

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

I would like to make a submission to the current Legislative Council inquiry conducted by the Closure of Public Schools Committee.

I applaud an inquiry established to investigate and report on the closure of public schools in New South Wales, and I sincerely hope the committee will be able to conduct the inquiry unhampered by political pressure.

I feel that my submission might demonstrate the human side of the current policy used for school closures and how it has affected my family and my community.

I live in Wollombi and my child attended Wollombi Public School (WPS) from kindergarten until the end of third grade when the school was closed by Mr Adrian Piccoli in his role of Minister for Education in 2014.

The school had provided quality education for children of the Wollombi community for 161 years of its 162 years of continual existence (the school's quality of education fell well short of the mark in its final year while efforts seemed to me to be concentrated on the closure of the school rather than the educational needs of the children).

I am aware of the need to contemplate the closure of schools due to low enrolment figures. However, for some time it has appeared to have become department policy to allow "out-of-area" enrolments in many rural areas - without those out-of-area enrolments having to comply with the usual due processes set out by the DEC (eg putting their requests in writing). Because of the ease with which out-of-area enrolments have been able to be accepted, many rural schools have suffered. WPS is one of those affected schools. The true historical statistics of out of area enrolments at WPS's neighbouring schools will easily identify the devastating effect the acceptance of lax adherence to department policy has had on WPS.

I have serious doubts as to the validity of the figures provided to the DEC during its "year of review" regarding possible future enrolments for WPS. Driving past letter boxes on the main roads and extrapolating statistics to suit the DEC's fete accompli and asking one local real estate agent (whose conflict of interest cannot be underestimated) do not, in my opinion, constitute appropriate statistical evidence for a decision as important as the closure of a school.

I believe that my number-crunching doubts about have been justified. This is evident in number of new enrolments at the school which my child has attended since the closure of WPS - unanticipated mid year enrolments from residents who have moved into what was, until last year, WPS's catchment area.

The now-nearest public school my child now attends has no room for expansion once the current demountable classrooms are filled, despite its newly expanded catchment area. By contrast, WPS could have contained all of his/her new school's enrolments without having to make any structural adjustment. WPS also had room for considerable expansion if necessary. However, suggestions made to the DEC to consider the closure of the school which was smaller in physical size (but larger in enrolment number) in favour of the school which was much larger (but smaller in enrolment number) were dismissed outright by the DEC's area director.

It is my strong belief that a "community consultation committee" set up prior to the school's closure was set up purely to comply with departmental policy after public fury insisted on its instigation. Only a very few community members were asked to consult with the committee and most suggestions presented to the committee were disregarded when they did not suit the DEC's conviction to close the school (so forgive me if my confidence in committees is less than it could be).

As a family, we were treated appallingly by representatives of the DEC. I was personally made to feel that I had deliberately set out to harm my child's educational and social progress by sending him/her to his/her local school - which happened to be a small school (possibly because other parents took the department's advice to enhance the educational and social progress of their children by enrolling them out of area in what eventually became the bigger school - leaving WPS in its shadow).

To that point, I also believe that my child's educational needs were deliberately not being met in his/her final year at WPS. The Acting Principal, who successfully managed to do the DEC's bidding and close the school, indicated to me that my child had not been able to grasp many basic concepts in the year spent "teaching" him/her. I believe that this was conveyed to me so that my child would, by comparison, seem to excel in his/her new school...the bigger school...the school that would cater for his/her educational and social needs. His/her grades last year seemed to have been dumbed down (to use the words of the DEC's Area Director) so that any improvement identified this year can be claimed to be due to his/her improved surroundings.

It is my opinion that the representative of the DEC, the area director, who was our direct liaison was unhelpful, dismissive and, quite frankly, extremely rude. I tried very hard to avoid giving him the satisfaction of letting him know that he had, on numerous occasions, reduced me to tears. He declared that he found me "annoying". I subsequently sought to discover if he truly meant what he had said - and, yes, I was able to really annoy him.

I do not consider this to be the appropriate forum to discuss my disappointment with the Acting Principal's interactions with my child, nor do I think that this committee is interested in specific personal interactions with the Acting Principal or the Area Director, however, I do want the committee to know that I have been considerably upset by the process used to close WPS. I am happy to make further submissions if the committee feels that my input would be beneficial to its decision making process.

The closure of a school is always an emotive and controversial issue. However, in the Wollombi Valley emotion is mixed with disillusionment with a process which I consider to be lacking integrity and good faith.

Given my first-hand experience of being directly affected by the closure of my child's school (my community's school), I feel that I am rightfully qualified to respectfully suggest that certain element could and should be included in the process required to close a public school:

I believe that the process **MUST** be fair, transparent and truthful; it **MUST** have accountability and **GENUINE** community engagement and, above all, it **MUST** treat the children and their parents/care givers with dignity and respect.

It is my honest opinion that the process used to close Wollombi Public School included precisely **NONE** of these elements.