

completely due to preschool closures, the flow on of increased demand at neighbouring sites and the lack of alternative local, affordable and safe venues. Hundreds of families have been left without their regular support mechanism. In addition, playgroups established for disadvantaged families, those from different cultural groups and with special needs have been left without a venue and have therefore ceased. Much of this has happened with little or no notice and certainly without consultation or engagement of local groups.

3d. New uses for school facilities

Preschools (and some primary schools) have been used as playgroup venues for decades in this region. A synergy has evolved between playgroup members and the preschool parent association and preschool staff. Many pre-schools recognise the importance of the early engagement of young families in the community into the preschool. This early familiarity with the local preschool has multiple benefits both in increasing rates of attendance at preschool and increasing parent participation in volunteer activities at preschool and school.

We would like to see this relationship recognised and enhanced. ACT Playgroups in its 2009 Budget Submission has requested that a new policy be adopted in relation to available preschool and primary school space. Community use of vacant rooms and areas should be encouraged, with funding, staff time or resources as appropriate. The broader community needs to access safe and affordable spaces for families and children. Commercialising ex-school sites or charging market rent denies families an opportunity to engage in their local community.

ACT Playgroups would like to see a greater involvement of community activities (like playgroups) in existing preschool and primary school facilities. In addition, we think that local community members should have priority in obtaining access to closed school and preschool buildings. Any redevelopment of a closed school or preschool site, should allow families in the immediate local area to maintain involvement with that site and continue the community engagement that the school/preschool facility had established. Neighbourhoods deprived of a school or preschool should not also be deprived of the hub and focus to community life provided by that particular school or preschool.

Please contact me if you have any questions about this submission or require any further information on the effect of school closures on playgroups in the ACT.

Yours sincerely

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