

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

Dear Ms Bresnan

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

We have lived in the Flynn suburb since 1991 and have 3 daughters, all of whom attended Flynn Primary School. Our youngest daughter was mid way through year 5 at Flynn in 2006 when the Towards 2020 proposal to close Flynn school was announced. In the period leading up to, and subsequent to the closure, our family, along with the wider Flynn school community was significantly negatively impacted.

We believe that the school and only community resource centre in the suburb were wrongfully closed in December 2006, contrary to overwhelming community opinion, at the end of a flawed and damaging process that was in breach of the principles and process outlined in the government's Education Act.

We understand that the Flynn Primary School P&C Association has submitted a detailed response outlining some serious matters that deserve close scrutiny by the Committee. We urge the committee members to give the Flynn submission a full read (not just the executive summary) and careful consideration. Failure to do so can only serve to compound the injustice already served on the Flynn and wider Canberra community by the Towards 2020 policy, and to subject those same families to significant risks of repeated poor governance and decision making in the future.

In line with the terms of reference of the inquiry, we offer the following comments.

1. The ACT Government's *Towards 2020* policy, including demographic factors influencing regional planning in the delivery of educational services; configuration of school environments and educational outcomes; and reorganisation of the ACT school system thus far.

The Towards 2020 policy was hastily prepared without appropriate consultation and debate. While allegedly about delivering better educational outcomes, it offered no evidence for any improvement under the new policy, and in fact was soon exposed to be purely driven from financial imperatives. It was not based on solid research and up-to-date, accurate data, but was proven to be based on out of date, and missing information. When corrected data was supplied, it was ignored.

It left our family and others within the Flynn community, for no good reason, without a school that was providing a rich educational experience. It also took away the only community facility that fostered social networks and social capital. Contrary to what the government said, the demographic data gathered by way of a census of the suburb showed that there was the capacity to support a school.

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.

The impacts on our family were traumatic to say the least. We were (and remain) angry at being subject to a decision that was poorly informed and unjustified. We grieved the abrupt loss of friends and community connectedness, and simple things like children being able to walk safely to and from school with their friends. We were very fortunate to find a place at a non-government school, but this was not within walking distance. This school demonstrated compassion in response to our circumstances and went beyond its normal capacity to make a space for our daughter in a year 6 class. It received no support from the government for doing so.

It took, however, a full 12 months for our daughter to adjust to her new surroundings. Establishing new friendship groups at a difficult age, when others had already been together for some time was not easy for our daughter, and she remained both upset and disruptive for some time as she struggled to settle down gain acceptance. Her learning and educational experiences were thus hampered, not enhanced during year 6.

Financially, the move to another school for year 6 was a significant cost for our family. The purchase of full summer, winter and sporting school uniforms, school specific resources (uncommon with those used at Flynn), term bus tickets, and other 'extra curricular' activities that were more costly than the publicly funded arrangements at the Flynn school, were all costs our family had to bear, without any recompense or acknowledgement by the government (which in fact discriminated against families whose only option was to attend a non-government school by denying them the transition allowance paid to families who were able to move to a government school).

3. Community responses, including: review of the consultation process, including how public submissions were considered and incorporated into the final reform package; views on the *Education Amendment Bill 2008*; interest expressed by school communities to re-open schools listed for closure; and new uses for school facilities.

At the heart of our frustration and disappointment with the Towards 2020 process was the profoundly flawed nature of the consultation process, the complete disregard for due process, and a failure to act in an open and transparent way, in line with the government's own commitments and as prescribed in the Education Act.

No aspect of the process worked well.

In the case of the Flynn closure, the government was unable to demonstrate that it genuinely wanted to get input from the community and would take on board suggestions made. There was no satisfactory response to requests for information, and no indication of how the government had considered the points made in Flynn's submission. The P&C went to enormous lengths to put information on the table, so that the government had the appropriate data on which to base its decisions – all to no avail.

The process felt like a *fait accompli* all the way through – from the beginning when there was an absence of information and criteria to address, for the community to prepare its submission, to near the end before the final announcements were made, when the movers came with packing boxes and principals were asked to get families to indicate what school they would transition to.

The fact that there has never been any information made public as to the basis for the closure of Flynn school compared with others nearby – ie on what basis one school was closed, and another remained open, breaches the fundamental principles of good governance – ie open and transparent decision making.

4. Any other relevant matter.

As a result of the significantly flawed Towards 2020 process, the Canberra community must be protected from governments behaving in a similar way in the future. The following is therefore recommended:

- All documents relating to the 2006 school closures should be released to the public (with the exception of any privacy related material) – including the Costello review and others withheld during the Freedom of Information request by Flynn P&C
- Amendments should be made to the Education act to ensure it is much tighter and governments can't circumvent its intention
- Consideration be given to re-opening the Flynn school (even if it be on a smaller basis initially) given the need established through the demographic data, and the support demonstrated by the local community – Flynn is the only school that was closed without any other community facilities available
- In the event that the school is not re-opened in the short-medium term, the buildings, which are subject to an application for heritage listing, be retained for community use, including for example child care facilities – the government to be prevented from clearing the land and surrounding park areas for financial reasons and construction of any housing.

Please contact us if you have any questions about this submission.

Yours sincerely

Judy Henson and Justin O'Dea

30 March 2009