

Submission to the Legislative Assembly for the ACT Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs

I have four children affected by school closures: two foster teenagers that were traumatised by the closure of Charnwood High and were relocated to Ginninderra High with a promise of receiving help. Neither got their year 10 certificate as a direct result. My two younger children have had to go through the same traumatising process.

Having been through it all before, I was well aware that at the end of the day the government would close us down without good reason. It was quite clear that they had already decided to close Flynn, which is why there were unable to give us a reason for choosing Flynn in the first place.

The reason I went to Flynn was because a caseworker from community services refused to allow my nephew to go to an alternative, closer primary school when he moved in with us some years ago. Flynn was the next closest and so we went there. I loved it so much that I enrolled my two younger children there.

I was and still am very angry over the decision to close Flynn. It was made only nine months after I suffered a stroke and I could hardly walk or talk and I had to make a choice of a new school—as if my kids hadn't been through enough already, they were now going to lose their friends and their support network.

The parents at Flynn were feeding my kids as I had to relearn how to cook. They were driving them to and from school because I had to relearn how to drive. The parents and teachers were putting in extra time with my kids because I couldn't. I had to relearn how to read and write.

There are no words to describe the extra stress it put on me. it was so much stress that I was having frequent anxiety attacks, which made my rehabilitation process and lot harder and longer.

After going into all the surrounding schools that had similar numbers of children, it was obvious that they were not up to the standard of Flynn. Some of the parents even did the surrounding schools visit with me to help me make a better choice for my children.

I thought it would be better if my children could walk or ride, so we attended the local school for the first day in 2007. After a meeting with the principal, the deputy spoke to me in a way that made me feel 'set upon', because the principal had not communicated the special circumstances of our situation.

My daughter saw this and was traumatised again and said she never wanted to go back to that school. This left us with not many options—one school stunk of wet carpet, another one close to Flynn was run down and had really small classrooms with no wet areas in classrooms so it was out. Fraser had very small classrooms and no Indigenous program and the principal made it clear she didn't usually take children from the Charnwood side of Kerrigan Street, and the last thing I wanted was for my kids to go from a nice cool concrete school to small, hot demountables.

This left Latham. I was very impressed because the principal was very honest and told me what work the school was waiting on being done and about when it would be, classrooms were small and only a few had wet areas and there was no parents' room, but it was friendly, clean and didn't smell. Everyone seemed to care and they were willing to give us the extra support we would need.

It meant I would have to drive further than I had since having the stroke and the cost of petrol meant that we would have to cut our food bill down again. We were already struggling financially as my rehabilitation appointments were at the Canberra Hospital, Dickson Health Service and Belconnen, and the extra cost of petrol was making things harder.

But the biggest loss of Flynn for my children was their friends, teachers and the fantastic sense of community that my children know they had at Flynn. We have since tried a few alternative community things, but they are not even close to what we had at Flynn.

Over the last 20 years, I have had children and foster children at Macgregor Preschool, Melba Preschool, Charnwood Primary School, Charnwood High School, Ginninderra High School and Melba High School as well as Flynn Primary School. From this experience I think the government made a big mistake in closing Flynn. Out of all the schools my children attended, Flynn had the best community spirit and caring teachers and principal.

Three years after the closures, I finally get to hear the sound of laughter in my house. My children get to see their Flynn friends as often as we can, given the price of petrol. Conversations are now about going to high school and how all of them will finally be back together again. They are also very upset that their beautifully mosaic tiled school is being damaged. We want the government to look after it.

The closures process really wasn't thought out too well at all. On the day they told us, there was one male counsellor who just stood there with his arms crossed and didn't talk to anyone—we didn't even know who he was until days later. They had packers packing while my children were in their classes.

I ended up with very traumatised children who did not learn for quite a while. They were seen socially as outsiders because they hadn't gone through from preschool with the children at their new school. It was 18 months before they were socially accepted by their peers and one of them was invited to a play over with someone from the new school. Although there were programs put into place at some schools, there was no one checking they actually worked.

I urge any parents who have children affected by school closures to phone the contact provided by the Department of Education, and tell him what has happened. He told me in 2007 that there were no problems with children from closed schools, and that I should just get over it.

I don't understand why we have children at other schools sitting in demountables when they could have been redirected to Flynn. My children now sit in a classroom

that is one third the size of the ones they were in Flynn, our after school area was huge and the parents had a room where they could store things for the school fete and craft activities. We had a community room that was fixed up not long before we closed.

Flynn has no other community facility: no shops or community hall. It is like a dead suburb now. You just drive through to go to Charnwood or Melba. It is very sad because it has great community support.

I know my family wouldn't hesitate in giving back if the school were to reopen and we would use Flynn community facilities. I want my children to give back to the communities that have helped them, and I cannot thank Flynn enough for everything they did for me and my children.

I have lived in the Canberra area most of my life and we are a proud Ngunnawal family. I have made a few achievements in ACT schools I have attended, always to try to make my children's education acceptable and better. Our culture is about our heritage, friends and family. It forms our sense of belonging, and an important part of that was taken away from our family when Flynn was closed.

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