



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL  
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND  
YOUTH AFFAIRS**

**(Reference: School closures and reform of the education system)**

**Members:**

**MS A BRESNAN (The Chair)  
MS J BURCH (The Deputy Chair)  
MR J HANSON**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**THURSDAY, 30 APRIL 2009**

**Secretary to the committee:  
Dr S Lilburn (Ph: 6205 0199)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Committee Office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 21 January 2009*

**The committee met at 9.31 am.**

**SINGER, MRS ELIZABETH**, President, ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

**O'NEILL, MR MARK**, Vice President, ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**THE CHAIR:** I would like to welcome everyone here today to this hearing of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs in its inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system. I draw your attention to the privilege statement, just to make sure that you have read and understood that. We have half an hour with you today. We thought we would invite you to make a short opening statement before we go to questions from committee members.

**Mr O'Neill:** On behalf of the ACT council, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to appear here. We hope that we can assist the committee in regard to the outcome of their deliberations. We are doing this in the hope that, as far as school closures are concerned, we do not ever see the style of school closures that we have seen previously. We felt there was no proper community consultation; that there were ways in which the government could have handled that much better at the time, rather than announcing school closures in a budget speech which the Assembly ratified six weeks later. It sort of says that it is a foregone conclusion. Once a government decides to withdraw funds for something, obviously it ceases to exist. I feel even more strongly today that that was a part of the budgetary process, those school closures, and we do not want to see that. We have suggestions that we might give to you during questioning regarding ways in which future governments can go about this process. Once again, thank you for this opportunity.

**THE CHAIR:** We might go to questions. The first question I have is to do with page 8 of the submission you made to the committee. You talk about some of the new schools that have been established on the P-10 model, and I note that you have some concerns about this particular model. Could you elaborate a bit more on the concerns you have with this P-10 model as opposed to some of the models which you recognise there—P-6, 7-10 and 11-12.

**Mrs Singer:** The concerns that are being expressed to us by parents are with respect to how leadership develops among the students as opposed to the familiar P-6 model, where the students, particularly in years 5 and 6, start developing leadership roles within their school community. There are concerns that students will not have the same development pathway for their leadership skills when they are in a P-10 school. There are concerns expressed by parents as to the interaction between such physically very large students and such physically very small students, in going to and from the school and where they interact in playground situations. That may cause increased intimidation in those groups.

Some of our parents are concerned that, while the P-10 school model may work well in terms of education and you may be able to take some of your specialist teachers that would only teach in your 7-10 model and bring them down into, say, a year 5-6 position, the preference may still be to take a lot of those students from 7, 8, 9 and 10 and put them in a separate setting—and, in particular, having regard to the breadth of

educational learning experiences, by putting certificate I CIT courses into the high schools. So to get that breadth of subject experience and subject choice for our students in those upper high school years you need to have a lot of students to be able to offer the range.

With respect to P-10, the schools seem to be designed for enrolments of about 100 students a year, and that reduces the capacity of the school to offer a large number of choices, such as are offered by a school like Canberra high school, with 200 students a year.

**THE CHAIR:** Is it also bringing in that issue of providing choice in terms of the school that parents choose to send their children to?

**Mrs Singer:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** So it brings in those issues.

**MS BURCH:** Similarly, a number of parents are supportive of the P-10 model because the reverse is the case: it does provide opportunities for leadership and mentoring across the age spectrum. That is recognised by educators. Has that been raised through the P&C council?

**Mrs Singer:** We do have some families that are very happy with being in a P-10 environment. The concern that has been expressed to council is that all the new schools being developed within the ACT seem to be in the P-10 model. We are not seeing a P-6 and then a 7-10.

**MS BURCH:** I think there are models. There is the preschool to 2; there are different models. Not every school is a P-10 school. Colleges have been reconfigured; early education has been reconfigured. So new schools are of a different scope. With the education range, your belief is that there will be limited education opportunities?

**Mrs Singer:** With the P-10 schools that we have at the moment, they tend to be designed to have about 100 students per year, or maybe a little more. That is the capacity they are designed around, and that means there is a different way of distributing an elective choice for the upper high school years in those schools, compared to a school that has a bigger capacity and has more students enrolled in that high school setting.

**THE CHAIR:** Do you have any more questions?

**MS BURCH:** Not on that. I might take it on notice; I do not have the data to comment on enrolment numbers. I would have thought they would be larger than that, given that they are for the catchment region, so by default they will be accommodating the region.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Hanson?

**MR HANSON:** Thanks very much for coming today. I thought your submission was very comprehensive and well put together, so I thank you for that as well. The

question I have is around consultation. Obviously, that has been a major criticism of this whole process. I would be very interested to hear what you have heard from parents in terms of the consultation and your thoughts on that process—whether there was actually genuine consultation or whether it was more of a case of decisions being made and we are going through a bit of a sham process. Do you have some views on the consultation process?

**Mr O’Neill:** Yes. Most of the people thought it was very much a sham process given that it was announced as a part of the budget. People were told, “Your school is going to close, and we will talk about it for six months.” To me a consultation process—and what I would recommend any government looking to close a school in the future should do—would first of all identify those schools that they felt should be under review for closure or to continue, then go to that school community, talk to that school community and say: “Here is what we see are the problems. Let us see what we can do to turn them around.” If the government and education department cannot work with the school community to turn things around, whatever the reason is that the school has been assessed for closure, then you can say, after a period of time: “Okay, it is just not working. We have not been able to do it.” That way, the parents, the students and the staff would be on board from the first step of the process, once it has been identified for closure.

The other problem we have had in the last lot of closures under the 2020 proposal was that the school communities had to write submissions as to why schools should not close but we did not know the criteria that we had to address, because at no stage were we ever told why a particular school was to be closed.

I am convinced that the Cook primary school was closed because it was too successful, sitting at 95 per cent occupancy rate of students, and down the road you had the Macquarie school. If you closed Macquarie, you would not have in that area the room in the existing schools to accommodate those children from that school. But, if you closed Cook, you could accommodate the Cook population into Macquarie. At Cook you had a vibrant school community that was very active, and it paid the penalty for being a successful school.

Surely you would close a school that was failing, that was not successful. But numbers count, and that is a part of the confusing aspect of this whole process that we went through. Schools like Tharwa and Hall were much more than just a school; they were the social hub of those communities. People from outside of Tharwa chose to send their children to those schools; children came from Conder, Banks and places like that because the parents saw something in that school that they wanted for their children. There were conflicting things. We would see schools with low numbers and we did not know if they were not meeting benchmarks. We did not know why Cook was going to close, because it was such a successful school. The only reason for it closing was that the closest school to it was failing.

Amongst all that, the school communities had to write submissions as to why the schools should or should not be closed. But, because they did not know the criteria to address, I really felt that those school communities were denied natural justice through this process.

**MR HANSON:** So when the schools were asked to put in a submission there was very little guidance about what they were presenting to the department to justify why their school should remain open; was that the problem?

**Mr O'Neill:** All we got were figures on the number of students in a particular school. At one time they went around and assessed each school for how many students could be accommodated in that school. At Isabella Plains primary school they also counted a few demountables there, saying that so many kids could be put into each demountable. Quite apart from the fact that a couple of them were so dilapidated and there was so much asbestos in them that they were unusable, they were still assessed as part of the school's capacity.

**MS BURCH:** Whilst there is comment around the framework in which to respond, you made an earlier comment about poor consultation. I know there were over 350 submissions received. There was a series of six education seminars held. Public forums were held in each of the eight regions. Over 700 meetings were held by the minister or ministerial staff and departmental officers over six months. I find it a bit hard to say that there was no consultation. There has been rolling consultation over the last two years around use of school sites. People have had an opportunity to make comment; indeed, 350 submissions prove that the community have responded and made comment. Whilst there was a list of schools for possible closure, not every school closed. So the community had input and actively participated and you could say that we listened and we responded.

**Mr O'Neill:** I would say that to this day we do not know why a particular school closed and a particular school did not close. We do not know to this day why a particular school ceased to be a K-6 and is now a P-3 or a P-2 school. We do not know the reasoning behind any of this, which makes it very awkward for us. Yes, I will say that there were quite a few public meetings, and I will say that Minister Barr was the last person to leave most of those meetings, and he stood there and took everything that was thrown at him, including what I threw at him, at those meetings. That is fine, but the decision was made that these schools were going to close. It was announced in this building, during the budget speech, and then we were going to talk about it for the next six months.

I am sorry, but to me the decision had been made, and the decision was endorsed when the Assembly voted to endorse the government's budget.

**MS BURCH:** An education reform. So you are saying that you do not agree with structural reforms to create P-2 schools?

**MR HANSON:** We are talking about the consultation process at the moment, rather than structural reform.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Doszpot has a question.

**MR DOSZPOT:** I have a supplementary question that sort of encompasses some of the things that have been talked about. Like my colleagues, I just wish to commend you on the report that has been put in. It is excellent and there was a lot of consultation, I understand, from council. Your submission is based on consultation

with P&C associations, including those from school communities that have closed. I note on page 3 of your submission that council believes that the government must take immediate steps to reopen closed schools where the following specific circumstances apply. So you looked at the criteria that perhaps the government should have looked at, and maybe did look at but did not disclose to us, and you believe that at least three ACT communities—Hall, Tharwa and Flynn—do meet those specific circumstances and deserve their schools to be reopened. That is your strong recommendation to this inquiry?

**Mr O’Neill:** Yes, it is our strong recommendation. Especially with two of those schools, Hall and Tharwa, they were much more than just schools in those areas. Although they are right next to the biggest inland city in this country, the culture is still very much a rural culture in those areas. In any rural setting in this country, you will find that the local school is quite often the social hub of that community.

**THE CHAIR:** I was going to ask a question about that. Obviously there are a number of submissions which talk about reopening particular schools, and you have listed three in particular. I am interested in how you would see this working if that were to happen, and what would be the impacts, for example, on schools that have already taken students, and on the teachers? How would that actually work in practice? Would it be until the demographics changed? How would you see it working? We have been through a process now.

**Mr O’Neill:** My idea would be that, with respect to a small community like Tharwa or Hall, we have had the Lyons primary school being administered by the primary school at Curtin. In a small school like that you certainly do not require a non-teaching principal. I think one of the major problems with Tharwa was that they had a non-teaching principal. It is quite easy to link it to another school, and you have just got another annex which is operating and staffed and has the support of a larger organisation. Gordon would probably be the closest school, so it could be an annex of the Gordon school, although it would still be the Tharwa primary school.

**MS BURCH:** So an off-site campus; is that what you are suggesting now?

**Mr O’Neill:** Yes, it could be, and it would operate fairly autonomously.

**THE CHAIR:** I can imagine that, for Hall and Tharwa, you are saying that could be a model that would work because of the location of the schools being in the villages. What about a larger school like Flynn, and considering where it is in terms of the suburbs in that area? I imagine that would be a different type of operation.

**Mr O’Neill:** It would be beyond my expertise to tell you about that one. I have not thought long and hard about that one like I have with the others.

**MR HANSON:** Are you suggesting that there is a need to reopen some of these schools and that the process of how that could eventuate needs to be examined in more detail—and there are a number of options on the table, I guess?

**Mr O’Neill:** There are a number of options. I would suggest that we do with Hall and Tharwa what was done with Curtin and Lyons primary school.

**MS BURCH:** Your criteria relate to where there is a groundswell of community support. If there are 50 people in the community, you think that is adequate. What is the distance from Tharwa to Gordon school?

**Mr O’Neill:** Well, it depends on whether the bridge is open.

**MS BURCH:** The bridge is open, Mr O’Neill.

**Mr O’Neill:** But it has not always been. You can have a 15-minute drive or a 25-minute drive.

**MS BURCH:** So if you were to go down this line, the impost on the budget would affect other schools, for the sake of a 15-minute distance. A number of parents are travelling with children for more than 15 minutes to their school of choice because they may want them to go to a P-10 school or they may want them to go to a language school. I am not quite sure if you can justify the cost based on groundswell. Immediate capacity is my understanding—schools that have absorbed school closures have been able to do that. I again ask: do you think the impost across the education system is warranted for a 15-minute drive?

**Mr O’Neill:** If it is the parents’ choice, and they want their children to grow up and to be educated in that sort of an atmosphere—

**MS BURCH:** So parents in Gordon—

**MR DOSZPOT:** Madam Chair, I think that the questions that Ms Burch appears to be asking should be asked of the government, not the P&C.

**THE CHAIR:** Maybe we will let Ms Burch continue because it seems that Mr O’Neill would like to answer the question; perhaps after that Mr Hanson can ask a question.

**MR HANSON:** Yes.

**MS BURCH:** I think it does because they are saying where they have identified schools, and they have identified two rural schools that are not far out of the perimeter of an urban build-up. I am asking the P&C for their thoughts on the cost and the impact of accommodating that.

**THE CHAIR:** Can I suggest too that we do not debate it as a panel, and that we allow the witnesses to answer the question. Mr O’Neill, do you want to address those points?

**Mr O’Neill:** I hear a lot in education circles all around this country about choice in education and things like that. There are a lot of people who believe that their children do better in a smaller setting where they get more individual attention. Some children require that more than others, and these schools probably provide that opportunity. With respect to absorbing those children into a larger school, one of the biggest fears that we have heard about with the P-10s is: “Our children are going to be lost in this.

My little one's going to be lost in that." There are a lot of things that we need to see sorted out in those sorts of settings in these new schools that have been built.

I have grave concerns about the P-10 system, especially around those common areas like a canteen, where you will have a rather rowdy 13, 14 or 15-year-old and a six or seven-year-old child in the same common area of a canteen. They may well play in segregated parts of the school grounds, but there are common areas which they will use, and that, to me, presents some concerns.

**MR HANSON:** So you feel that this process has eliminated choice for parents and that a one-size-fits-all approach now is becoming more prevalent rather than the choice that existed at one stage?

**Mr O'Neill:** Yes, and when you consider what used to be the Tharwa school community, I think at least 50 per cent of those children travelled out from the Gordon and Banks area.

**MR HANSON:** I will move on to the children that were moved out of the schools that closed. You are suggesting in your submission that there is no tracking of their educational outcomes. The government made much of the fact that this was going to be about improving quality, but we have actually got no evidence of that. We have not tracked those students to confirm whether their educational outcomes have improved or deteriorated; is that correct?

**Mrs Singer:** The council is not aware of any studies that have been done, given that we have had a period of time for those students to become engaged in and used to the educational culture at their new school, and for their educational outcomes to be tracked. A study could use the data comparing them to the students in those schools who did not move, and how they are tracking. We are not aware of any research that has been published which says, "Wow, it took them six weeks to settle in, then they did very well." Part of the thing for parents with a closing school is that the main business of a school is education. My child was at a school which, despite all of the responses that we put in to government, they decided to close. This education thing, this whole business, must not be working as well as in another school, so my student, from a parent's point of view, may not be learning as well as they could in the new environment. Parents really wanted to see that sort of research being undertaken and published by the department of education. At this stage we are unaware of any.

**MR HANSON:** So I guess it comes down to the cost, and we have yet to see the evidence that we have actually saved money as well, which is another point that you raise in the submission: if we have not necessarily improved any educational outcomes and this was about rationalising costs, where is the evidence?

**MS BURCH:** But there is no evidence to say either way. There is one more comment on page—

**THE CHAIR:** We are running out of time. We did start a couple of minutes late.

**MR DOSZPOT:** I guess the bottom line is that a lot of the questions in the submission relate to the impact of the school closures and to feedback on the

prioritisation of why schools were closed. With respect to page 3 again, what you were saying before, Mrs Singer, was that to inform the process that was utilised for the closure of the schools the department should release its study and research on the impact of the closures, as you were discussing, on each of the schools, on students, families and communities. You state that such research should be completed immediately, and that this would help people to understand the criteria for why they were closed and what the impact has been. I presume that is what you are trying to get across to us here?

**Mrs Singer:** Yes, and that would ease any concerns that families still have, and any doubts that are in their minds that their child had issues at a school, and that possibly they were not learning to their maximum because the school was closed. Education is the core business of a school, and where they are at. We all know that children at school from time to time have problems; it does not matter what school they are at. Regardless of whatever the issues were that they faced at their new school, they have come out at the other end, they are doing well and the education department can say, “Look at how good the educational outcomes are, how much of an improvement there has been overall in all those schools.”

**MS BURCH:** On page—

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry, Ms Burch, we are out of time. We have probably all got a lot of questions we would like to ask you. Unfortunately, we are out of time, so I thank Mr O’Neill and Mrs Singer for coming here today and giving us their time.

**DUNDAS, MS ROSLYN**, Director, ACT Council of Social Service

**THE CHAIR:** Welcome, Ms Dundas, and I draw your attention to the privilege statement. I know we have limited time with you today but I would like to offer you the chance to make an opening statement.

**Ms Dundas:** Thank you and I thank the committee for the opportunity to appear. Our main interest in relation to this inquiry into school closures and the reform of the ACT education system actually relates to what will be made of the schools that have closed. We see these very much as community facilities and are quite strong in our approach in ensuring that these facilities are best utilised by the community as a whole.

We support the government decision to make sure that some of these facilities turn into community hubs for community organisations, allowing the space to remain as a centre for local and broader community engagement and allowing that open space that exists around most of the schools that have been closed to keep a focus for that particular suburb and that region and to ensure that there is community activity retained in that area.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Just around what you have stated in your opening statement there about making sure that the spaces are retained for community use: depending, I guess, on the type of organisation or community organisation that goes into that particular school site—for example, if it was a national organisation having an office there—how will placing different community organisations in particular sites serve the community, if it may not actually have a connection to that community as such?

**Ms Dundas:** My understanding is that most of the organisations that will be looking at moving into those facilities are ones that have a strong connection to the Canberra community already. They are looking to use that space, yes, as office, but as well as drop-in centres and encouraging community involvement. I would suggest that having a space that is open and well utilised is more effective for retaining a sense of community than having an empty space or having it turned completely into a private space.

The additional use of the neighbourhood halls idea is also one that should encourage the continual use of those facilities by the community. Even before the 2020 debate began, school halls were often used on the weekends or in the afternoons by after-school care groups or local community groups for a range of different uses, and retaining the school hall as a focus for that community activity we believe is important.

**MS BURCH:** Community NGOs and community groups struggle for infrastructure and space. If they were excluded or denied access to these sites, this opportunity within communities, where would they go? What would be the downside of their growth being limited?

**Ms Dundas:** Maybe I should just clarify that we do not see these as the only solution to the community facility shortage that exists at the moment; we see it as one part. I can tell you that many community, not-for-profit, government funded organisations

already face a number of challenges in relation to their accommodation. I have heard of one that has, due to the inability to find adequate accommodation in the ACT region, moved to Yass. Many organisations exist in substandard facilities with inadequate heating or cooling, that are overcrowded or that leak when it rains, or they are paying commercial rents which divert their resources away from ensuring, I guess, that the community demand for their service is met.

The provision of extra community space can help address some of these needs by providing more facilities that are offered at the government rate as opposed to a private rental rate. We hope, and this is not guaranteed yet, that in refurbishing the schools into regional community hubs it is done in a way that meets the other concerns of community organisations in relation to heating and cooling, adequate space, disability access and a range of other concerns that community organisations currently struggle with.

**MR HANSON:** The question I have is about, I guess, the point of view that you raise. I just want to confirm and clarify that you view that this process had been done more on a sort of economic rationalisation basis rather than looking at the social inclusion aspects; that the imperative was more about the dollar than about looking after the community's needs and the bond, I guess, that a school in a local community creates. Is that correct?

**Ms Dundas:** Certainly, in our response to the original 2020 consultation and to this inquiry we have indicated that we are concerned that the original 2020 process appeared to have more of an economic focus than a social focus, and that is of concern. A range of things that need to be considered when looking at what a school brings to a community—not just the economic viability of that particular educational program in that particular locality, but what it brings to the community around it, what it offers to the students and the families as a social outcome as well as an educational outcome and an economic outcome.

**MS BURCH:** But if that comes at a cost to the system, is the line—

**MR HANSON:** I thought we were not debating; we were going to be—

**MS BURCH:** I am asking the question then: the cost to maintain those alternative schools needs to come from the system, so do you think it is fair for other schools to underwrite the cost of maintaining small schools, purely on a social connection point of view? There must be some economy in there.

**Ms Dundas:** We certainly support a range or a diversity in schooling options through the public system for the Canberra community. We know that some students will do a lot better in a small school than they will in a larger school and we know that some students will do a lot better in a larger school than they will in a smaller school. If we go down the path of ensuring that every school looks identical, we take away that diversity and we do ourselves, as a community, a disservice.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Ms Dundas, you have stated your support of the school closures, if I understood that correctly. I have got a question related to that and you can perhaps explain if I understood that correctly.

**Ms Dundas:** I would suggest that what we have stated is that we had a number of concerns regarding the Towards 2020 process, around the consultation, and, as I have discussed, the social imperative and whether or not that was considered. We now see that a decision has been made—and some of those decisions will be very difficult to unmake—and that in the longer term there is a range of facilities that once were schools that should remain in community hands and for community use.

**MR DOSZPOT:** From your experience in the area of expertise that you are representing, the Council of Social Service, what impact has the school closures had on families that are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage or were experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage?

**Ms Dundas:** I must make clear that this is anecdotal, that we do not have systemic evidence around the outcomes of the implementation of Towards 2020. But, as anticipated, some families have seen increased costs around transport; they have seen increased stresses brought about by change. Low-income families or families facing disadvantage are less well equipped to deal with significant change, and these are significant changes for the entire family.

The shift in relationships around the community that was there has impacts on those families being able to immediately turn to friends for support. It also impacts, as I said, in terms of the cost of transport and supporting the delivery of kids to the school door. A range of programs exist that encourage walking, but if there are not schools within walking distance it turns to long bus trips or the use of the family car, which have both environmental and economic impacts.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Like you, I have had a lot of anecdotal information from very concerned people who have been deeply impacted by the socioeconomic situation that they face. That is why I was rather surprised by your comment about the support of the school closures.

**Ms Dundas:** I challenge that I made that statement.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Well, at the beginning you stated that, but I do not wish to make a big point of it. All I am saying is that the impact of whatever happened should not happen again, I should imagine, to a lot of the people who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or—

**THE CHAIR:** Is there a question in there, Mr Doszpot?

**MR DOSZPOT:** I guess I am just trying to understand whether there has been any further information that you have received from people who were disadvantaged, and what impact it is still having on them—the fact that they still have to travel further, they have other issues with children having to go to different schools. We have heard a lot of evidence on this. If you have not, I am just trying to understand—

**Ms Dundas:** I thought I just answered that we are hearing anecdotal stories of the ongoing impact of the school closures on families around, like we said, transport and that feeling of social cohesion that comes from that school group. To clarify what I

was indicating at the opening, we welcome the retaining of closed schools as community facilities; that is what we welcome.

**MR HANSON:** I am just reading your submission. You are not trying to make a judgement. You are saying there are a number of issues with it, but you are not revisiting that because your focus is on now looking forward in terms of what you can do with those community facilities. You have some concerns with the way the process was done and the social inclusion aspects of it, but now, because that decision has been made, your focus is much more on what you can do to use those facilities. Is that right?

**Ms Dundas:** And, as I said, I think some of these decisions are going to be very hard to unmake and we need to look at how we can then best service those communities that have been impacted by the Towards 2020 process, not just through their educational focus but through their social focus as well.

**MR HANSON:** So the damage is done—

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Hanson, I think Ms Burch has a question.

**MS BURCH:** Given that 40 per cent of public school students go to schools out of their region, 40 per cent of enrolled students are actually travelling anyway. You made the comment of not wanting all schools to be the same everywhere. But the government has created a whole mix of schools, so indeed there are different configurations now. Is that a good thing for the social fabric? Is that a good thing for parents and students, to have that diversity?

**Ms Dundas:** We do not think the government has put forward the educational rationale for particular configurations of schools in particular areas. It is possible that those decisions on where a P-2 or a P-10 school was going to be located were based on economic reasons. We are yet to see the explanations or the social reasons underpinning those decisions.

**MS BURCH:** But having those different configurations in schools does give parents choice. Do you recognise that or not?

**Ms Dundas:** As I said, we do welcome diversity in educational options for students across Canberra.

**MR HANSON:** You were saying that it is a done deal, the damage is done and your focus is on looking forward. But I would like to go back to the consultation process and the words you used were that it was “a done deal”. So your sense is that the consultation was really just a process of spin, more so than substance, in that they knew they were going to close these schools and they just wanted to go through the process. That is the impression you have given in the paper.

**Ms Dundas:** Certainly, there was a lot lacking in the Towards 2020 consultation process. As we have outlined in our submission, there seemed to be a focus on the economic underpinnings of the decisions that the government was looking to make, rather than the social factors that should be considered. In the range of community

concern that came about through the consultation, there was an obvious indication that the consultation was not robust and was not necessarily receptive to community concerns. Putting out a discussion paper that says, ‘We are going to close schools X, Y and Z,’ and then consulting on that does not leave communities with a lot of expectation that different proposals or different ideas put forward will be listened to, especially when the rationale for closing X, Y and Z was not clearly articulated.

**MS BURCH:** A government has responsibility for economic pragmatism and prudence, so a government should always have an eye to the dollar, as much as to other things. In regard to the consultative process, there were over 700 meetings, 350 submissions and 100 visits to school sites. There were a number of schools listed, and a number of schools were not closed. Do you not recognise that, with 700 meetings and 350 submissions, there was a community voice in that?

**MR HANSON:** Submissions only count if you take notice of them, though.

**THE CHAIR:** Can we let Ms Dundas answer the question.

**Ms Dundas:** I am not government. I do not know what government thought when it received particular submissions or as it undertook its particular process. What I am saying is that the initial *Towards 2020* document was flawed. As I say, I think that was backed up by the amount of community concern that was then raised. Shifting the goalposts as the consultation was still proceeding did not encourage good community engagement. I believe that there are a lot of lessons that could be learnt from the 2020 process regarding how government undertakes community consultation in the future.

**MR HANSON:** So your argument would be that, regardless of the number of submissions that were put in and the number of meetings and so on, once the decision has been made, that process was almost nugatory in that they were not listening and they were not responding to those submissions? So it was almost a process in spin rather than in substance. I do not want to put words in your mouth but—

**MS BURCH:** You are, Mr Hanson. We knew exactly what you meant.

**MR HANSON:** ‘‘Done deal’’ were Ms Dundas’s words, so I am just trying to—

**THE CHAIR:** Perhaps we should let Ms Dundas answer the question.

**Ms Dundas:** Mr Hanson, as we outline in our submission, the rationale underpinning the government’s decision making was never made clear, so the ability to effectively respond to that was hampered because the community did not have all of the information that the government had, so it could not put forward alternative proposals to meet whatever ends were driving the decision making. If it was economic, if it was social, if it was education based, this information was not made clear in the initial *Towards 2020* document. So responses were made based only on the outcomes that were put forward rather than the evidence that was underpinning those outcomes. That is a flawed process in terms of trying to engage the community in decision making as opposed to engaging the community in response-giving.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Ms Dundas, with all of the questions, what we are trying to get to is

an understanding, with respect to the socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals that you represent, of what could be gained from this. The fact that it is a done deal is one thing, but would you like to see some sort of a report on what has happened to the people who were in that socioeconomically disadvantaged area? What has the impact been? Has anything been done by the government, and should anything be done by the government, to assess the impact on those people and the people that you represent?

**Ms Dundas:** Certainly, having a sound evidence base on which decisions are made is always to be supported. As I think has been outlined already to you this morning, there is insufficient evidence being provided to see how these changes are impacting on families.

**THE CHAIR:** We have talked about the process and it being essentially a flawed process regarding how it was carried out. Do you think it could have been done differently? With respect to the views which have been expressed in some of the submissions by parents and other people, and particularly by schools, do you think that a social impact analysis should have been done, and that it should have been made public? How do you think it could have been done differently in terms of the reaction which came from the community?

**Ms Dundas:** It would take a longer time to put that on the table in the first instance, but the government could have said to the community: “We need to make some changes to our education system. We are keen to improve the educational outcome for all of our students across all of our schools, but we are facing tough economic times so we need to make some shifts in how things are done. Here are our parameters in that we have X amount of dollars that can be spread across X number of school sites,” or, “We have X number of students and we need to obtain this particular outcome.” If those kinds of key indicators were made available as the broad information that everybody could have, the government could have said, with open arms: “We will welcome your ideas. We’re not saying that we have all the answers at once.”

It is a brave thing for a government to say, “We don’t have the answers.” But if they were able to take that step and say: “These are the parameters we want to work in. We welcome your input. What are your ideas?” it would have given opportunities for school communities themselves to look at whether or not there were greater opportunities to share resources between them and the neighbouring suburb or them and the neighbouring higher education or lower education institution. There may have been greater opportunities to support some innovative thinking from communities, from students themselves, and to feed that into a process that was more respectful of the range of ideas in the community.

Unfortunately, the way that the process was done, it was more reactionary. So the ideas that were generated were generated in a short time frame under the threat of a closure. So they were done in more of a tense situation. If there had been the time available to do it in a more open way, I think we would have got a much better outcome and a much better process of engaging the community.

**MS BURCH:** I have a comment for Mr Doszpot. In the budget there was \$4 million for transitional assistance to schools.

**MR HANSON:** Ms Burch!

**MS BURCH:** Moving forward, and going back to community assets, there has been a round of forums and consultative processes about what can be in that new facility. Have you had any comments or feedback on that?

**Ms Dundas:** The process around the future of the closed school sites was a much more open and receptive process than the initial Towards 2020 process. The reports from the consultations and then the decisions that were taken showed a government that was fast learning the lessons of what went wrong in the process before and showed, certainly, a willingness to accept community input into the decision making around what was going to happen on those sites.

**THE CHAIR:** We are running out of time but we did start a few minutes late. Mr Hanson, do you have any more—

**MR HANSON:** No, I think you have expressed it very well, Ms Dundas. I thank you for your appearance before the committee.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Doszpot?

**MR DOSZPOT:** I have no further questions, thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** We do not have any further questions. Thank you very much for your time. A copy of the transcript will be sent out to you for corrections or further information.

**Ms Dundas:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** We will take a 20-minute break.

**Meeting adjourned from to 10.29 to 10.48 am.**

**COBBOLD, MR TREVOR**, Convenor, Save Our Schools

**THE CHAIR:** I will begin by welcoming you, Mr Cobbold, to the inquiry today. I draw your attention to the privilege statement—there is a copy of it there—just to make sure that you are familiar with that. We have limited time today, but would you like to make a brief opening statement before we go to questions?

**Mr Cobbold:** Yes, thank you. I would like to do that. Save Our Schools welcomes the opportunity to present our submission to the inquiry. We see this inquiry as being of critical importance. It is important that the Legislative Assembly and the public learn from the failures of the Towards 2020 process. Changes are needed to the Education Act to ensure that these failures do not happen again in the future.

Perhaps the greatest failure of Towards 2020 is that it has undermined community confidence in governmental consultation processes. In a democracy, there must be real and genuine opportunities to influence decision making. The extent and effectiveness of community involvement in major public policy decisions such as those involving the closure of many neighbourhood schools is a test of democracy. Towards 2020 failed this test.

Towards 2020 was a sham process. It did not genuinely engage with the community. It was ill conceived, ill planned and ill managed. It was not conducted within the spirit of the law. At critical points, it contravened the letter of the law, such as its failure to assess impact on students and their families and to provide a full six-month consultation period. All of this reflected the government's intention to go ahead with a number of school closures, whatever the communities concerned said. The voices of many went unheeded in that process.

Community participation in public policy decision making is critical to a vibrant and healthy democracy. Changes to the Education Act are needed to restore at least a semblance of community faith in public policy consultation processes in the ACT in the future. They are needed to renew effective community participation in decision making. They are needed to renew democracy in the ACT. This is what is at stake in this inquiry. It is also important that school communities whose school has been taken away from them by a process that lacked legitimacy, integrity and natural justice should be given the opportunity to re-establish their school.

Our submission outlines the failures of the Towards 2020 consultation process, makes a case for changes to the Education Act and makes recommendations for change. I will briefly canvass some of those issues. In terms of consultation failures, our submission shows that the Towards 2020 process was riven by failure. It failed to assess the education impact on students and their families and school communities. Key education factors were ignored in the decision and the research on small schools was wrongly presented as indicating they provide a lesser education. In particular, the minister failed to take account of the successful outcomes being achieved in the closed schools, present any evidence that closed schools were delivering an unsatisfactory education, have proper regard to the learning needs of disadvantaged students and assess the adequacy of the curriculum in each of the closed schools.

Although the government argued that small schools limit the educational

opportunities of students, almost every school that was closed had generally average and often higher than average student outcomes in some aspects. No audit of the curriculum of closed schools was ever carried out and there is no evidence of an inadequate curriculum in any of the closed schools. None of the schools were closed because they were found to be failing schools. All this suggests is that the government's real reasons for closing schools had very little to do with education quality.

The process also failed to assess financial impact. None of the financial factors that the minister said he considered in assessing financial impact related to the financial impact on families and the school community, as required by the act. They all related to the financial operation of the school and the cost to government. There is no evidence that the government systematically collected and analysed information on the financial impact of school closures on students and families during the consultation. This suggests that the government's primary concern in closing schools was to generate financial savings. Yet in pursuing this priority the government even failed to do a whole-of-government analysis of the financial impact of closing schools and it excluded additional costs incurred by the education committee and other agencies from its savings estimates. As a result, the net saving to government was overestimated.

The minister also failed to assess social impact as required under the act. The factors taken into account in assessing social impact largely related to demographic and enrolment trends in schools. None referred to the impact on students and their families as required by the act. The minister also ignored the impact on communities and other matters such as traffic safety issues, environmental impacts and impact on property values and business values.

The government also failed to provide a full consultation period. The effective period of consultation was less than the statutory six months because it took months for the government to provide necessary information to school communities and even then some information requested was never provided. The closing date for submissions was a month before the end of the six-month period. The final decision was announced only one week after the end of consultation, which meant that decisions were being prepared during the consultation.

The minister also failed to fully adhere to the consultation principles outlined in the act. Our submission shows that the consultation principles were not fully adhered to. The process was not fully open and transparent and was marred by an adversarial approach by the government. Some key documents were withheld and information requested by the community was not readily supplied.

Community engagement in the consultation process was less than effective for several reasons outlined in the submission. Some options were not even consulted on—for example, the P-10 school on the Kambah high school site and the P-2 school at Isabella Plains. The decision on the P-10 school effectively decided the future of Urambi primary school, yet it was never included in the consultation because it was not identified for possible closure in Towards 2020. Its future was decided without any consultation with its community.

The lack of timeliness and accuracy of information provided by the minister and his department were ongoing and contentious issues for much of the consultation period. This did much to undermine community confidence in the process. There were long delays in the release of the necessary information and much financial enrolment capacity and demographic data was shown to be inaccurate and misleading.

The litany of failures incurred under Towards 2020 demonstrate a strong case for change in the way proposals for school closures are considered and consulted on in the future. Key requirements of the Education Act were not followed to any reasonable degree. It is also apparent now that the act fails to set out a sufficiently clear set of guidelines for fully assessing the impact of proposed school closures.

In addition, six months is too short a time for an effective consultation, especially in circumstances where many schools are proposed for closure. Not only is it too short a time for communities to be able to respond but it is clear from the Towards 2020 experience that the department of education did not have sufficient time to organise an effective consultation and provide all the relevant data and information at the beginning of the consultation.

While the government failed to adhere to both the spirit and the letter of the law relating to section 20 of the Education Act, it also failed to have due regard to other sections of the act which have relevance to the school closures. These are the sections on the principles governing the provision of public education.

Many of the failures of Towards 2020 were the result of a lack of independence in the conduct of the consultation and analysis of the feedback and submissions. The department of education cannot be a neutral broker in issues of school closure. It has a fundamental conflict of interest that biases it towards following government instructions rather than doing an objective analysis. The department was seen as working on behalf of the government and as a proponent, an advocate, of Towards 2020. It was not seen to be independent by the vast majority of school communities.

Save Our Schools proposes that section 20 of the Education Act be amended to provide for an independent public inquiry process to assess proposals for school closures and to consider alternatives; to provide for a more comprehensive and inclusive community consultation process on school closures which takes account of the principles of public education stated in the act; to provide a schedule of educational, financial, social and environmental factors to be taken into account in considering proposals to close schools; to provide an independent cost-benefit study of the direct and indirect effects of a proposal to close schools, to be made available during the consultation process; to provide an extended three-phase consultation which includes consultation on a draft report to government; and, finally, a right of appeal against decisions to close a school.

Finally, Save Our Schools proposes that the ACT government should reopen schools whose communities have wrongfully lost their school and have been adversely affected by closures and where there is community support to do so. Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Cobbold. We will go to questions. First off, I thank you for making the submission. It is a very comprehensive submission, and I thank

you for taking the time to do that.

The first question I have, which is one of the key things you mention in the summary, is about an education impact assessment. I would think that the education department would be considering the impacts on education and making decisions that take that into account. Is there evidence that you know of that the education department took into account the good work that some of these schools were doing—Flynn and Cook, as examples? Do you think the process would have had different outcomes if this information was used in a different way? I note that in your submission you say that this was not taken into account in the final decisions that were made.

**Mr Cobbold:** When you look through the notes of decision, the consultation report on Towards 2020 and the documents that were provided under freedom of information requests, it is clear that the successful school outcomes being achieved in just about every school were largely ignored. You would have thought that if a government was assessing educational impact or educational factors as a possible reason to close schools, they would do an analysis of the outcomes of those schools. The evidence is that in just about every case the schools that were closed were achieving average or above average results, and yet they were closed.

The minister made considerable and extensive reference to the inadequacy of curriculum in small schools. This was a constantly stated problem with small schools. Yet there is no evidence in the consultation report, the notices of decision for each school or in the freedom of information documents that any audit was ever done of the curriculum in each of the closed schools or, indeed, in any of the schools that were proposed for closure. In fact, in the notice of decision the strongest point that the minister made was that—and I am quite confident that I have got the words right here—the curriculum “may be” inadequate in the future. This was a reason for closing schools: may be inadequate. But no audit was ever done. Yet, two years prior to that, the ACT curriculum task force did a review of curriculum across government schools in the ACT and it reported that the curriculum across all schools was adequate. In terms of some of the examples that we looked at, it was clear, especially in the case of primary schools, that each school had a similar curriculum.

The final point I would like to make about that is that Save Our Schools produced a literature review and analysis of the impact of large and small schools on the learning needs and outcomes of socially disadvantaged students. That report shows very clearly, based on substantive evidence, that small schools deliver better outcomes for disadvantaged students than do larger schools. They better mitigate the effects of poverty on learning outcomes. Yet this paper, which is now cited in literature overseas, was not even referred to in the consultation report; it just disappeared. I cannot say that the minister never considered these, but there is no evidence in the major documents produced at the end of the process that education outcomes, these key education factors, were a primary issue in deciding which schools would close.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Cobbold. Ms Burch, do you have a question?

**MS BURCH:** Not just at the moment but I will come to it.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Hanson?

**MR HANSON:** Thanks, and I reiterate the chair's comments about the quality of your submission, and I thank you for your opening presentation.

It is a pretty substantive submission. To be honest, it does not leave much room for questions because you have been so comprehensive. Going through what you said, you basically said that there is no evidence that we have improved our educational outcomes—probably, in fact, we could point to evidence where it has got worse; that there was no assessment of the social outcomes and the negative effects there; there have been financial impacts on families and that was not properly assessed; that the actual entire cost benefit for closing a number of schools has not been validated and we still have not seen evidence to prove that we have actually saved money in some cases; that the consultation process was a sham; and that in some cases we have failed to adhere to the act.

Have you got any sense of why the government went through the process and did what it did, which is what this committee is struggling to understand? Based on the evidence that you have presented, why has the government gone through this process? Did it get it wrong somewhere fundamentally at the beginning or did it have an ideological agenda? Do you have an assessment, Mr Cobbold?

**Mr Cobbold:** It is hard for me to ascribe motivations on the part of government. I can only read what happened. I think it is superficial but I think there is a common view that somehow you can save money to government and the community by closing small schools; their average cost is higher than larger schools. I think the government saw a possibility of making financial savings. But, as we learnt in the school closure issue that confronted the government in 1990, when a very substantial analysis was done of all the financial costs to government and the community—and this was done by both the ACT Treasury at the time and by a leading academic at ANU—when it came down to the final bottom line, to make financial savings from closing schools really depends on being able to sell land; the recurrent savings are not significant.

For what it is worth, my view is that the government thought it was going to make substantial financial savings, but it effectively only did that analysis in relation to the financial operations of the department of education, not in relation to other costs to government as well. I note that the report—a bipartisan report—of the estimates committee for the 2007-08 appropriation noted this and in fact made a recommendation that the Auditor-General should do a comprehensive study of the costs and savings on a whole-of-government analysis. That is yet to be done. I cannot prove one way or the other because we do not have the data, obviously. But, when you look at what was done, the conclusion you have to come to is that all the costs associated with closing schools were not taken into account.

To answer your original question, I suspect that the idea of making savings was a dominant—

**MR HANSON:** A driving factor.

**Mr Cobbold:** factor, but I only suspect that.

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry, Ms Burch, do you have a question in relation to that point?

**MS BURCH:** You have made your opening statements around reopening some schools, or your position is that schools reopen. So the question to Save Our Schools is: there is significant development going on—new schools being built or reconfigured—so does that work stop?

**Mr Cobbold:** That is obviously a question for the government, but our—

**MS BURCH:** But you must have a view on it.

**Mr Cobbold:** recommendation is that, given the lack of legitimacy and integrity in the process, and the lack of natural justice, schools that have got significant community support to reopen—and some of them do not—should be given the opportunity to make their case and to establish that and should be given sufficient time to re-establish their school. It is not a question of what the cost to—

**MS BURCH:** No, but I am asking about the work—

**THE CHAIR:** If we just—

**MS BURCH:** I think it is a clear question. There are works—schools under development now, plans to build new schools now. What is—

**Mr Cobbold:** We are not proposing that new schools in Gungahlin be stopped because of this.

**MS BURCH:** So the forward work—

**Mr Cobbold:** Those schools would go ahead in any case; they were never conditional on the closing of other schools. They were part of the forward planning of government. It is just that they got brought into the Towards 2020 plan to make it look like something else was happening. They were schools that were already planned and have to be provided, and we certainly are not proposing that those developments be stopped in the event that some schools might reopen.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Mr Cobbold, I echo the sentiments of the chair and of my colleague about the extent of your submission, which is excellent, covers a lot of points and makes a lot of recommendations. You stressed a number of times the lack of legitimacy, natural justice and integrity in the process that was undertaken. One of your recommendations is for a right of appeal to an independent arbiter. If there was an independent arbiter in place, do you think it would have solved a lot of the problems that we are looking at here today?

**Mr Cobbold:** Our fundamental reason for proposing that—I know it is not a proposal without its complexities, of how you do it; but putting that aside—is to ensure that, when the process has been gone through, whoever is doing it, whether it is the government or our independent planning commission, is aware of the possibility of an appeal, which seems to us to inject a bit more discipline into the way submissions and consultations are carried out and into the analysis that is done to justify whatever

decision is made. We see that as important protection for the process.

**MR DOSZPOT:** And the question from there is: is this one of your primary recommendations? That is what I am trying to get at. There are a lot of recommendations and all of them have some substance. Which carries the most substance?

**Mr Cobbold:** That is a difficult question. I think that is one of the fundamental recommendations that we are making. We are suggesting an independent process because we cannot see that independence will ever occur when the department runs a consultation. That is not to question the integrity of individuals; it is just that the department is placed in a conflict of interest situation. It is important that the full impact of the closing of schools—that is the financial, social, educational and environmental impact, not just on government but on families, the students and the broader communities around those schools—is considered. We see that as fundamental. The right of appeal is necessary to ensure that there is discipline and integrity in the process. It is not a complete assurance, but it injects more than there has been in the past.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** This is in relation to having the independent arbiter there. You have mentioned throughout—and in quite some detail too—that the *Community Engagement Manual* and also principles in the Education Act were not followed in the way the process was carried out. I know you do address this in the submission but I just want to know where specifically that occurred and how it could have been done differently, I guess.

**Mr Cobbold:** Sorry, I am not sure—

**THE CHAIR:** You said that key parts of the *Community Engagement Manual* and also parts of the Education Act were not followed in the way the consultation process was undertaken.

**Mr Cobbold:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** I know you did say that you have addressed this in your submission, but, in terms of us discussing it, where specifically in the process that was carried out by the government for the closing of schools did it not follow the manual and parts of Education Act were not adhered to?

**Mr Cobbold:** I guess the thing about the manual is that the principles outlined in the manual are really important. They are based on quite substantive research about the best way to engage communities in consultation. What is clear from the manual and other research on public consultation is that the community needs to be involved in the process right at the beginning—in how the process is going to be carried out and the terms of reference—and this did not happen, at all, in this case. We see that initial phase as really important for getting the community engaged and not imposing a process on the community.

There were several regional consultation forums that were very well attended—I am just giving an example—but the whole process was run by departmental officials and the minister. How those forums were going to work was never discussed with the community or planned beforehand; therefore they do not have a stake in it. Given the other factors that were operating at the time, like not full provision of information and delays in the provision of information, in effect the community was disempowered in that process because the process was decided by the government, controlled by the government and the community were just there.

**MR DOSZPOT:** In fact, you made the point that key parts of the *Community Engagement Manual* were not followed and that there were indications that decisions to close the schools were made before the end of the consultation period.

**Mr Cobbold:** There are several. It is particularly apparent in some of the FOI documents that there appeared to be work going on—planning, changes to buildings that were occurring in receiving schools, tenants being asked to leave, schools being delivered with packing boxes—before a decision was ever made. Schools were very aware of that—parents and families were very aware in the schools where that happened—and that does not give people confidence that it is a genuine process. I can understand that the department thought it had to prepare, because it had not given much time between decisions and the beginning of the next school year. But that is a problem with the process. Certainly it brought a great deal of disquiet and dissatisfaction from many school communities.

When you put that together with difficulties in getting accurate information, difficulties in getting information that people needed—for example, even a list of factors that would be considered by the minister in closing a school was not supplied until the end of September, three months after the beginning of the consultation—that just does not give people—

**MS BURCH:** Mr Cobbold, you have made a comment, again on your final recommendation about reopening schools, that a number of school communities do not have a strong interest in reopening schools. So that asset is proposed for other community use, an alternative community asset?

**Mr Cobbold:** Yes.

**MS BURCH:** Your view is that that is a good thing for those sites, to invest in community assets?

**Mr Cobbold:** Yes. You may be aware that we certainly participated to a large extent in the two rounds of community consultation on what should be done with those buildings and we put a strong case to retain those buildings and land for community uses.

**MS BURCH:** All of the buildings or—

**Mr Cobbold:** In each case as a general principle, although we did not go through the specifics of each community, we argued that, and in large part that has been the decision of the government and we support that.

**MS BURCH:** Where those sites now are earmarked for an alternative community asset, what is the balance? With the community moving on, in these communities where there is not strong support to reopen a school, what do you think makes the difference?

**Mr Cobbold:** That is a good question. I think the difficulty many parents face, and I should say that I no longer have children in the system, is that once the school closes and you are forced to go on to another school, although you might not like it—and there is certainly still a great deal of anger about that decision—your children have to establish new relationships with new teachers, often new friendships because children go to different schools, and it is a very difficult decision to say, “I am going to go back to the other school.” Changing school regularly we know is a disruptive experience, and a lot of parents would say that once is enough.

I guess the other factor is that a lot of people worked very hard in preparing their submissions. It was a very stressful period for many families and I think it is clear that many people are still very tired and a lot of people have dropped out of even participating in their school because they are tired and it has been such a stressful, angst-ridden period for them. So for reasons like that I think many parents will have decided that they are not arguing the case for reopening some schools.

But I need to emphasise that in several communities—and I am sure that you will have submissions from them—there is strong community support to reopen the school. We believe that those people should be given the chance to make their case and to re-establish their school community, particularly in the case of the regional schools, Tharwa and Hall. Every neighbourhood school is a pillar of the local community, but in those two cases they were fundamental pillars of the community.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Mr Cobbold, your recommendation—

**THE CHAIR:** I am sorry, but we are out of time. Maybe we could just have one final question. Mr Hanson?

**MR HANSON:** I am happy for Mr Doszpot to ask his.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Your recommendation 8 is that the ACT government reopen schools whose communities have been wrongfully closed and adversely affected by closure and where there is community support as demonstrated by submission of a proposal for reopening to the inquiry. You have looked at this in fine detail. Do you have your own opinion as to which schools?

**Mr Cobbold:** I think I am stating the obvious that there are at least four. There may be more, but there are at least four who have demonstrated a strong community commitment to the school, and they are Flynn, Cook, Hall and Tharwa. I mention those because they are the most obvious ones. There may be others that I am not aware of but certainly they are schools that come to mind.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you again, Mr Cobbold, for coming here today and giving us your time. The transcript of today will be sent out to you so that you can check that.

**Mr Cobbold:** Thank you very much for the opportunity.

**Short adjournment.**

**GILMOUR, MS PENNY**, ACT Branch Secretary, Australian Education Union

**THE CHAIR:** I thank the Australian Education Union for agreeing to give evidence and to speak to us today. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is on the table, so that you are familiar with and aware of that. We are inviting each group that speaks to make an opening statement if they wish. If you would like to do that, that would be great.

**Ms Gilmour:** We have a brief opening statement. Essentially, the AEU's position on the issue of school closures is that we certainly held the view that it was an important thing to do—to look at the education provision across the territory and to see whether it was still serving needs. Our concern was with the way the process was conducted, not with the idea of a process that might result in the closure of schools per se. Certainly, I reiterate our belief that any closure of schools in the territory ought to be based on well-founded educational objectives and not, as seems to be the case sometimes, on short-term demographic or economic pressures.

We deliberately chose not to express a view about schools once they were named publicly because we felt that was not in the best interest of either our members teaching in those schools or the communities that the schools served. Our criticism was, and still is, around the process. Put simply, the fastest way to kill a school is to put its name on a list of schools that might close and then ask people to argue why it should not. We would hope that in future when these kinds of considerations come forward again the process is much more sensitively managed than was the case this time and that there is genuine consultation with the community—to have the discussions before what look like pre-emptive decisions are made.

Certainly, it was our view that the release of the list of schools that were earmarked for closure had a remarkable destabilising effect—and it is not surprising that that should be the case. The time frame in which that occurred created difficulties for the teachers as well as the students. The teachers were managing not only students with anxieties and in transition to new schools but also their own professional anxieties, because the time frame for knowing what their future held was just as short for them as it was for the students. It is our view that in future it would be better if these processes could be managed with a better planned time frame that did allow more thorough consultation and in the end produced a list for consideration or a list of determined schools for closure that was the result of a considered community debate, rather than what occurred this time with the announcement first and the debate later.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Gilmour. We will go to questions. The first question I have is around what you mentioned—around the way the policy was undertaken. As you said, there was support for the 2020 policy but your issue was with the way the process was undertaken and the way the consultation was undertaken. Given that is the case, when that occurs does that actually affect the policy itself in terms of the way that it is being implemented and also in terms of the way it is delivered? There have been issues from the start, when the information was given to the community and to other interested parties. Does that then affect the implementation and delivery of that policy?

**Ms Gilmour:** I think it does because you start the discussion from a different premise.

You start with a list of schools that are earmarked for closure and invite the community to express an opinion as to why that should not be the case. The alternative is to start the discussion about what the educational future of the territory looks like, what issues we need to take into consideration in planning and how we might better manage that.

When it is done in that way, where it appears that a decision is made but a decision has not really been made, you have a period of time for debate and it leads to all the speculation and destabilisation that was evident across the territory. Underpinning it as well, I think that some of the hidden arrangements, if you like, become a bit haphazard. For example, once the schools were determined for closure—those that were to close in the first round—resources freed up from those schools were available for other schools and they could put in an expression of interest for them.

The first round of that process was not very well managed. I would have thought that the most sensible thing to do would be to take expressions of interest and then determine the distribution of the resources on the basis of need. It does appear to us that, in the first round, it was largely on a first come, first served basis rather than on considerations of need. The capacity of schools to get in quickly is always dependent on what time they have got available and what other pressures there are. I guess it is just symptomatic of a process that appeared to have been not as well thought through as it might have been. I think that does lay an uncertain foundation then.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Gilmour. Ms Burch?

**MS BURCH:** The new configurations of schools provide different learning experiences for different children and families, so that is a benefit to the education spectrum across ACT schools?

**Ms Gilmour:** Provided that it is supported with professional learning for the teachers who are moving into the new environment, it will continue to be a benefit.

**MS BURCH:** You made a comment on page 4 that the unrest around schools being named tends to mean there is a bit of a leakage of students out of the system. The recent census shows that ACT schools now have higher enrolments than ever before, so do you think that period of unsettlement has settled?

**Ms Gilmour:** I would hope so. It is understandable that parents facing uncertainty would take steps to get what certainty they could, and if that meant moving their students so be it. One of the consequences is that, once you move your student to a new setting and deal with all those sorts of adjustment issues, the potential to move them back to the old setting, should that become available, becomes just as problematic a consideration as the original. But it looks to have settled down. Of course we are very pleased to see the public education sector numbers growing, but we note that we still have a bit of an issue in the high school sector.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Hanson?

**MR HANSON:** Yes. Thank you very much for appearing before the inquiry and for your submission as well. In terms of the educational outcomes, evidence has been

presented to us in submissions, and also today, that having a bit of choice and having small schools, large schools and so on actually presents better educational outcomes in some cases. I notice that you talk about the Costello review later in your submission. Do you feel that this was done as a rationalisation which was cost driven rather than looking at the educational outcomes? That is the impression that I get from your submission. I just want to get some more meat around that—that, rather than looking at what is the best educational outcome for the ACT and its public school students, it was more a matter of “How can we save some bucks and achieve a similar result?” Is that a fair assessment?

**Ms Gilmour:** I have to say that an educational rationale was not obvious to us in that it seemed to be an idea, and not well thought through in its initial implementation. Certainly, right at the beginning of the process there were some comments about the achievement levels of schools. Indeed, for a very short time there was some data and information on some school websites that seemed to suggest that they were failing schools, which was not necessarily correct.

Certainly, the enrolment patterns of some of the schools that were on the original lists immediately sparked community debate. I am very well aware that many schools contested the data that was provided about what their demographic information was. Some of the named schools seemed illogical to us but, as I said before, we took a deliberate position of not getting into the business of naming names. To be the organisation representing teachers and taking a role that effectively is being a bit of a Pontius Pilate we did not think was an appropriate thing to do, particularly when there was so much that could be said about the process itself. And fundamentally we do not have an issue with a periodic review of educational process.

One of the things that has come out of the change is that there are now a number of different structures and a number of one-offs of those structures. Stromlo high is an example of that. It is the only school that has had year 6 imported into a high school setting. I am not saying that that in itself is a poor decision to have made, but those sorts of one-off instances make it difficult in terms of planning logical resourcing and staffing for new things like that.

Another example is—and this is not a result of 2020 particularly—that across the territory now we have a range of schools that are P-10 and they are all configured slightly differently. As the union that sits at the table with the employer talking about staffing and staffing formulae, it is quite difficult to get consistent outcomes when the basis on which those schools were set up is quite different. Gold Creek has a different set-up and was established with a slightly different staffing structure from what was done at Wanniasa when it was combined into a single school, and from what is being done now. So we still have not seemed to have caught up at a system level with what the implications are for staffing P-10 on one site. Part of that is most clearly demonstrated in the difference in teaching load hours between primary and secondary in a setting where people will teach across both sectors. That creates some difficulties.

**MR HANSON:** What you are suggesting to me is that, rather than a holistic examination of the way that education should be delivered, it was more a matter of saying, “Hey, how can we cut some schools and then make that work?”

**Ms Gilmour:** That seemed to be the impression—that it did not have a consistent narrative about why the proposals were made. Having made them, certainly, with respect to the things that have come out of 2020, we have had discussions and recognise that the department has put resources into those sites to assist them to work. There are still some teething problems, but I think that is to be expected. Certainly, the AEU has been absolutely vocal in its support for the replacement of Ginninderra district high with a facility in west Belconnen. We also support the Tuggeranong school and we were a strong advocate for the early childhood school idea. We are pleased to see that it is up and working and showing every sign of being successful.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Doszpot?

**MR DOSZPOT:** I compliment you on your comments at the outset about looking at well-founded educational objectives as the issues that should have been looked at, and obviously the point that you made about having a considered community debate. Was there any consultation with the union and with your members as well?

**Ms Gilmour:** I do not believe so, prior to the actual announcements. I am racking my brain because you may know that I have taken up the secretary's role in the last 12 months. I do not recall, no. There was no formal consultation with our members but certainly the AEU attended the community consultations and encouraged our members to do the same.

**MR DOSZPOT:** As part of the community consultation?

**Ms Gilmour:** Yes.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Is this something that perhaps you and your members should be involved in? In a situation where 39 schools are considered for closure, should you be part of that discussion and consultation process?

**Ms Gilmour:** I think it would be useful to get a handle on it, perhaps to provide a view about whether the way that is proposed is the best way. The reality is that you could have a lengthy debate and still not reach an agreed conclusion about whether the way the 2020 list was provided was the best way or whether a community debate would have produced a better outcome that the community was more supportive of.

One of the things that will always make for some level of attention in this community is the general view that there should be a community school in each area. Demographics do not always lend themselves to that, but then that is part of the discussion about well-founded educational decisions, so that you do not simply make a decision based on what the demography shows you now—clean out all the schools from an area that has no current use for them, only to discover, as often happens, that the population shifts five or 10 years down the track and you start to have school-age populations in those areas again.

I do not think there is a clear answer but I am sure that we would, as we always do, welcome the opportunity to express a view about proposals and to warn of what might be the implications from our members' point of view, for government to be able to take that into consideration in making its announcements.

**THE CHAIR:** On page 4 you noted with respect to some of the receiving schools that some of your members reported that the level of support for students who were being transferred from other schools was not always adequate. I wanted to find out whether this was formally recognised and whether you are aware that this has actually been rectified now in most cases.

**Ms Gilmour:** I know there were some issues with delays in records going from some schools. For the most part, I think it was a people issue—not enough people and hours in the day. It must be remembered that at that time schools were in session and teachers were trying to make sure that the curriculum was being maintained at the school, that those students who were in schools that were closing were being supported to deal with whatever anxieties they might have had and that they and their parents were then being supported to deal with the practical aspects of moving.

The department did employ a couple of extra people to act in a consultancy role but it simply, in our view, was not enough and it did mean that at times schools did feel unsupported. We have not had continuing complaints from our members that students coming from those schools continued to be unsupported. To be honest, it is probably partly a function of the time of year as well. The end of the year is always a difficult and busy time in schools. Doing this on top of it, and in relatively large numbers, so to speak, I think just compounded the issue.

**THE CHAIR:** So there was that initial influx of students but it seems to be—

**Ms Gilmour:** I think that by the time the second round came along the system had learnt some lessons and the second round certainly went more smoothly than the first round did, even from the point of view of having seen notices to schools through the department's internal communications about opportunities to come and view the resources that were now available because of the closing schools and to put in their bids, if you like. That is as opposed to the first round which, as I said before, was pretty much a first in, best dressed activity.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Burch?

**MS BURCH:** I have a question on page 3 of your submission, about Caroline Chisholm high. You say it has devolved its subschool structure. When did that happen?

**Ms Gilmour:** As part of the change to a single site, but it is also true that with staffing changes the staffing provision to Caroline Chisholm no longer supports the subschool structure.

**MS BURCH:** Well, it did last year.

**Ms Gilmour:** Last year they were certainly in a transition stage. They had a new principal and they were moving away from the subschool structure model, and that was part of the amalgamation across both sides.

**MS BURCH:** My child went to Caroline Chisholm last year and there was an active

and supported subschool structure. I just make that comment. You made a comment about there being strong community support for Hall and Tharwa schools. These are small communities that are 15 minutes away from other school opportunities. At what point does it become untenable or unsupportable to maintain these boutique-type schools that come at a cost to every other student in the public system?

**Ms Gilmour:** In relation to Tharwa, our view was that Tharwa could have been maintained as an annex of Conder or Gordon. It would not have needed to have its own principal. But what Tharwa offered was a different kind of educational experience. We are well aware that parents who did not live locally in Tharwa, who were down in the valley, chose to take their children out to Tharwa because they wanted a small-school experience. The school was certainly achieving good results for its students. If it is a cost-cutting argument, we recognise that it was a small school but we believe that it could have operated effectively as an annex of Conder or Gordon. So it would not need to maintain a principal and other executive infrastructure to the extent that you had on the site when it was Tharwa, but you could have still maintained an educational provision in that community and met that need.

It is similarly the case with Hall. We certainly recognised that Hall had students from New South Wales. Again, it offered a particular kind of education, and there are quite a few parents in our community who do actively seek smaller schools for their children, and both of those schools did not have any indication that they were failing to maintain and deliver a quality education.

From our perspective, the argument comes back to one about what is the educational provision and what is the educational argument for closing schools. Notwithstanding that you can drive from Hall and Tharwa to other locations, having skimmed the submissions on the website, I am well aware that in those communities, in their mind, the debate about what they would like to see happen is not over.

**MS BURCH:** The Primary Principals Association expressed concerns around limited education opportunities in small schools and the demands that small school place on staff. So there are some concerns around the provision of education through small schools.

**Ms Gilmour:** Yes, but there have always been some small schools in this system. The AEU's fundamental consideration in this round was that this system did have a lot of very small schools, and smaller schools that were becoming unviable, and there was a need to have a look at whether resources could be rationalised in a sensible way. For us, Hall and Tharwa did not appear to be logical choices because they met different needs.

**MR HANSON:** Just in response to that, can I commend the union on the position it has taken in terms of recognising the differing needs of parents and students and that one size does not necessarily fit all. I commend you on that. It leads in to my question, which will be a little bit long winded. We are all recognising the need for improved educational outcomes through these processes and taking notice of the broader demographic changes, the longer term and the social impact of these. It seems that the driver for this in your analysis is somewhat of a narrow, cost-cutting, short-term focus. You do have some criticism of the way that this process had been conducted which

may have led to some wrong decisions. We were just talking about Tharwa and Hall and that the decisions may have been incorrect. You recognised the need for some communities like Tharwa and Hall to re-examine whether those schools should reopen. I commend you on all of those points.

You then talk about the fact that, on those sites, you would not want to see an independent school reopen. If it were established by the community that there is an ongoing social need and an educational requirement—and you have expressed that yourself and recognised that there is an argument that you could present like that—but the government were to disagree, based on more narrow, short-term, cost-driven agendas, could you explain why it is that you would not support an independent school? If you recognise the educational need, the social need and the longer-term demographic need, and reject the government’s shorter-term cost-cutting measures, and if an independent school were to say—and I am not saying that is the case—“We can fill that vacuum,” you have been very specific in your submission in saying that you reject that entirely. I am just trying to understand that position.

**Ms Gilmour:** I suppose, put simply, it is because we are fundamentally committed to the provision of public schools, and for every school that is not in the public sector there is a price that is paid from the public purse in the amount of support that is available for public schools. Our fundamental position is to not support the expansion of non-government provision and to argue that government has a responsibility and should provide basic educational services.

**MR HANSON:** For instance, if that were the decision and the community, the union and everyone said, “We do believe there is an ongoing need and a justifiable reason that there should be a school in Tharwa or Hall,” and you agreed with that principle but the government did not, for cost-driven reasons, but then an independent school were to say, “We could provide that need,” would you in no circumstances support that or would you consider it?

**Ms Gilmour:** No. I think the reality too goes to a comment that I made a little earlier. Having gone through the sometimes painful process of moving schools, despite the deeply held convictions of individuals, I think it would need to be tested whether provision on sites that have closed would actually attract the numbers to make a viable school. The last thing we would want to see, equally, is a school re-established, only to die by attrition over the short term. Our fundamental position is in support of public provision of public schools, so we do not advocate private provision, whatever its source.

**MR HANSON:** Thanks.

**MS BURCH:** There is a question—

**MR DOSZPOT:** Excuse me.

**THE CHAIR:** Sorry, Mr Doszpot.

**MR DOSZPOT:** In this whole process of school closures, have your members seen any improvement in the educational outcomes as a result?

**Ms Gilmour:** Certainly in terms of NAPLAN results—last year, you may be aware, was the first year that this jurisdiction had participated in the national assessment program as opposed to the ACT assessment program—I think it is probably drawing a bit of a long bow to say that improvements are solely due to the changes in school structures. I think the improvements are about teaching and pedagogy and efforts made to better support and resource our schools and make sure that every child in them has their best opportunities. So I would not attribute the success solely to a change in structure.

**MS BURCH:** Mr Hanson seems to, in a number of his questions to you, indicate that you said earlier that you feel that some of the school closures were cost-cutting measures. Is that right or wrong? The point of the question is: how does that then balance up against the significant investment in schools? I am looking at a 2006-07 budget document which had an increase of \$41 million and I know that the current investment is \$350 million over four years. So it is a bit of contradiction to say that it was driven by cost efficiencies when in actual fact there is more money than ever before in the public education system.

**Ms Gilmour:** I do not believe our submission says that we think the fundamental reason was cost cutting. What we have tried to say is that we cannot identify a clear educational rationale behind the decisions. Certainly at the time that the closures were announced the government did indicate what it expected to save in implementing those decisions, so it is clear to us that our reference to basing decisions on well-founded educational objectives rather than short-term demographic or economic pressures is a correct one, because clearly the government saw an economic benefit in taking the path that it took. The fact that it has subsequently injected resources into education is very welcome but I do not think that it negates the fact that government identified that it would save costs in making the decisions that it chose to make.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Hanson?

**MR HANSON:** No, I think I have got everything I need from the answers you have provided so far.

**THE CHAIR:** Mr Doszpot?

**MR DOSZPOT:** Have you identified any ongoing issues with any of the teachers as a result of the school closures—finding work, satisfaction with the new schools and so forth?

**Ms Gilmour:** No. In fact, from time to time the ACT department has difficulty in filling particular positions. We do not have large pockets of shortage at the moment. We are not aware of members from the schools that were closed who have been unable to be absorbed. Certainly the numbers of new employments have adjusted a bit but there has been a consequent increase in the number of age retirements in our system as well. So we were never, in our view, going to be faced with a situation where there was a high probability that there would be insufficient vacancies to absorb the staff that were freed up.

Having been out to look at Kingsford Smith and Southern Cross just recently, I think they are wonderful looking facilities, but I am a bit perplexed because I am advised that the student enrolment at Kingsford Smith is currently over 800 with a capacity of 1,100. There is currently, as I understand it, no single space in the school big enough to hold the current enrolment now and, equally, while the individual staff studies are quite sufficient for the current and anticipated staff numbers, the staff common room cannot hold the whole 80 staff that are there at the moment.

I guess I am puzzled at how that happens three months into a new school and I wonder whether that does not go back to the marriage, if you like, of primary and secondary building codes, in the same way that I referred to primary and secondary staffing and teaching load provisions earlier, because the codes are quite different. For example, a primary code includes a hall; the secondary code includes a gymnasium. On a site where you have got both, what do you do? Do you give them a single, very large multipurpose centre or do they have one of each? I was surprised to be told that on the first day of school this year the parents who came with their students only just fitted into the gymnasium area and that the school identifies that it may have some difficulty fitting the entire school, when it reaches capacity, in any space.

So I hope that, in the development of the Tuggeranong site, that sort of twist between the building codes is taken into account. I do not think it matters which it is but it seems to me that, in Canberra of all places, there needs to be a place large enough to accommodate the entire school population under cover, given our rather cool weather.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Just a supplementary on that along a similar line: have you had any feedback from the teachers regarding the impact on children with special needs during this whole process?

**Ms Gilmour:** No. We have not had any specific complaints that I have been made aware of, and certainly the student support section of the department work very closely with the schools where those students were enrolled. Given that our special schools were not part of the equation, I think there was less impact.

**MR DOSZPOT:** Thank you.

**THE CHAIR:** We are out of time but I know Ms Burch has one final question, so we might just—

**MS BURCH:** It was a question on future process. You made mention very early around having discussions with schools before they are named if they are possibly being closed. How do you do that without the community knowing that they are on a list of some sort anyway?

**Ms Gilmour:** I am sorry if I gave the impression that I thought you would have a discussion with particular schools. Our view around process was that there ought to be a discussion among the community as a whole about what the future educational provision needs to look like. That would allow government to bring forward any of its concerns about where we seem to have oversupply or undersupply of resources of whatever kind, what the demographic information was et cetera and actually engage the community in helping make the decisions about what we should do.

There could be arguments, for example, about making sure that you did keep a school provision available, even if it was not going to be used as a school or used as a large school currently, against future needs. But when you publish the list of schools and then say, “Let us have the discussion about what should happen,” I think you immediately invite people to start from a position of defence rather than a position of arguing or anticipating and discussing what really are the educational drivers for the decision rather than the personal emotional ones.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you very much once again for coming here today, giving us your time and for answering all of our questions. The transcript for today will be sent out to you so that you can look at it and make any necessary corrections.

**The committee adjourned at 12.01 pm.**