

**The Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth
Affairs**

SUBMISSION

**Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT
education system**

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BACKGROUND

We are parents of an eleven year old daughter who was a student from Kindergarten to Year 3 at Hall Primary School until its untimely closure in December 2006. We are also parents of a sixteen year old son who was a student at Hall Primary School from Kindergarten to Year 6 from 1997 to 2003.

Our family chose to live in Hall village on moving to Canberra in 1996 for a number of reasons, including the unique village lifestyle, the strong community linkages, and particularly the small rural school to which we believe our children are best suited. In our nine years association with Hall Primary School, we experienced enormous benefits to the education of students in the school, and strong linkages with the Hall Village and District that enhance both school and community life.

We would like to make the following comments with respect to the current inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system.

1. ACT GOVERNMENT'S TOWARDS 2020 POLICY

There are two serious problems with the ACT Government's Towards 2020 Policy:

The completely flawed and unresponsive "consultation" process with the ACT community in general and affected schools and communities in particular;

The total lack of recognition of the appropriateness of diversity and choice in educational models within the government policy, particularly as it pertains to small community and rural schools.

"Consultation" Process

In spite of numerous requests to the Minister of Education, The Chief Minister, Members of the ACT Legislative Assembly and the Department of Education to provide clear and transparent criteria for the basis upon which the decisions would be made as to which schools would close and which remain operating, no such advice was ever provided. As a consequence, residents of Hall Village and District and parents of students at Hall Primary School were never afforded the opportunity to address specific criteria and seek appropriate solutions to apparent issues that the government had identified.

Misleading information provided by the Minister of Education, such as his statement that NSW did not recompense the ACT government for NSW students at Hall Primary School¹ added to the confusion in trying to identify why Hall Primary was targeted for closure. Information on projected enrolment numbers provided by the Department of Education mysteriously changed and reduced during the "consultation" period without any apparent factual basis.

Most serious and significant was the total lack of engagement by the Minister and government on the treatment of the Priority Enrolment Area (PEA) of Hall Primary School as being limited to Hall Village. Hall Village is a service centre for the district providing commercial and community services over a wide area of what is now NSW and the ACT. For the residents of Hall District, the political boundary

¹ ABC Stateline transcript, 9 June 2006 <http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/act/content/2006/s1663590.htm>

between the ACT and New South Wales is nothing more than an administrative border, clearly demonstrated by the enrolment of Hall Primary School prior to the closure in 2006. For families in Hall Village and District, both ACT and NSW, Hall Village is their community and Hall Primary School their community school.

The decision to define and interpret the PEA for Hall Primary School as Hall village only was clearly determined in order to justify the outcome of school closure. Minister Barr's Notice of Decision makes much of the fact that only "43%" of children from within the PEA attended Hall Primary. With only a dozen or so primary school children resident in the village at the time, even if 100% went to Hall Primary, the school would have been deemed unviable. The actual catchment area extends beyond the village into NSW and nearby ACT suburbs. This deliberate distortion around the PEA doomed Hall Primary School for closure even before the "consultations" began.

Diversity and Choice

Much was made of "expanding diversity and choice" in the announcements and material provided by the Minister of Education and the government over the Towards 2020 Policy². Nevertheless, all "choices" for students and parents seemed to revolve around large and "super" schools, where the concept of community schools and rural schools were not to be part of such diversity and choice.

There are a number of factors as to why Hall Primary School was the choice of primary school education for our family, in summary:

Safe and Supportive School Environment

As Hall Primary School was small, all students knew and supported each other, no matter what age. It was commonplace to walk through the playground and hear the greeting by Year Six students of others in Kindergarten. Such an experience is unimaginable in a school of 1,300 students with required segregation of Years. This interaction also led to positive mentoring programs such as reading and citizenship within Hall Primary School.

Unique Setting, Innovative Learning and Community Linkages

Hall Primary School is a place where innovative approaches were being taken to the education of students and individual talents nurtured and individual challenges supported. The unique rural community setting, and links to the Hall Village and District, as well as the presence on site of the Hall Museum (the original Hall Primary School building) involved children in a range of environmental and community activities linked to their day to day experience of living in semi-rural and rural situations.

In summary, the "consultation" process was fatally flawed, failed to acknowledge community concerns nor provide relevant and timely information upon which authentic dialogue could occur. Our submissions were not properly considered. Diversity and choice failed to recognise the strong constituency for a rural community school such as Hall Primary School.

² <http://www.activated.act.edu.au/2020/>

2. THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION AND SCHOOL CLOSURES

The most immediate impact of the announcement of the closure of Hall Primary School was grief and devastation on the part of students, families and the Hall Village and District community.

The impacts of the closure of Hall Primary School have been long term and wide ranging including economic, social and environmental impacts. We will highlight issues that were raised prior to the closure of the Hall Primary School including in submissions made in November 2006, were not addressed during the consultations or in the Notice of Decision (Minister Barr, 15 January 2007) and have certainly been proven over the last two years.

Economic Impact

All small business owners in Hall Village have reported a material reduction in revenue and limited confidence to invest in their businesses as a consequence of the loss of passing trade and the presence of 130 school students and their families every day in Hall Village. Hall Primary School contributed significantly to the economic vitality of the village, and that vitality is severely diminished.

The impact on our family was significant. Working hours for one of us had to be reduced to accommodate different before and after school arrangements. Complicated and expensive arrangements around extra-curricular activities had to be put in place, replacing what had been a creative, active and convenient before and after school program at Hall Primary. Bus fares to take our daughter to school cost \$56 per term, when she previously walked. All new arrangements, including choosing a new school, had to be put in place extremely quickly, in early December 2006, as the government refused to separate the decision to close Hall Primary from the act of doing it.

Erosion of Social Capital and Community Linkages

The unique rural community setting, and links to the Hall Village and District, as well as the presence on site of the Hall Museum have involved children in a range of environmental and community activities linked to their day to day experience of living in semi-rural and rural situations.

Hall Primary School contributed significantly to the social and economic life of Hall village and the wider District. For example, every year students of Hall Primary School placed wreaths, sang and commemorated Remembrance Day in a solemn community evening service at the village war memorial. Similarly, each year, the Christmas Carols event organized by Hall Primary School engaged the broader community, local church groups and the Hall Village Brass Band in celebrating the Christmas Season.

With the closure of Hall Primary School, this critical community focal point has been lost. As children are so often at the heart of community events, as well as the community as a whole, the loss of Hall Primary School as a focal point has resulted in a diminution of social interaction and social capital amongst families within the Village and District.

Negative Environmental Impacts

Students formerly attending Hall Primary School now attend other, more distant schools in the ACT. As a consequence, there are additional students, on more buses and in more private transportation travelling more kilometres to attend schools in the ACT, with obvious negative environmental impacts.

3. COMMUNITY RESPONSE INCLUDING INTEREST EXPRESSED BY SCHOOL COMMUNITIES TO RE-OPEN SCHOOLS

In spite of the disenfranchisement experienced by most families with the closure of Hall Primary School, and the fact that most families affected at the time will no longer have primary school aged children by the time Hall Primary School is re-opened and restored to its place in the life of Hall Village and District, overwhelming support remains in the Village and District for the re-opening of Hall Primary School.

Village and District residents continue to seek alternatives means for the possibility of having a vibrant educational facility contributing to community life. Private/public partnership proposals, support for the current inquiry, discussions with Green, Labor and Liberal MLAs, and identification of alternate proposals all continue towards the re-opening of Hall Primary School.

A recent process of community dialogue over the use of Hall Primary School facilities of the ACT government reiterated a resounding and unanimous view that the priority for Hall Village and District residents is the re-opening of the Hall Primary School.

We fully support the submission made by the Village of Hall and District Progress Association in March 2009, and the submissions made in November 2006 by the Village of Hall and District Progress Association and the Hall Primary School P&C.

We are committed to maintaining Hall Primary School as a unique educational resource for Hall Village and District and the wider ACT and surrounding NSW community and will work with the Hall P&C, the Village of Hall and District Progress Association and the relevant authorities to ensure the implementation of proposals to ensure the long term future of Hall Primary School and Preschool.

CONCLUSION

We firmly believe that Hall Primary School provided an essential contribution to Choice, Opportunity and Diversity as the stated outcome of the *Towards 2020 proposal*.

Hall Primary School was the oldest continuously operating primary school in the ACT and one of only two rural community schools within the Territory.

Hall Primary School provided diversity in educational experience, community linkages and a safe and supportive environment of the primary school community itself which cannot be duplicated in a school of 1,300, 1,000 or even 300 students.

HALL PRIMARY SCHOOL MUST BE RE-OPENED FOR ITS UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION IN THE ACT.