

Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

Independent Submission

20 March 2009

During the consultation period of 2006 I was heavily involved in preparing the Chifley Action Group (CAG) submission in relation to Melrose Primary School in Chifley and lobbying the then ACT Labour Government.

I was board chair at Melrose Primary, thus gaining added insight into school closures via the official departmental view. I was also involved in formulating the departments' "transition" process for affected students from Melrose in relation to the proposed closure of the primary school.

I initiated and attended several meetings with Minister Barr, the Chief Executive and Area Coordinator of the Department of Education, several primary school Principals in the Woden area and numerous opposition MLAs.

Canvassed the views of residents in the then Melrose Primary School Priority Enrolment Area (PEA) (which took up all of Chifley and half of Pearce approx 1500 residents) by conducting a survey into current and future enrolment practises and uses of the then offered services.

I have attached all the relevant documents related to CAGs 2006 submission for your reference, to act as a background to my comments against your current terms of reference.

I am always more than happy to discuss any aspects of this submission.

Regards,

Louise Evans

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.*
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- ***Demographic factors influencing regional planning in the delivery of educational services;***

I am at a loss as to why the ACT Government in 2006 continued to base all its planning on figures that were proven to be incorrect.¹ It was stated in our 2006 submission that the figures used by government were averages of whole of region NOT suburb by suburb. These were then used by the government to demonstrate suburb by suburb demands. In respect, comparing apples to oranges and not like to like. This continued to happen again during the consultation held to determine what was to be done with the closed sites (first land then building)²

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.*

- ***Community experiences and attitudes;***

The overall experience and attitude conveyed during the consultation process was dismissive. In my experience and opinion, the Minister appeared to be showing the right amount of concern and interest when meeting with groups but at the same time you were left with the underlying feeling that we were just a check box that needed a tick in it. Have we met with relevant stakeholders, yes. Have we listened, yes. Are we going to provide any useful feedback, no. The feeling in the community, well at least in the Chifley community which I know fairly well, is one of disgust in the way that the 2006 school closure consultation and all that then followed was just a "process" that the government was legislated to perform and that any and all decisions that were and will continue to be made will be regardless of any consultation processes involved. This is currently being demonstrated by the fact that Melrose Primary is still ⅓ empty after 2 years and 2 separate independent consultations.³

- ***Financial, social and environmental impacts.***

The financial impacts are still and will continue to be felt by displaced families. When children were enrolled in new schools following a closure, a rebate of \$750 per child was awarded to families. This was to "offset" any initial or immediate financial hardship that might have occurred. What it did not do is take into account the continuing hardships experienced by families. In our case, mainly that of transport. It is irrelevant which school was chosen by families and for what reasons. Whichever

¹ Attachment 1 Enrolment Projections

² 2006 consultation on school closure and New Uses for Former School Sites, September 2007

³ 2006 consultation on school closure and New Uses for Former School Sites, September 2007

school was chosen was not within the suburb of residence, hence new transport options were required. In my case, it has been a long two year battle with ACTION to secure an appropriate morning and afternoon school bus service. This is an on-going cost to my family (two current school aged children and a third to start kindergarten in 2010) that will continue until at least 2019, when my youngest will be in year 10. If you base that on a \$54 term bus pass for three children attending at least until year 10 each (\$54 x 132 terms), I am at the very least out of pocket by \$7,128 (based on the cost of buying a term bus pass today). A cost that I would not have otherwise had to incur, had my local primary school remained opened. This is of course the lesser of two evils, the cost both to myself, the ACT government and the environment would be higher if I choose to drive my children to and from school each day for the 12 year period.

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.*
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- ***Review of the consultation process, including how public submissions were considered and incorporated into the final reform package;***

Unfortunately I am not in a position to comment on how public submissions were considered in the decision making process. I think that THAT is at the crux of the negative and sometimes hostile feeling that the general public have surrounding school closures and the process used to determine "which one". Many many unpaid, voluntary hours were put into providing the government at the time, with submissions expounding the virtues of each school, with rationales, facts and figures as to why a particular school should remain open. In our case, we also included revenue raising options and contingency plans until numbers improved. The question is not whether the submissions were correct or not in their deliberations but how they were used or "discounted" by the Minister in his decision making process. Again there has been no detailed rationale provided to communities on a case by case basis, just a generalised statement issued with the final decision.

- ***New uses for school facilities.***

The response by the Chifley community for the use of the school building was amply demonstrated through two separate consultations after the school closed. The first for the land and buildings and then once the land was secure for public use, for the buildings. How many times does the sitting government have to ask the community the same questions⁴, for the same answer? How much money has to be spent? The community is all in favour of consultation in regards to community assets, managed on behalf of the community by the incumbent government. The sticking point seems to be the government taking heed of what the community expresses and then acting on it. The views on the future use of the Melrose Primary buildings are clearly stated and I would assume on public record.

⁴ Purdens 2007, Bag the Table 2008