

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Save Our Schools

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Save Our Schools

**Submission to NSW Legislative Council
Inquiry into the Closure of Public Schools
in New South Wales**

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The arguments for closing and amalgamating schools are based primarily on two presumed benefits: financial savings and better student achievement. However, these claims generally turn out to be over-simplifications when the full evidence is analysed.

In considering potential closure of schools, governments should carefully analyse the educational, financial and social impact on students, their families and the general school community. Governments frequently fail to fully investigate these impacts before closing schools.

The range of factors that should be considered in assessing proposals to close schools is outlined in the attached submissions by SOS on school closures in the ACT and a paper by published by SOS that reviews issues arising from the ACT school closure plan (SOS 2006, SOS 2009, Cobbold 2009). It is fundamental that a full cost-benefit analysis be undertaken of proposal to close schools on a case-by-case basis. A framework for a cost-benefit analysis of school closures is attached (Starrs 2006).

School size and educational achievement

The educational benefits of small schools are frequently disregarded. There is no robust research evidence to suggest that small schools deliver worse education outcomes than larger schools. Indeed, many studies conducted during the past 20 years have found that small school size, particularly at the primary school level, has a positive effect upon student achievement, extra-curricular participation, student satisfaction, student behaviour and attendance. An OECD paper reviewing the literature on school size and student achievement is attached together with a review published by SOS (Ares Abalde 2014, Cobbold 2011).

Much of the research literature on school size and student achievement has overlooked the possibility that school size may be associated with different outcomes for students from different backgrounds. This gap has been rectified by a range of state-wide and national studies in the United States since the mid-1990s. A review of these studies is attached (Cobbold 2006).

Almost without exception, the studies show that small school size is unambiguously good for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and communities with relatively high levels of disadvantage. Students from low SES backgrounds achieve better results in smaller schools. Small schools with high concentrations of students from low SES backgrounds have higher average results than large schools with similar concentrations.

Closure of small rural schools may impact on student achievement because of the longer time spent on bus travel to another school (Jimerson 2007). Research also identifies participation in after-school activities as an important factor in helping students feel a sense of belonging and be connected to their schools. Long gruelling commutes, however, make participation in after-school activities very difficult, or even impossible.

Financial savings from school closures are often over-stated

Governments frequently base the case for closing schools on the need to make financial savings. However, the large proportion of school costs are enrolment related with the number of teachers and a range of recurrent costs such as water and electricity costs also determined by enrolments.

The extent of financial savings is often over-estimated because they tend to be based only on estimates of the gross savings to the Department of Education arising from small savings in

staff salaries and site-related payments. One-off costs associated with school closures and costs incurred by other government agencies are often ignored, with the result that any net savings are likely to be small (SOS 2006, SOS 2009, Cobbold 2009).

Significant one-off costs are incurred in closing schools. They include the duplication of special education facilities in other schools; purchase of new demountable classrooms and/or the transfer and installation of existing demountables; and refurbishment works in schools to receive additional students.

One-off and ongoing costs to other government agencies include the provision of additional bus services for students travelling to more distant locations and increased building maintenance and security costs. The exclusion of transportation costs is particularly problematic in the case of the closure of rural schools and likely results in a significant over-estimate of the savings from closing schools. The cost of bus travel following closure of urban schools can also be significant and should be taken into account in assessing the fiscal impact of closing schools.

Government estimates of the savings from closing schools also generally ignore additional financial costs to families. For example, additional costs incurred by families include car operating expenses, bus fares, bicycle operating costs, new school uniforms, new textbooks, and child-care.

Community effects

Closing schools can also have a significant effect on the local community and economy which is typically ignored by governments in focusing on financial savings. Schools, especially in small rural and remote areas, are a source of social capital and community cohesion.

School amalgamation policies are often intended to save public funds and/or enhance educational opportunities for children. However, the closure of a local school can diminish the sense of community that develops around such schools, which is not so easily replicated in larger schools where parents and children are drawn from a larger 'catchment'.¹

Schools play a critical role in developing and sustaining social support networks between families in local communities. Very often friendship groups for children and for parents are formed in the local pre-school and primary school and are developed into broader social networks that form essential social capital in these communities.

This is especially apparent in small rural towns where school closures are often a severe blow because schools in these towns are a major part of the cultural fabric of a community. In addition, schools are often the major "industry" in a rural community and contribute to the economic stability of a community.

Independent public inquiry process to consider school closure proposals

Save Our Schools recommends that all school closure proposals in NSW, including those of very small rural schools, should be subject to an independent public inquiry process. The public inquiry process should assess the full educational, financial, social and economic costs and benefits of school closures.

¹ Productivity Commission 2003. *Social Capital: Reviewing the Concept and its Policy Implications*. Research Paper, AusInfo, Canberra.p. 6.

Attachments:

- Save Our Schools (2006). Towards 2020: An Unsubstantiated, Flawed and Inequitable School Plan, A Submission to the ACT Department of Education and Training.
- Save Our Schools (2009). Towards 2020: A Failure in Public Consultation, A Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, April.
- Trevor Cobbold (2009). A Look Back at School Closure Issues in the ACT, A Paper Presented to the Education Works or Education Wilderness? Forum, Adelaide, 5 September.
- Margaret Starrs (2006). Economics of Towards 2020: Renewing our Schools, Paper prepared for the ACT Council of P&C Associations Inc., October.
- Macarena Ares Abalde (2014). School Size Policies: A Literature Review, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 106, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Trevor Cobbold (2011). Small Schools and Education Outcomes, Research Brief, Save Our Schools, July.
- Trevor Cobbold (2006). The Interaction of School Size and Socio-Economic Status on Student Performance: A Review of the Research Evidence, Save Our Schools, October.
- Lorna Jimerson (2007). Slow Motion: Travelling by School Bus in Consolidated Districts in West Virginia, Rural School and Community Trust.