

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Partially Confidential

Dear committee members,

it has been my misfortune to have been involved now in the Department of Education's process for closing Martins Creek Public School for over a year and a half. It all began...

It all began on a sunny morning in November 2014 when [REDACTED] arrived at the school to provide a briefing for parents and staff about his department's concerns about the school, its future and the now-infamous "provision of education for students in Martins Creek". This was supposed to be the first step in what has been refereed to in documents without number (including the 3,748 pages of documents in the Legislative Council's order for papers that I photocopied) as "extensive community consultation". In fact, [REDACTED] reputation and arrogance had preceeded him, and his initial contact (I should say, tussle) with the school community resulted in him declaring this event a closed meeting to be attended by only the staff and parents of the school.

What took place at that meeting was a friendly smiling jolly fat-man show decrying the ability of the teaching staff to properly support their students or provide them with what the department considered sufficient "socialisation", extra-curricular activities and departmental "special programmes" (one in particular, "Focus on Literacy", was mentioned so many times that the only parent present wondered if [REDACTED] had written the mandatory textbook for the course and was about to offer signed copies at a discounted rate). In particular, the school was berated for not providing the teaching principal with time to undertake such courses, but that such were commonplace in other schools; it was particularly intimated that Vacy Public School could and did provide all of these things and more. I understand that the principals of both Martins Creek PS and Vacy PS have recently completed this very course. The value of such expensive training (the figure \$15,000 has been mentioned to me) for a school which, entirely without its benefit, had a student achieve a perfect score in his NAPLAN reading test seems questionable, but such was the power of suggestion at this "information session". This student was *not* attending Vacy PS (and never will).

The failure of the teaching staff to bring their students up to "minimum standards" in NAPLAN was another belaboured point. Remember that we are in the "community consultation phase" here. All of these belittlements were preceeded by "I'm sure that [teacher] doesn't mind me saying..." and "no offence to [teacher] but..." qualifications, but the plain message delivered to the parent was that this school was no good, that no thought would ever be put into ways to improve it, and did he agree that the school should close now? All for the "improvement of educational provision" for children in Martins Creek (not limited to those attending that school).

In fact, in this writer's opinion, the education provision for children in Martins Creek could be improved by enforcing school zoning and sending them to Martins Creek Public School. Sustainable numbers are needed to run a school, and the Martins Creek catchment area certainly has those (at least 20 children in the area are sent out-of-zone by their parents every day). At the meeting, [REDACTED] told the parent that "even doubling of the current numbers would not be enough to save the school", those current numbers then being six (plus two unenrolled students attending for half a year). The suggestion smelled of a pre-determined decision even then, and the department's behaviour towards this and other schools since (for example, the installation of "closer" principals who refuse to take enrollments, allowing the department to turn around and say "declining numbers led to a review of the school's viability") reinforces this view.

The pervasiveness of this view throughout the department is appalling. To quote from a briefing to the Minister for Education supplied following the order for papers:

Although the Bellimbopinni community are very proud of their history of providing high quality education at the school, declining numbers have curtailed its ability to meet the needs of students.

– Kim Taylor, Director, Public Schools NSW Mid-North Coast Network

"Declining numbers" reduce educational provision?? Why is no effort made to improve these (so they say!) failing schools? From the outside it appears not even due to *mis*-management but to a blind obsession with

closing any school under 100 students by hook or by crook (we are more of a beef-farming area, so probably the former in Martins Creek's case).

At this point of the information session, ██████ told the parent present that if the parents agreed to the closure of Martins Creek Public School, he would provide any assistance necessary, for uniforms and the like, "even if it has to come out of my own pocket." This unsavoury offer was declined (and I have been told that ICAC are only interested in cases involving brown paper bags and where actual money changes hands) and he was told that

The parents will never agree to the closure of Martins Creek school.

– ██████ to ██████, 27th November, 2014

And, dear committee members, here we are.

The meeting described above led to the formation of the so-called "consultative committee" which was charged with exploring the educational provision for students in Martins Creek. The remit of the committee was as grand as it was doomed. Not only were we to explore alternatives for educating these children – and, to the best of my knowledge this has **never** been discussed, by the committee or anyone in the department – we had to decide the future of the special-needs child at the school *and* explore the financial implications of any "possible" closure or recess. Oh, and analyse the NAPLAN results of the school over the eight-year history of that test, a task that even the department's "High Performance Unit" undertook with the disclaimers

There's not enough data to do a statistical analysis around those scores for 15 students.

You would need to look at individual marks.

You cannot conclude anything from this analysis, there is not enough data.

– ██████, telephone conversation with the author, 22nd September, 2014

██████ being the assistant director at the High Performance Unit who initially informed ██████ that "Given is a very small school, data looks fine;" (██████ in email to ██████, 9th September, 2014). This comment even elicited a manly response of "Thank you very much. I owe you several beers....." (count 'em!) from the recipient, and **was never heard from again**. Such was the data that inspired such attacks on the school's performance as those present at the information session had witnessed.

Enough about them. What about the much trumpeted consultation? The "extensive consultation", "formal community consultation", "consultation with the parents", "consultation with the community"? The total extent of community consultation in the case of Martins Creek was one (1) call for submissions from the public, and how this was announced outside of the school's parents I do not know (because ██████ told me that it would not be announced) and, er, that's it. The remaining consultation, with the parents of children at the school, has almost completely consisted of complaints about the department's actions, refusal of certain executive directors to enter the same room as certain parents (omit the plural, if you please), promises to the media and members of the Legislative Council that the director "is also available to discuss issues with individuals from the school community" (The Hon. Adrian Piccoli to the Hon. George Souris, letter dated 20th March, 2014).

Such promises were made, presumably, in the spirit in which they have been fulfilled. Similarly, promises to the House:

A community consultation process is considering the most effective educational provision for the six students currently enrolled at Martins Creek Public School. No recommendations will be made until the community consultation is concluded.

– The Hon. John Ajaka, answer to question without notice, 17th June, 2014

The government even made the same promise to the premier of New South Wales:

Until the community consultation phase has been fully explored, no decision will be made about the future of the school.

– The Hon. Adrian Piccoli, letter to The Hon. BR O’Farrell, 15th January, 2014

Moving right along, since, as noted above, the community phase of the consultation was wrapped up long ago...

In December 2014 I was told by the principal of Martins Creek Public School that the school was to close at the end of 2015. In that case, according to the protocols that the department claims to be following, I can shortly expect to be consulted on the needs of my child: another promise, this time to the boy’s mother:

After a decision has been made, all parents will be informed and they will be consulted on the needs of their own children.

– Frank Potter to an “undisclosed member of the public” via email, 8th August, 2014

I also await arrangements to support him in his transition to another school to be made, which will occur “as soon as a decision is made” (department employees ████████ to ████████, 25th July, 2014). A decision was apparently made months ago, and yet still **not a single word of discussion has taken place about alternative provisions for the education of my son which must result from the closure of Martins Creek Public School.**

Employees of the department probably believe everything that they say, and clearly expect anyone within earshot to do the same. This can be difficult. When visiting the Maitland office of the department for the first consultative committee meeting held there, I entered the local director’s office as he went away to fetch me a cup of tea. I greeted the others present and, noticing that it was too hot, reached down and turned off a small fan heater by the door. When the director returned, he remarked to those present that he had turned the heater off but if anyone found it too cold, they should just ask for it to be turned on. At this stage the gentleman was under no great stress (this came later as the meeting progressed), but this opening gambit perfectly demonstrates the “black-is-white” mentality that we have encountered from day one of the parents’ involvement in the department’s efforts to close Martins Creek Public School, and the grotesquerie that is their idea of “extensive community consultation”.

Yours faithfully,

Dr David Allingham

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Additional Thoughts 1

I note that similar definitions of “consultation” were used by department employees in the case of Wollombi Public School. The timeline of their process, as written in a draft of the consultative committee’s report dated 18th September, 2014, lists

Step 1: 29 October 2013 Acting Director, Public Schools NSW, met
with the Wollombi PS principal to discuss
the proposed closure of the school and coordinate a meeting
with the parents of the school.

might have met with to discuss such a thing, but to comprise Step 1 of the protocols *surely* the discussion *should actually take place!* In own words to Frank Potter:

I have never had a discussion with regarding these options. I did have a short meeting with on Tuesday 29 October where informed me wanted to meet with the parents to gather their opinions on the closure of the school and asked me to arrange the meeting for Friday.

– email to Frank Potter, 7th November, 2013

Strangely, in the -authored* “Approval to Consult Locally” document approved by Greg Prior on 23rd October, 2013, the meeting above is alleged to have taken place on *14th* October, 2013! And not only did they carry out Step 1, claims that they also “commenced discussions around the future viability of the school”!

Notwithstanding the date of any discussions which might not have taken place (several times), somehow “arrange a meeting because I want to talk to the parents about closure” became, on Frank Potter planet, a discussion that a reasonable member of the tax-paying public might expect to be rather in-depth and informed, given a school which had somehow come to be failing so badly that the department was considering closing it but had never mentioned the principal.

Such extrapolation and inflation and, ah... flexibility, of any facts concerning “consultation” is very typical of my experiences with the department regarding the “possible” closure of Martins Creek Public School.

Additional Thoughts 2

One of the most incredible things about our experiences of the past 18 months has been the wilful dismissal of facts which did not fit into the department's plans. There have been many instances of this, ranging from "the BER building can be moved without financial implication" to NAPLAN results as described in my main letter.

In the case of NAPLAN, at the one-and-only community consultation meeting (the information session at the school on 27th November, 2013, which was barred to all-comers except parents and staff) about an hour was spent with _____ stating and restating and then saying again that students at the school were not achieving minimum standards and so the school should close, and when pressed for details and how such things are defined anyway and how many students were in the data and how were they compared to other schools and so on and so on, he attempted to explain all of this by waving a few unlabelled printouts of plots of NAPLAN results around and saying that these weren't the actual Martins Creek data but you see some trends and lines and some go up and some go down and I can't give you these or let you show them to anyone but anyway the school is terrible and has to close. (Breathe now.)

Subsequently at the first consultation committee meeting it turned out that those plots *were* the actual Martins Creek results, but we still couldn't see them because we (the committee tasked with writing a recommendation to Frank Potter himself, and whom we were told would merely rubber-stamp it as it made its way upward through the department to the Minister who might actually ignore it entirely and make any decision that he liked) would be able to identify individual students. The data which, for a "very small school", "looks fine", according to McCloughan, who provided the data and analysis to _____ and later told me that you could not do anything with it as a whole anyway.

And so how that data came to be one of the four pillars supporting the department's view that the school should close is beyond me.

Similarly for the special-needs student at the school: he came along and did not fit in with the department's plans, so they tried to omit him (from their plans, and lately have been trying to omit him from the still-running school). The committee was told to work out what to do with him, and _____ suggested that he would be our strongest case for keeping the school open. Let's say that again so that when Frank Potter has Greg Prior's job in about 3 months from now he knows who to thank: _____ told the consultative committee members that the special-needs child would be the best reason to keep the school open. From the tiny acorn, a mighty oak.