

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Partially Confidential

The Director
Select Committee on the Closure of Public Schools
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Many thanks for the opportunity to submit on behalf of the Grong Grong Public School community.

When we enrolled our daughter at Grong Grong Public School in 2011 we were determined and excited to support our local school. We understood it was a very small school, but when we looked at Grong Grong's demographics we could see that there had been a natural generational dip of primary school age children over the past decade, and a **rising trend of young families like ours with preschool and younger children yet to come through.**

Background

At Easter 2012 Grong Grong Public School enrolments dropped to 6 children, returning back to 9 the following term. Through the work of the school and the P&C the school had 12 signed enrolment forms submitted into the Department for the 2013 school year. As it was only mid year, and there was a great deal of excitement and interest about the work and achievements of Grong Grong Public School, we as parents and the school community were confident of commencing the 2013 year with a conservative 16-18 enrolments, and that with so many young families returning to the district that this would continue to build.

'Process' of closure

In July 2012 with one day's warning to the school community the then School Education Director for Grong Grong came to the school to meet with parents and staff.

At this meeting the community was presented with a power point presentation showing slices of data and Naplan results claiming that small schools do not deliver 'educational outcomes'. and that our children would be better off socially and academically in a big school like Narrandera Public School, or at nearby Matong Public School, effectively a school in a paddock. Amongst the reasons given were that Narrandera Public School had a canteen, and that Matong Public School offered more sports. (Though neither offered yoga, bike riding, produce gardening, bike mechanics, tennis, weekly cooking or community art lessons....as did Grong Grong, along with sport..)

Using pedagogy, Naplan, sports programs, the availability of a canteen (lunch orders available every day from Grong Grong Store) simply do not stack up as valid

reasons to close a state public school in a place where demographic and socio economic trends indicate that that school will be in demand in the very near future over a very long time. It's like closing a main road for all time because of a pot hole.

It was mentioned by the SED that he had that week met with the parents of Bilbul Public School, (also enjoying the benefit of a bright new building..) and they had made the 'right' decision and closed their school. [REDACTED] asked the Grong Grong community to agree to close their school. The community said no.

Over the next few months we lobbied the Minister for Education, who was also at that time our Member of Parliament Adrian Piccoli, and found that we had no representation on this matter. I would suggest that there is a clear conflict of interest here, as several small schools have been closed in the then electorate of Murrumbidgee; the communities of which would also have no representation on this matter. (From what I can glean from public data the majority of schools closed in NSW since Mr Piccoli's appointment have been in safe National seats. The remainder are in Coalition seats. I am yet to find a school in an independent or Labor seat that has been closed under this administration.)

After many requests Mr Piccoli agreed to meet with us briefly in Griffith. In this meeting he stated that he supported any decision made by the Department of Education, and that he would not send his children to a small school.

Throughout the period during July to September 2012 we continued to lobby both the Minister Adrian Piccoli, and sought a meeting with the Regional Director of Schools [REDACTED]. During this time we were continually assured by the SED [REDACTED] that no report, recommendation or decision had been made regarding the future of Grong Grong Public School. However, [REDACTED] report and recommendation to the Regional Director [REDACTED] (obtained under the *Government Information Public Access Act*) was in fact already written (dated 25 July 2012 – one day following the first meeting with the Grong Grong community, and noted as received by [REDACTED] office on 27 July 2012. **Please see appendix 1 attached.**

It was also noted during this same period of time during which no report or recommendation had been made by our SED that;

- Solar panels that had been granted to Grong Grong Public School through the federal Solar Schools Program were installed on the roof of Matong Public School – effectively doubling the panels that school had installed under the same program. When we queried this with the Department's assets office we were informed that [REDACTED] had told them to redirect the placement of the panels.
- That our school Principal was advised that [REDACTED] was not to accept any enrolments into Grong Grong Public School.
- That the Dep of Transport had contacted parents of children at Grong Grong Public School and the bus operators serving Grong Grong Public School to determine which schools our children would be attending in the following academic year.

- That the Department of Education does not respond to any letters or emails by either letter or by email. There is no paper trail of communications from the Department of Education on the closure of Grong Grong Public School. (As the Minister points out so often in the media these are very serious and complex decisions...surely decisions that warrant due diligence, and a very transparent and clear process.)
- That our Principal refused to speak out in support of the school in fear that it would compromise ■■■ career and job prospects. There is a media gag on employees of the Department of Education, and those who do speak out often receive a Code of Conduct reprimand.
- That the SED consistently and repeatedly misrepresented conversations and discussions held with the Grong Grong School Community.

The community consultation process on the closure of Grong Grong Public School was entirely symbolic, and simply the Department going through the motions of 'being seen' to do the 'right thing.' It is clear to us now that Grong Grong Public School had been earmarked for closure long before we had even enrolled at the school, and that no demographic data or parental preferences were to be taken into account.

■■■■ the Regional Director met with us on September 9th 2012 and defended the Department's process. We questioned the strategy of closing Grong Grong Public School in an existing town where postal and retail services were available, while two very small schools nearby - Matong and Beckom Public Schools (in non-serviced villages, and in very similar geographic positions relative to larger schools as Grong Grong) were enjoying the support of the Department. The only difference we could see was that Grong Grong Public School had a new demountable library recently installed under the Rudd Government BER program.

■■■■ provided us with a copy of the report provided to the Minister Mr Piccoli. We pointed out several factual errors in the report and asked for a reprise on that basis to no avail. **(Please see Appendix 2 attached).**

We then copied the report and our corrections to the Minister, again asking for a review of the decision-making process that Grong Grong Public School and Community had been subject to, on the basis that the fact sheet provided to him as the Minister for Education was technically incorrect and contained several errors both in data, and in reporting meeting outcomes. **(Please see Attachment 3)** The Minister responded again supporting the Department's decision and encouraging us to transition our children into a nearby school for their better educational outcomes.

We continued our submissions and contact with the Department of Education. However the school was placed in recess in December 2012 for the 2013 academic year and our children pushed away from the school.

Transport was provided for out of area children to be bussed from Narrandera **through** Grong Grong to the **further** out of area school Matong Public School – even though this would place Matong Public School well over its existing seating capacity, and break the zoning rules which had been cited as a reason for closing Grong Grong.

At the end of that year the Grong Grong P & C called for expressions of interest in enrolment and received 26 positive responses, including from Narrandera. The Department also advertised for expressions of interest but would;

- only take these expressions of interest by telephone contact, there was no formal enrolment procedure, and no written, electronic or telephonic confirmation back to the parents that their EOI had been received.
- only count children within the immediate Grong Grong zone – despite this zone having not been enforced for many years
- only count children for the next immediate year – so our youngest child who was 4 (or indeed any of the many preschoolers in the area) was not considered at all.
- Out of area children pushed out of Grong Grong Public School by the recess decision could not be considered as enrolments for Grong Grong Public School – though they were counted as viable enrolments further out of zone at Matong Public School.

I have since discovered that a number of parents who left messages at the number advertised by the Department received no follow up or return call.

The Department of Education undertook no demographic analysis of the area, and took no consideration of the steady growth in young families taking up property and building homes in and around Grong Grong. When we put forward that the population decline was in fact incorrect data the response was 'We know this is very emotional for you.'

In December 2012 we provided the Department with a zone map of Grong Grong showing the head count of families with very young children in the district, and the clear but brief gap in children that had affected the enrolments at Grong Grong Public School. **(See attachment 4)** There was no response to this information.

We had no further communication with the Department.

The closure of Grong Grong Public School was conducted by the Department of Education and the Minister for Education with an absolute disregard for facts or evidence, or the impact on the children or the future of the community.

We are of the opinion that this wave of school closures in tiny vulnerable communities is thinly disguised asset stripping at best by a Department hungry for metropolitan infrastructure and with no budget, foresight, or longitudinal demographic or socio economic analysis that would have assisted it in anticipating such demand.

Many thanks for the opportunity to share the experience of the Grong Grong Community.
Yours sincerely

Gemma Meier