



**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

FRIDAY, 1 MAY 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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Amended 21 January 2009

The committee met at 2.04 pm.

HAIMAN, MRS PENELOPE LOUISE, President, Hall Primary School P&C Association

HARRIS, MRS MARYANN, Secretary, Hall Primary School P&C Association

LEWIS, MS JENNIFER KAY, Treasurer, Hall Primary School P&C Association

THE CHAIR: Thank you for coming here today for the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth affairs inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system. Thank you to Mrs Haisman, Mrs Harris and Ms Lewis for joining us today. I draw your attention to the privilege statement. Have a quick read of that and make sure you are aware of that. I thought we would give you the opportunity to make an opening statement if you like before we start asking questions.

Mrs Harris: We would like to thank you for providing this opportunity for us to speak to you. The Hall Primary School P&C remains an active and viable entity. We have continued to meet since the closure of the school to ensure that the community had a focus as we worked to reverse the decision to close the school and to ensure that the school site remained intact for future use. We believe that the village and surrounding area and the ACT public education system deserve to have our school reopened. We remain committed to pursuing a positive outcome through whatever channels are available to us.

By way of background, Hall primary school was an extraordinarily well-resourced school, with SMART boards in every learning space, a well-equipped library and separate computer lab. We believe it was one of the best-resourced schools in Canberra. We were able to achieve this level of resourcing because of the support provided by the Hall community. Each year approximately 70 per cent of parents paid their voluntary contributions, almost double the ACT average. Our fundraisers were always popular and financially rewarding for the school. This further enabled us to provide funding for many literacy and numeracy resources for the classrooms and library.

The support in the wider ACT community for Hall primary school was evidenced by the almost 4,000 signatures recorded on our petition. The petition was tabled in the Legislative Assembly towards the end of the consultation period in 2006. It called on the government to keep our school open.

The announcement made in June 2006 that our school was on the list for closure as part of the 2020 proposal came as a tremendous shock. It is our view that no school should have been identified for closure before consultation with the community and appropriate stakeholders. If this were a true review or reform of the education system, input should have been requested about what changes were wanted by parents, teachers, schools and the department to better meet the needs of students into the future.

The current range of educational options scattered about Canberra only creates confusion about what would be best for our children. Canberra now has a variety of options, obviously excluding a small rural school. But is there any evidence about which model provides the best outcome? Is this just an experiment and at some point

will we revert to one model?

As part of a preliminary consultation process, specific quantifiable criteria could have been developed to accurately and openly assess all schools, should closures be deemed necessary. Despite repeated requests to the minister and the department during the so-called consultation phase, at no stage were we provided with the criteria that were to be used to determine which schools would close. Without these criteria we were unable to prepare a submission that addressed any specific concerns the assessors may have had. One can only assume that the decisions had been made prior to community consultation occurring.

This opinion was further reinforced when Minister Barr refused to meet with us a second time. This was in direct contradiction to his earlier stated intention to do so. In fact, we had enormous difficulty reaching him, his staff and departmental representatives.

Following the announcement that Hall primary was to be closed, we requested a statement of reasons for the decision taken. Minister Barr used this document to belabour the point that only 43 per cent of students in the PEA chose Hall primary. That was 43 per cent of 28 children. The PEA for Hall was determined to be the village and one or two farms adjacent to the village. A more realistic PEA would have included the traditional areas our students come from, that is, the rural locations of Wallaroo and Spring Range roads and the area towards Murrumbateman. It is farcical to rely on statistics derived from such a small sample group.

Minister Barr went on to use the fact that 91 per cent of enrolments were from out of area, as if this was a negative factor. For schools such as Kaleen primary, out-of-area enrolments were viewed as parents exercising their right to choose and were a positive reflection on the value of the school. On the 2020 website, Kaleen was listed as a school of choice for this very reason.

Minister Barr also talked about how most of the programs available at Hall were available at other schools within the Gungahlin area. Of course they were available in other schools; after all, we follow the same basic curriculum. As part of the proposal we were grouped with Gungahlin. Mr Barr stated that Hall students could be more effectively educated at larger schools in the Gungahlin region. What was meant by this? We believe Hall students did have access to a broad and rich curriculum in more than satisfactory accommodation.

In our opinion, the most damning factor regarding the statement of reasons was the failure of Minister Barr to make available to the Canberra community his reasons for each and every decision taken. How is one supposed to believe that a fair and unbiased process was undertaken when told that decisions about other schools were not our business and that this material would not be provided to us? Without a clear understanding of the how and why of such decisions, each decision is open to speculation of favouritism or worse. We respect the rights of parents to choose larger, newer schools but we maintain that we and other parents should have an equal right to choose the smaller, rural-based school.

In finishing up, we want to be very clear that the community of Hall and district and

many in the wider ACT community strongly support reopening our school. At all local public meetings and community gatherings this view is re-emphasised. We submit that Hall primary school should be reopened because it truly represents the missing element of choice and diversity for the ACT education system because of the negative social and economic impact on the village community and the acknowledged heritage value of rural villages such as Hall and Tharwa.

Once again, thank you for this opportunity. We ask that you take into consideration our original submission from November 2006 and those submissions made by the Hall Village and District Progress Association and the numerous submissions made in support of reopening Hall primary school. We are happy to answer your questions, to the best of our ability and knowledge. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs Harris. I will start the questions. The first question I have is for you. You have referred to the reopening of the school and the support in the community. I was just going to ask: if in fact Hall school reopened, are you confident that parents would bring their children back or that there would still be that support, given, I guess, that there has been that dislocation; children have gone to different schools?

Mrs Harris: Clearly a portion of parents have children that are too old to come back. My youngest is now in year 6; so clearly my children cannot come back. But I feel quite sure that parents of younger children, particularly parents who have children who may have not yet started school, will be very keen to return to Hall. Also, new parents, parents whose children either are disaffected in the super schools of Gungahlin or have moved into the area recently or their children are just growing up and are ready to start school soon will all be available to come back to Hall. It had an excellent reputation at the time. It met the needs of people that were looking for that sort of school. Those people still exist.

MS BURCH: It is a very small school, 40-odd local students?

Ms Lewis: It depends what you mean by local.

MS BURCH: ACT-based students, students living in the ACT. It is an ACT education system; so 40 students?

Mrs Harris: Yes.

MS BURCH: From the ACT?

Mrs Harris: That is right.

MS BURCH: The cost per teaching student must be quite extreme?

Mrs Harris: No, actually it was not. It was above the average cost. I actually have the figures here for costs across Canberra, and certainly the expensive schools were not the ones that were closed.

MS BURCH: I am thinking of the education program that can be offered through

such a small school with 40 students.

Mrs Harris: It does not have 40 students. It has a capacity for 175 and when it was closed it had 128.

MS BURCH: This is about the ACT education system; so we should be concentrating on ACT students.

Mrs Harris: Are you suggesting that the ACT has no responsibility for the outlying communities when the ACT welcomes the funding that comes in from the outlying communities in all sorts of other avenues?

MS BURCH: What I am saying is that the ACT has a responsibility to educate ACT students; that is our primary responsibility.

Mrs Harris: The students that went to Hall, but for 20, are still in the ACT public education system. So you still have that responsibility; they are still there.

MS BURCH: And the distance to the next primary school from Hall?

Mrs Harris: It is an additional 10 minutes.

Mrs Haisman: Gold Creek is the nearest one, which is about three kilometres further down the road, but our students did not choose there. Forty of them went to Lyneham primary school. So they were scattered throughout mostly Belconnen schools rather than Gungahlin.

Mrs Harris: So distance-wise that is an additional 25 minutes, but—

MS BURCH: If they choose to go beyond the nearest school.

Mrs Harris: Yes, which they did, but for four students.

THE CHAIR: Sorry, so most of them went to Belconnen schools, did you say?

Mrs Harris: Forty went to Lyneham. I actually have the figures here.

Ms Lewis: Between 40 and 50, I think, went to Lyneham and probably about 14 or 15 when to a few others like Evatt, Maribyrnong—

Mrs Harris: And the rest were scattered.

MS BURCH: Thank you.

Mrs Harris: A total of 40 went to Belconnen schools, 10 went to Gungahlin schools, 40 went to Lyneham and the rest were scattered, including a few that went to the south side. I am assuming that they went there because their parents worked on the south side.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hanson?

MR HANSON: Firstly, can I just commend you on the work you guys obviously did while the school was open—it was very impressive—and also in maintaining the commitment since the school has closed and maintaining that important link into the community and so on. It has obviously been a drain on you and I am really full of admiration for what you have done there, so congratulations.

A lot of the things that you have said are echoed in the submissions that we have received. A lot of submissions have constant themes in terms of the consultation process and so on. It may be a bit anecdotal, but my question is towards the students that have now been relocated, be they students who came from outlying areas or chose to go to Hall for a specific reason and who have now gone elsewhere. How are they going? Do we have stories back that this has been disruptive on, I guess, the families and those students?

Mrs Harris: We can only speak for the families that we are in touch with and I think they would be split: some children were fine but there are certainly a number of children that took a long time to settle into new schools. Going from a school of 128 to a school of 300 or 400, it is a vastly different environment. A number of the children did find a great deal of difficulty in settling in and were unhappy, for a while. Obviously, over time, anybody gets used to anything and so I am sure that they are doing fine now, but that does not mean that they do not want to be at Hall, that they do not want to go back to Hall. Even the children who are perfectly happy in their school, the families that I know, have talked about how they would want to go back to Hall if it was there and what they miss about having been at Hall.

Our children are not sorry cases; they are mature—as far as children are concerned—functioning—

MR HANSON: Good luck with that.

Mrs Harris: I mean that they have done well. For the most part, they adapted and they are doing well; but whether they are doing well because they had this basis in this wonderful little primary school, where their abilities were encouraged and their confidence was built, or whether they would have done well anyway, who is to say. That is not a factor that has been examined. But the kids have gotten on.

MR HANSON: Okay, thank you.

MR COE: I share my colleague's admiration for the work of the P&C, for the work it did during the school's operation and post. I was wondering whether you could briefly outline the spirit of the community and the spirit of the P&C post school closure and how the P&C has continued to operate since the closure?

Mrs Harris: The P&C still holds regular meetings. We have a full complement of office bearers. We produce minutes. We pass information on to the progress association, who disseminate it to our community. We are involved in community meetings at which there is any reference to the school or the school site. We have worked with the government representatives from housing, community services—the different representatives that actually have their finger in what goes on with the school

site—ensuring that the opinions that we have as representatives of the school community and the board community are put into that mix, so that decisions are not taken that are irreversible or damaging to the community.

We are involved in just social things that are happening in the Hall community. Last month we sponsored the art competition that was at the national dog trials. We participate in the community Christmas celebrations and provide funding to assist with the smooth running of those celebrations—those sorts of things. As the P&C, we were very despondent for quite some time but were not prepared to quit. There was an election, which we were hoping would turn out differently. We have also wanted to continue actively until decisions were made about the school site. That was very important to us so that at some point, if it were possible to revert to a school, the facilities would survive for that to happen. I think that is probably it.

Ms Lewis: We believe the Hall village really needs to have a primary school, a school there, to be growing and developing still as a village. That is one of the main reasons. And we believe the education system needs the complete range of schools. I live in Ngunnawal. My children went to that school because to me that was the best environment for their primary school education, and I still believe that.

THE CHAIR: I was just going to ask a question around the process that was undertaken with the school closures, noting the opening statement and also your submission, Ms Lewis: if the process had been conducted differently—for example, I guess, if there were clearer criteria or if there had been an independent social impact assessment done which looked at a range of factors—do you think that would have changed the perception of how the process was conducted and even around the policy itself?

Mrs Harris: It would definitely have changed the perceptions, because there would have been more clarity. If we had been given an opportunity to provide information against specific criteria, we would have known what we were dealing with.

Ms Lewis: It would have been less stressful.

Mrs Harris: It would have been much less stressful, and our focus could have been on the things that were needed rather than as broad as it had to be.

Mrs Haisman: Trying to second guess what it was that the assessors were looking for; naming the schools beforehand. There was a division in Canberra at that time—the schools that were not listed and the schools that were—and that created a bit of a barrier as well. You felt like you were becoming behind the eight ball in the entire process.

Mrs Harris: With regards to the social assessment, I cannot see how anybody could have assessed the case to not have a huge negative impact on the social structure of the village by removing the school.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS BURCH: I have two questions. One is around the use of the school site as a

community asset. You have made mention that you are communicating with the progress association. So is it a good thing to have a community asset in town? Your preference is for a school but, if other functions and activities were built around that site, that would be welcomed by the community?

Mrs Harris: It depends what they were. Because the school draws people to the village, it broadens the social interactions for the broader community in a central location, so community facilities that would do that same thing would be a benefit for the village as a whole.

MS BURCH: And some of the suggestions for school use that you are talking to departmental folk about?

Mrs Harris: No, we were not. We have not actually discussed alternative uses at all. We have—

MS BURCH: You made comment earlier that you were talking to people about the school site.

Mrs Harris: Yes, retaining everything, protecting things.

MS BURCH: Okay, so you must have thoughts when you talk to the progress association about what it could be used for and the benefits that would have for the community?

MR HANSON: A school to educate the children.

Mrs Harris: We have not wanted to actually go beyond the possibility of a school reopening, so we have chosen not to address alternative uses that did not involve some sort of educational element.

MR HANSON: I have got two questions. Jennifer, I noticed in your submission you said:

My distrust of the Government and its processes hit rock bottom.

Is that a shared view within the Hall community?

Ms Lewis: I share it.

MR HANSON: So anecdotally that would be amongst the people that you meet with—the parents and so on

Mrs Harris: Yes.

Ms Lewis: In the parent community from the school.

MR HANSON: From Hall.

Mrs Harris: And the broader community, because in the writing of our submission in

2006 it was not just parents writing that submission. We had grandparents, we had people who had no direct involvement with the school participating in that process, sourcing data for us and doing all sorts of bits and pieces. So this is not just about self-interest from parents. It goes beyond that.

MR HANSON: In terms of this site, I understand you want it to be a school. I guess a government school is the preference but, if that were not to be provided, if an independent school were to open, do you think that would meet the community's needs?

Mrs Harris: I think it would. I do not know that it would be the best option for the ACT public education system. But it would, by far, be a better option than no school at all.

Ms Lewis: I find it hard to comment on that, because, as I said in my submission, I am a passionate believer in the public education system and that is what I will, very strongly, fight for.

MR HANSON: I certainly appreciate that but I suppose if the government were to say, "No, we are not going to re-open a public school," but an independent school were to say, "We would like to open," would you anticipate that you would see pretty much the same sort of level of community support?

Mrs Harris: I do not think so.

MR HANSON: Not as much?

Mrs Harris: Not as much.

Ms Lewis: It would depend on what school it was, what the fees were—things like that.

Mrs Harris: This was a public school, it has been a public school for almost a hundred years and that is what people were fighting for. I think as a second-best option, because we have had approaches from independent schools seeking our support, that would get support. But I do not know if it would be to the same degree.

MR HANSON: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: Sorry, but we are out of time. I do apologise, but thank you to you all very much once again for coming here today and for giving us your time. The transcript will be sent to you and you can make sure that it is correct and records what was said today.

CROMBIE, MR ALISTAIR, President, Village of Hall and District Progress Association Inc

HALL, MS JO, member, Village of Hall and District Progress Association Inc

THE CHAIR: I want to thank you for coming here today to speak to the committee. I do not think I need to say again the name of the inquiry; I think we all know it. I draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is there, so you are aware of that. We will invite you to make an opening statement, if you would like, before we ask questions. Did you want to do that?

Mr Crombie: We both have a little bit to say. Jo Hall was president at the time of the school closure. She wrote the major submission that we put in at that stage and has been the major author of the submission that is before you now.

I want to make a few introductory remarks. The first is to commend the Greens for following through on this election promise—we respect that—and also for introducing recently the matter of public importance on viability of villages on which all members for Ginninderra spoke, including Alistair Coe, who is here today. We were pleased that so much attention was paid in that debate to Hall.

We accept that there were major challenges facing the government in 2006. We are not fully informed on what they were, but we recognise that there had to be some structural adjustments and there have been some positive outcomes from that process. So we are not wreckers of all that the government has tried to achieve. However, the business end of this review from our point of view is the issue of reopening. We have a large agenda, but that is the issue that animates us, obviously.

We believe that at the end of the day there is a good case for reopening the school, and we would like to see it reopened. That has been the constant position of the progress association. Before passing to Jo, I will simply say that I think you have to overcome two hurdles, if you like, to make that happen. The first is a vision of Hall beyond borders, or without borders. I would like to table for your inspection, courtesy of Google, a representation of Hall and its district, the area from which we believe students could still be drawn. There is, I believe, no effective logic for reopening that is not prepared to look across the border.

Secondly, I think you have to accept that small is beautiful—that there are special things that can happen in a small, rural school. Most of the schools in Australia are, of course, of that size and character. I hesitate there. That is not true, but there are a lot of them all through the bush. That has been our history and a lot of very famous people have come from them. I will hand over to Jo to elaborate on the detail of our submission.

Ms Hall: Thank you very much, Alistair, and thank you for letting us have a chance to speak. Since 1906 this association has been vitally concerned with the education of successive generations of children in Hall and its district. We have petitioned the government to establish the original school in Hall, and it is on this basis of continued commitment that we appear before this committee.

Reading the 76 submissions to this inquiry, the matter of the consultation process being grossly flawed, dismissive and disrespectful of communities like ours in Hall is well described. We thank you for the opportunity to speak, but we will focus our words on the matter of reopening the school—that particular aspect of your terms of reference.

I would like to expand on four arguments for the reopening: an educational argument; a demographic argument; a financial argument and a social argument. The educational argument is that Hall primary had demonstrated excellent education outcomes for children and can do so again. Parents of children attending Hall primary believed in small community rural schools. Children were attracted from outside the village from New South Wales and from nearby suburbs because of their belief in small, rural schools. You have just heard from the P&C that the fact that this group still operates three years after the school was closed is a remarkable demonstration of their commitment to small community rural schools.

This question of diversity in the system and choice for parents is what we believe is missing from Towards 2020. A couple of small rural community schools—and Tharwa fits here too—would bring genuine diversity and enrichment to the whole of the ACT system. The primary school at Hall was, and could be again, a valuable resource to the whole of the ACT education system. The centre of the school, the old school from 1911, is now a fine museum. This was used for visits from students from other schools. The whole school site is heritage listed, and this welcome protection also restricts the alternative uses for this site.

The demographic argument is that Hall is a district centre. One of the most problematic aspects of the Towards 2020 proposal and subsequent policy was its blinkered perspective on the boundary with New South Wales. The ACT heritage register captures the reality of the situation quite nicely, so I will quote from it. It states:

Proclaimed in 1882, Hall Village represents a small rural service centre associated with the pastoral use of the area prior to the formation of the Australian Capital Territory. Hall Village continues to provide services to the surrounding rural area within the ACT and NSW—

The reality of living in the ACT means we have to deal with complex cross-boundary issues, yet Towards 2020 would not acknowledge the relationship between Hall and Hall district. Before closure, the primary school was thriving with 128 students, of whom 82 were from New South Wales. The majority of those New South Wales students have parents working in the ACT. Their children now go to other schools in the ACT, as the P&C has just described. Something like 600 children are bussed through Hall on their way to or from ACT schools every day. It would be much more convenient and mean much less travel time if primary aged children could attend the school in Hall village.

In our mind, the need for a primary school in Hall is growing. The Yass valley is the sixth biggest growth area in New South Wales. Newspaper reports talk about Gungahlin's rapid growth and the likely need for new school space. A small school in Hall could present a nice solution.

Towards 2020 arbitrarily used a priority enrolment area for Hall primary that included only the village of Hall to support an argument to close the school. This was clearly ridiculous. The village of 120 houses could never sustain the school even if 100 per cent of the dozen or so village children attended it. We argue that a school was, and is, both viable and desirable with a catchment that extends into New South Wales and nearby suburbs to Hall.

I will not spend much time on the financial argument, just to say that all costs and benefits should be considered in reopening the school. These include environmental costs, costs to local business, social costs and costs to families. We do not believe the size of the savings to the ACT of closing Hall school and we do not believe the costs of reopening it would be high.

We are not clear about what has happened since 2006 in terms of the ACT government negotiating a better arrangement with New South Wales in the cross-border arrangements to address the purported shortfall in reimbursements. It was a big deal at the time of the consultations. The shortfall, if there is one, affects the whole of the ACT, and not just Hall primary, because those children are still going to ACT schools. But we stand ready, as we did in 2006, to support a better deal if this would help to reopen Hall primary.

The final argument is the social argument. Our submission and many of the submissions talk about the primary school being the great community connector. This is particularly important in a rural setting where parents are otherwise isolated. It is hard to find other ways for parents to meet. It is also important for the children to be connected with other children from the area in which they live. Something has died with the school closing, but we are sure we can get it back with the school reopening.

Since 2006 we have tested over and over again with the community whether we should use the site for some other purpose. Over and over the community has expressed its strongest demand for a school in Hall. One-third of the submissions to this inquiry are in support of reopening Hall. The Save our Schools submission and the Parents & Citizens Association submission support reopening of Hall, Tharwa and Flynn. A petition from 2006 signed by 4,000 people in support of Hall primary was tabled. The P&C also mentioned this. I have a copy here. May I table it again, please?

It is abundantly clear to us that closing Hall primary was a mistake, but a mistake that can be rectified. There is a nature playgroup and a preschool operating on the site alongside the school museum. Everything is intact and ready to go. This inquiry represents our last hope for genuine engagement between the government and community to plan for a primary school on this treasured site for our treasured children.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for that statement. I will start with questions. The first question I wanted to ask is in relation to Hall being a small school and the educational opportunities there. Had there ever been concerns raised at any stage by parents at that school about the educational opportunities they were receiving there? I know that was used throughout the process as one of the reasons why the small schools were not as good as larger schools?

Ms Hall: I can speak as a parent as well. My children both went to Hall primary. One was in year 3 at the time that it was closed. As far as I am aware, there were not complaints. The P&C was extremely active, as we have heard. The SMART boards, for example, that existed at Hall primary do not exist in Lyneham where my daughter now attends.

THE CHAIR: What was that, sorry?

Ms Hall: SMART boards. They are the electronic blackboards that are connected to the computers and everything. The facilities were fine and suited the needs of our children. I actually find it is more difficult now for me personally. The before-school care arrangements and the after-school care arrangements were particularly spectacular, if you like, at Hall. There was a very small group of children and a very committed—she was hardly a carer. She is an artist and she would teach them art and would take them on walks down to the creek and so on and so forth. We certainly have no complaint about those things and we miss them very much. I have never heard people complaining. Always the choice was open to go somewhere else.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS BURCH: You have mentioned that the majority of students at Hall were from New South Wales.

Ms Hall: Yes.

MS BURCH: And a number of children from Hall chose to go to other schools as well?

Ms Hall: A number of children from the village?

MS BURCH: Yes.

Ms Hall: Yes.

MS BURCH: And Gold Creek is less than two kilometres away?

Ms Hall: Three, I think.

MS BURCH: Three kilometres away. There is a cost of maintaining small schools and the impost then is on other parents and other students from other schools to maintain these smaller, rural boutique style schools. Is that impost reasonable on other parents across Canberra?

Ms Hall: Boutique is—

Mr Crombie: The government's own assessment was that it would cost \$145,000 over five years to keep the school in condition to operate as a school. It is part of the government's own analysis of the buildings and the site and so on. I do not know what relative scale you use, but \$145,000 over five is not a huge impost, it seems to me.

MS BURCH: If there is in the enrolments within that region, that educational region, a surplus of capacity amongst schools, where do those savings come from? If it is not Hall, if other schools need to downsize or lose teachers or lose classrooms to find a match, how does that work across a region?

Ms Hall: I am sorry, but \$145,000 over five years, as we have just said, does not seem like a huge amount of money. If that is the saving that we are talking about or if we are talking about the cost per child saving, which, as we have already heard, is actually a very comparable cost as across any other school in the ACT, then I am not sure—

MS BURCH: It is higher. The cost is higher.

Ms Hall: Then let us go back to how that cost was arrived at. It chose the one year in the past 10 years when we had the lowest possible enrolments in Hall school. Our questions about how exactly that cost was arrived at were never actually answered. We could never really find out how accurate those costs were. Minister Barr himself said this is not an expensive school. He said that on a number of occasions. If we go with the numbers that are before us, if it is 10,000 and a bit per child at school, even based on the lowest enrolment over the last 10 years against an average of 9,500 or something across the ACT, it is not a huge difference. If this was a financial matter, we volunteered at the time to put money in. I do not know where that went. I think the figure of \$40,000 was mentioned. We asked if that would help, but it did not seem to be a financial issue.

MS BURCH: You made mention also around community support, the figure of a third? Did I hear that? Was the figure you used a third?

Ms Hall: A third of all the submissions to this inquiry were in support of reopening Hall primary school.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hanson?

MR HANSON: Yes. Thank you very much for coming in and for the good work that you have both done. It is a compelling argument. It is one where it is difficult to find in some ways the flaws in it and to try and understand why the government chose to close Hall. It comes to me that maybe it is because of the New South Wales basis, you know, where the residents come from and maybe a perception that, “Hey, they come from New South Wales. Maybe we can, you know, not worry about them as much.”

In moving forward, obviously now those students are going to other ACT schools. We have not actually sent them back to New South Wales per se. They actually are still within the ACT system so it is just a matter of the fact that they are no longer at Hall; they are somewhere else? Is that correct?

Ms Hall: Yes, that is correct.

MR HANSON: Right. Another interesting thing in your submission was that you had Wayne Berry disagreeing with the consultation or the process, the way it was done.

That one grabbed me, obviously. I was curious about that. What was the story of that? Can you extrapolate?

Ms Hall: The consultations began, in my view and in the view of the progress association and the community, at the wrong place. The consultations began with a proposal which named schools and described the educational model and put that out there. What Wayne Berry said and what we agreed with was that, in fact, there should have been a prior consultation on what the vision was for education in the ACT and that that community consultation could then have created a vision that would then have those issues around small schools, medium sized schools and large schools all out on the table. Once we had created that vision, then the next step could be: what does that mean for the existing schools?

It is difficult. The consultation started at the point of having the Towards 2020 proposal on the table. That model had already been developed without consultation. Wayne Berry said—he was quoted in the *Canberra Times*, I think—that this was a mistake and it should have happened as I have just described. It should have happened earlier. It should have been a consultation around the model and not around which schools are going to close.

MR HANSON: All right. Thank you.

MS BURCH: I have a question.

THE CHAIR: We do not know if a social impact assessment has been done or what factors it took into account, because there have been some economic impacts on Hall. Can you briefly talk about that? If the social impact assessment had been done, would that have made a difference, I guess, to what would have come out of the process?

Mr Crombie: It is inherently difficult, especially when one is partisan and a lot of other water has flown under the bridge, not least of which a global economic recession. It would be challenging for anyone to disentangle the current state of businesses in Hall from all of that. The anecdotal evidence is from the key enterprises, what you would expect—the shop, the garage and so on. Yes, they suffered a hit. It was a big setback because a very large proportion of children who came to the school were brought in by their parents, who would obviously then pit-stop at the shop or the garage to get petrol. A lot of that passing trade has evaporated. There is no question about that.

Socially, a lot of the older people in the village impress me most with their sadness about not having a lot of children as a component of village life. You know, it was taken for granted while they were there, but missed sadly now they are not. That connectivity business is, again, subtle but very important, I think. Other things have happened, but that hole has not been filled in or replaced. It is hard to imagine what could replace it.

MS BURCH: Can I have the last question?

THE CHAIR: Just very quickly because we are actually out of time.

MS BURCH: What other uses could be made of the school site to address some of those factors? You made mention of the older folk and the community missing a hub to wrap around activity? Do you have any thoughts around what could be used on that ex-school site?

Mr Crombie: We have given it very extensive thought. We have run our own public consultation surveys and so on, and that has yielded a whole suite of ideas. We have not moved on those ideas pending the outcome, first of all, of the election, and now this inquiry, because it seemed to me that government agencies were keeping open the option of reopening the school, so it would not make sense for us to—

MS BURCH: What were some of the thoughts? What were some of the ideas?

Mr Crombie: Aged persons accommodation; a park; an extended heritage museum built around the existing school. If one imagined that the school buildings were to stay there and be recycled, which was the initial proposition, then we had groups coming out like University of the Third Age and various art and craft groups who would be interested. They see it as a marvellous place to set up business. Our own position has been that, if the day comes when we need to accept definitively that there will not be a school there, our preference would be to stand back and look at a greenfield site. But, as I say, we are still waiting for that day.

Ms Hall: Can I just say that within all of those consultations we identified a number of principles for use of the school site. One of those principles, for example, was to protect the heritage values of the site. Another one was to do with making sure that whatever the uses they will fulfil some of the social vacuum that has been left by the closing of the school. This idea of bringing people together and finding a forum particularly for young parents of children who are living in rural areas and for those children to find a way to connect to each other was a really important aspect.

Another one of those principles was that, whatever the uses, however we go about it, we have to meet these basic principles that will best serve the community of Hall. As I said before, time and time again the conclusion was, well, the best way to do that would be to have a school. As Alistair says, if the worst comes to the worst, then we will obviously do something else.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. We are seriously out of time. Thank you, Mr Crombie and Ms Hall, for coming here today and speaking to us. The transcript from today will be sent out to so you will be able to view that for accuracy.

NICOLL, MR ROGER, President, Flynn Primary School P&C Association Inc
NICOLL, MRS CATHY, Member, Flynn Primary School P&C Association Inc
LEAHY, MS MELINDA MARY, Public Officer, Flynn Primary School P&C Association Inc

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming here today to speak to the committee inquiry. I draw your attention to the privilege statement. You can see that and be aware of that. I will, before we ask questions, invite you to make an opening statement if you would like to do that.

Mr Nicoll: First of all, the Flynn P&C would like to thank the standing committee for holding this very important inquiry. This really is the first opportunity to tell Flynn's story, after two years of trying to challenge the school closures in the Supreme Court. Flynn primary school was wrongfully closed in December 2006, and I think our submission to Towards 2020 and to this inquiry shows quite comprehensively that the school should not have closed. It was much more than just a school; it was a heart; and it was our community centre. The function of the suburb relies on the school being there. A primary school and childcare centre should now be opened as part of the community centre at Flynn, and we will explain more about that.

In 2006, Flynn was a healthy, neighbourhood primary school of around 180 children. Enrolments were increasing strongly and would have been around 200 if the school was open today. The reason for this was the renewal of Flynn's population, with young families moving in, and a sustained baby boom. Flynn primary school had the largest enrolments of any schools closed and larger than many that are still open.

The minister's submission to this inquiry cites population decreases in Melba and Evatt as a reason for closing schools in the region, namely, Flynn. Yet it was Flynn that was closed while these other suburbs had five schools, six campuses and a host of other community facilities. That makes no sense. Children still live in Flynn; new children are born every year. A viable and sustainable school can be opened as part of a community centre, with more enrolments than we currently see in the P to 2 schools, many more.

The failings of Towards 2020 were so serious and so extensive that the policy lacked legitimacy. It should have gone back to the drawing board. The basis for closing the school was wrong, and the government failed to publicly acknowledge that. The social, financial and educational impacts of closing the schools were never accounted for.

Based on all the documentary evidence we have seen, we believe the process was aimed at closing Flynn and realising its land value. These problems were compounded by a determination to close the school, no matter what we said. Flynn was told early on that one of Flynn or Mount Rogers schools would close, must close. The department clearly preferred to close Flynn, and this is seen through the noticeable bias in the departmental comments and advice, such as data for comparisons with Mount Rogers. That is detailed in our submission.

We fought on in good faith, not realising that a Mount Rogers-Melba parent also worked as adviser to the Chief Minister during the Towards 2020 consultation. This

extraordinary conflict of interest was the basis of our legal claim that an apprehension of bias existed, or could have been apprehended, because of the potential for undue influence on the final decision. That tainted the whole process. Realistically, what hope did we have? Was this the reason that our efforts to keep the school open were ignored in 2006? This is a very serious matter and needs to be addressed by the Assembly.

The Flynn school closure had major impacts and left a gaping hole in the fabric of the Flynn community. We have been left with even less than Tharwa and Hall. We have no social infrastructure, no shops, no primary school, nothing. Flynn is unique in that regard. Three-quarters of Flynn's children used to walk to the school. Now families are driving up to 100 or even 200 kilometres a week to and from other schools. Our children are being trained into car dependency, with all the environmental and health impacts that go along with that.

There is a long list of impacts which we have included in our submission. Some of those will last a lifetime—psychologists tell us that—but others can and should be reversed. Establishing a school and community centre is needed to repair some of this damage.

We genuinely want to move forward. The community has been galvanised by this and we want the best plan for the future. We are not going to dwell on the past. There is a need and support for a school, childcare and community centre. The factors that made Flynn a viable and healthy school back then in 2006 are the same ones that will make it a viable, vibrant school, childcare and community centre now.

Some of those things are: Flynn has a renewing population. We have assessed the needs and confirmed those needs. There is strong community support. A third of the submissions to this inquiry were from Flynn. A host of benefits will flow from introducing this centre: social, educational, financial, environmental and heritage. The school is an intrinsic part of the function and design of the suburb.

The Flynn community is proposing a community centre that includes a school and community-based childcare. This is an exciting new model. We have been discussing this with the John Flynn Community Group and we propose a governance and partnership model for running the centre. The John Flynn Community Group is going to present after us and they will put forward that proposal.

Very importantly, the Flynn school childcare and community centre can be opened at minimal additional costs. The \$2 million already budgeted for a new childcare centre in north-western Belconnen, in the same area as Flynn, could be used to fit out the childcare centre and reopen the school building. The minister has said it is about \$2 million to open a school.

The savings from closing Flynn from 2007 to 2009 were claimed to be \$1.5 million. That is essentially the amount that was asset-stripped from the Flynn community. Flynn residents have paid additional rates for reduced neighbourhood services. It is reasonable now that an equivalent amount of ACT and/or commonwealth government stimulus money could be redirected to rebuilding the Flynn community.

We have key partners who are ready to help deliver this new centre in the immediate future, and we are keen to work with this Assembly. It is a great opportunity for this Assembly and the balance that we have to achieve something for the benefit of all. We are not asking for anything special; we are just asking for a fair go. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Nicoll. I will start the questions. The first question I have is in relation to what you have just been talking about—different options which you have been looking at for the school site. I know you said the John Flynn Community Group, who is speaking next, will talk about that.

Mr Nicoll: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Can you maybe talk briefly about those options and what sort of time frame do you envisage that it would have? I guess it is essentially on the time frame and how that would operate.

Mr Nicoll: The time frame for—

THE CHAIR: Some of the options. You have outlined three options in the submission which you put in for this inquiry. I know you have said it will be spoken about a bit more, but maybe a little bit about those options and what the particular time frame on how that would work.

Mr Nicoll: The viability of the particular community centre model that we have put forward really comes out of the synergism, if you like, between school, childcare and other tenants. So really, we think that, with the money that is available now for childcare, for stimulus and for rebuilding communities, we could move very quickly on this. We have got partners ready to move quickly on this. So, essentially the school and childcare are fundamental factors in the viability of a community centre. A community centre is absolutely needed in Flynn because of the social fabric that has been taken out.

THE CHAIR: What are the primary parts? You said childcare would be a proportion—

Mr Nicoll: Really this is the basis of the John Flynn thing.

THE CHAIR: That is fine.

Mr Nicoll: So I think that it is probably better raising that later.

MS BURCH: There is a preschool at Flynn?

Mr Nicoll: There is the Mount Rogers preschool at Flynn, yes.

MS BURCH: And is that on the school site? Has that site changed?

Mr Nicoll: That is considered to be, yes. It is over on part of the site, yes.

MS BURCH: So, it is where it always was?

Mr Nicoll: Yes.

MS BURCH: That has not changed? And it is my understanding that four other schools in the region, Mount Rogers, Charnwood, Fraser and Latham, are 1,200-odd metres from Flynn school.

Mr Nicoll: Yes. They are separated by major arterial roads. I might note that, on those roads, there have been children killed crossing those roads. We had 75 per cent of our children walking. So, that is a real factor in those children being able to attend those schools.

MS BURCH: And the percentage of local, in-area children attending Flynn?

Mrs Nicoll: It is 62 per cent, maybe 63.

Mr Nicoll: It was very, very strong, yes.

MS BURCH: And the enrolment was around 170, is that right?

Mr Nicoll: Close to 180.

Mrs Nicoll: It was 179 when we closed. It would have been 200, roughly, if we were open today. We were not a small school. We were bigger than some schools that were kept open. If cost per student and the size of the school is a factor in determining whether we were open, it was applied inappropriately to us.

MS BURCH: Following on from that, if there is an enrolment number within a region which has five schools—the four that are there and your school—and if something has to give, if one school needs to be reconfigured into another community asset and used—

Mr Nicoll: No. We never supported that position. You would need social, educational and financial data to support such a position. But we always maintained that Flynn was a healthy school; it was a viable school; it had more enrolments than surrounding schools that stayed open; and certainly it was the main centre of the community. We relied on that school for functionality in the suburb.

Mrs Nicoll: We also note that the other suburbs that you have named have other facilities. Flynn has no other facilities. Because of the design of Flynn, it is rather unique in that the school is designed to be the centre of the community. This was a fact that the government ignored. If you rip the school out, you are left with nothing. And while there is a preschool there, the parents stay for one year and they move on. There form no deep relationship with the community. There used to be very strong links between the preschool and the school. In our submission you will notice that we have highlighted that that was an error that was communicated to the minister by the department, that those links did not exist. Those links were there. The day the school closed the preschool lost half of its prospective enrolments.

MS BURCH: But there are a significant number of local parents that are moving out

of the area as well, though?

Mrs Nicoll: Is that right? That is not data that I have seen. What I have seen—

Mr Nicoll: No. Can I answer that? We are very confident with the model that we have put on the table, which is a community centre with school and childcare, and that we are going to have good enrolments coming through from the baby boom, from the parents who live in Flynn and who want their children to be able to walk to school, to be part of their local community and to be able to visit their friends after school—all the things that make a community strong. What is it about Flynn that deserves nothing?

MR HANSON: Thanks very much for coming in and for your comprehensive submissions. They are very impressive. A couple of things have drawn my attention. One is, obviously, on pages 16-17, the assertion that there has been a conflict of interest in the Chief Minister's office and that one of his key advisers was a parent who had students in a rival school that had been listed for closure. You are essentially asserting that the advice that would have been given to the Chief Minister would have involved a serious conflict of interest. Is that correct?

Mr Nicoll: Yes. The fact that that adviser took part in a meeting with Flynn as part of that consultation without declaring the conflict of interest for us is a very serious matter that tainted the whole process.

Mrs Nicoll: Obviously we were not aware of it at the time,

Mr Nicoll: We found out, through going through freedom of information documents, that the person who was in our meeting was in fact the adviser to the Chief Minister.

MR HANSON: Right. And once you found that out, was any action taken? Was there any examination of the consultations or anything like that?

Mr Nicoll: We had already commenced legal action when we found that information out. I might add that some of that freedom of information material was not released until a year afterwards; it was a long time after, so we were not able to know that.

MR HANSON: And there has been, to your knowledge, no subsequent investigation about that.

Mr Nicoll: No subsequent investigation. This is the first time it has been able to come onto the public record, because of the ongoing legal matters.

MR HANSON: Okay. That is worthy of further consideration.

Mr Nicoll: They have stopped now, I might add. So yes, the legal action—

MR HANSON: The legal action has stopped.

Mr Nicoll: Yes.

MR HANSON: To your knowledge, is the adviser still working in the Chief Minister's office?

Mr Nicoll: No.

THE CHAIR: I think we need to be careful about where we are going with this line of questioning, given that there was legal action.

Mr Nicoll: There is nothing before the court now, so we can talk freely—

THE CHAIR: As a committee we just need to—

Ms Nicoll: There are no sub judice issues. We have sought legal advice about this; there are no sub judice issues.

MR HANSON: They are pretty serious allegations, they are in the submission and we need to examine them open and frankly. Just because it is uncomfortable—

THE CHAIR: That is fine, but if we just keep the questions to the members and not debate.

MR HANSON: All right. The other one is the assertion that, in looking at this, there was the extra claim that part of the intent of this was realising the land value. Do you have any evidence for that or is that just conjecture?

Mrs Nicoll: Part of the process of preparing for court is the task of going through 20,000 pages of freedom of information. On top of that—you are aware there are two freedom of information requests. There is the one that was put in by Catherine Bardon and Vicki Dunne and also a lady from Hall. So that is three—put in in June in relation to the papers used to prepare Towards 2020. There was another freedom of information request put in in December. I refer to those as the June FOI request and the December one. It will just save a lot of words to make that clear at this stage.

The June FOI request—most of the documents that could tell you anything about the reasoning behind the selection of schools or even why school closures were proceeded with were suppressed, as you probably know, but there is enough information in the conclusive certificates, and certainly the AAT judge found, because it went to appeal, that slides containing information about land value were used in making the decisions about Towards 2020. There is no question about that.

In addition, there was a 1998 audit report that assessed the value of preschools in relation to their capacity. Two preschools were named. One was Flynn; one was Melba. They were about the same. Melba was less full but Flynn was named—that it should be sold because of its higher land value. We are assuming that that flowed through to a recommendation to list Flynn first and realise it for the land value. On top of that, everything we have ever heard from the department, from TAMS, has been that they want to sell the school. They have had no intention of retaining—

Mr Nicoll: Can I just quickly add to that. Our submissions show very comprehensively that Flynn was wrongfully closed. There are some very serious

matters in there for the Assembly to look at. But we as a community are very committed to the best possible thing that we can do now, and we believe that that is a community centre which involves a school and childcare working together with other multigenerational uses and sports facilities that we currently have there. That is where we are heading. There are matters that the Assembly needs to look at—serious matters—but that is where we are going. We are looking forward.

THE CHAIR: Just in light of looking at options for this school, there is something I asked Hall as well. Do you think there is still support in the surrounding community that families would bring students back to the school?

Mr Nicoll: Absolutely. Yes. We have heard that from people. Certainly the number of young—Melinda is an example. Maybe Melinda can speak a few words on that.

Ms Leahy: I bought in Flynn in 2003. At the time I had no children; I also still have no children. This is unfortunate; it is something that I am working on with my husband. When we bought the house, we bought in Flynn because we loved the feel of the suburb and the suburb really did revolve around the school. I used to be a teacher, so for me having children around is something that is really important. The school was really the heart of the community. It had a lovely feel in the community because everybody was involved in what was going on in the school. There were kids walking around you after school; it was a really safe-feeling environment. I thought, “If I’m going to have children, I’m going to send them to Flynn primary school; I’m going to buy in Flynn.” As you know, I do not have children. I joined the P&C because I just cannot believe that the school would be closed under such pretences. I was just devastated by it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms Leahy: I think you would find that there are a number of other people—many, many people in the community—

Mr Nicoll: Many others like her.

Ms Leahy: who feel very strongly about it and would like to see a school opened on the Flynn primary school site.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Leahy. We are out of time. We would all like to ask more questions but we are out of time. I am sorry that we have you here for only such a short time, but thank you once again for taking the time to come here today and to speak to us. The transcript will be sent out to you, so you will be able to view that and check the accuracy of it.

Mr Nicoll: If you like, I am happy to stay with the John Flynn Community Group if there are any questions that cover the interaction between—

THE CHAIR: Okay. We would be happy for you to stay up here, if you want.

HINES, MR ERIC ROBERT, Spokesperson, John Flynn Community Group
KAROTAM, DR JILL, Member, John Flynn Community Group
NICOLL, MR ROGER, President, Flynn Primary School P&C Association Inc
SMALL, MS JUDY, Child Care Director, Baringa Child Care Centre

THE CHAIR: Again, I draw everyone's attention to the privilege statement, just so you are aware of that. I invite you to make an opening statement if you would like to before we ask questions.

Mr Hines: Thank you. First I would like to thank the committee for holding the inquiry and allowing this group to present this afternoon.

The John Flynn Community Group has always been about the future, and specifically the future needs of the Flynn community. To this end, we propose a multigenerational community centre which includes a P-6 school, community-based childcare and appropriate tenants to complement the school and community needs.

Physically the Flynn primary school is still in excellent physical condition due to its inherently strong construction and the full schedule of maintenance that has been carried out over recent years. The creative, open-plan design facilitates flexible use by children of all ages, importantly, and is also used by the community. This initiative will allow the community to rebuild after the devastating loss of the school and the associated community activities in 2006.

As has been said, Flynn primary was more than just a school. It was unique in the fact that it really was the heart of the community. As such, it is essential for the functioning of that community. We are proposing to restore the primary school and add a childcare centre and an intergenerational community hub.

In 2007, the John Flynn group nominated the school and grounds for listing with the ACT heritage register. It was on the basis of three things: one, the distinctive design of the award winning architect Enrico Taglietti; two, the status of the school as the first open-plan design school in the ACT, built with the intention of introducing a new educational philosophy and, finally, the cultural significance of the building and grounds through the long-established links to the Royal Flying Doctor Service, symbolised by the national memorial to John Flynn on the site.

The cost to open the school and community centre will not be an undue burden on the ACT community. The minister has identified the cost of reopening a school to be around \$2 million. That is about the same amount as is being promised to build a new childcare centre in north-west Belconnen. We are suggesting that for the \$2½ million we can have both at Flynn. The government could establish a P-6 school and community centre, including a 70-place childcare centre. This is an economically and environmentally viable proposition.

With the closure of Flynn, the community lost the estimated \$300,000 invested over 30 years in the school. In addition, \$1.5 million has been taken out of the community over the last three years as savings to government. We believe that it is reasonable that some of this money should come back. Our proposal seeks to maintain community involvement and ownership of the school and grounds. It also brings

sufficient service delivery for government.

The John Flynn Community Group proposes to establish a skilled community board to oversee the sustainable operation of the centre. This will be in close cooperation with the collaborative partners and, of course, government. Community board members would be elected from the community for, we imagine, two to three years. That would depend on the constitution and the things we would negotiate. The community board would be responsible for ensuring that the centre continues to meet the needs of the suburb and region. It would carry out needs assessments and attract appropriate and complementary service providers. It is also proposed that the community board would share the responsibility for the financial and business management of the entire operation.

There would be a school board, of course. I used to be on the school board. For several years I was the community member for the school board at Flynn. As all school boards do, they would take responsibility for the operation of the school. This explicitly recognises the link between the school and the local community.

A primary school and childcare centre is the key to the ongoing viability of the community venture. We must have both. The needs of the school will take precedence in the running of the facility, obviously, so that the school can grow as enrolments increase. The space not required by the school will be managed by the community board to ensure locally relevant and complementary uses. Full-time leases and casual bookings administered by the community board will support the operating costs of the school. The entire facility will be managed as proposed by the community board as a multipurpose, intergenerational hub.

The submission we give you proposes three governance options, but we believe one is the most obvious—retaining ownership of the building with the Department of Education and Training, which would then be responsible for ongoing maintenance and refurbishment. The John Flynn Community Group would be responsible for the building as a cooperative trust through the community board, overseeing tenancy arrangements and casual bookings to ensure they are running at a net social, environmental, educational and financial benefit to the community. The final model and business plan would be determined in full consultation with government and all the collaborative partners.

Irrespective of which of those models was chosen, the group would seek a community water recycling grant to make more efficient use of water, including feeding the water off the roof into a reservoir to enable the upkeep of a high quality playing field.

A safe, locally accessible school and early childhood and intergenerational community hub will produce the optimum long-term effects and flexibility for the ACT government and the community. The annual benefits will outweigh any short-term gain from selling off the land for housing. This will be most obvious in terms of the improved social capital in a suburb, as we said before, without any other social infrastructure—no shops, no schools, no churches. Through early intervention and improved social inclusion, the hub would reduce the burden of government costs in the areas of health, welfare, crime prevention and rehabilitation.

This is a bottom-up approach that empowers local communities to take responsibility for these community facilities and resources. It requires everyone to think outside the square and allow the Flynn community to help shape our future.

To conclude, we ask the ACT Assembly to work with the Flynn community through our community group and P&C and to implement one of either a stand-alone government-funded primary school and childcare or, as we recommend, a sustainable, government-funded P-6 school and community-based child centre as part of a multigenerational community centre using the Flynn school and grounds.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hines. I will start the questions. The first question I have is in relation to the proposal you have outlined. It is actually on page 5 of your submission where you have talked about support. You have mentioned a number of different groups and a couple of government departments. You also mentioned that there is demand from community groups. If you can, maybe, outline some of the support you have—and I am not wanting you to name any of the groups, obviously—from other community groups who would be part of it.

Mr Hines: Remember that we are talking about two of the main uses being the school and the childcare but, apart from that, we have had feelers from adult education groups, fitness providers, playgroups, various community clubs and things and some small commercial concerns. We would obviously have a duty of care to make sure they are child-friendly commercial groups and things like that. But, yes, we have had a lot of feedback on that.

THE CHAIR: Is there support from outside as well? You have listed some other groups where there has been support or where there has been some assistance in developing your proposal. Is there support from outside the Flynn community for this?

Mr Nicoll: Judy Small from Baringa Child Care Centre has been an active partner since 2006, when the submission was put in to Towards 2020 training. We put childcare on the table at that stage and Judy put in for the Flynn site as part of the Purdon process. Do you want to say something about that?

Ms Small: The Baringa Child Care Centre is a community-based centre that has been operating for 25 years. We have been operating out of the old Spence primary school. When we first moved in, that was originally an operating school but was then taken away, closed down a number of years after that. The centre has been totally viable, running off just parent fees, not using any government money. I guess, because of the high need for childcare, especially in the north Belconnen area, we are looking to expand our community centre and Flynn would be the perfect opportunity for us.

Mr Nicoll: You put in an official application as part of the TAMS process.

Ms Small: I did, yes.

MS BURCH: Again, it goes to the partnerships of the groups that will go in there. Ex-the school—just assume the school is not reopened—there is still enough across these community groups to create a viable community hub, childcare, men's sheds.

I understand childcare is certainly high on the thinking to be established there to complement the preschool on site.

Dr Karotam: That is true. When you talk about the breadth of services offered by the community centre, if there was not to be a school, as the P&C have pointed out, we are firmly of the belief that if the 2020 process had not been so flawed we would not have lost our school in the first place. It was already a viable school and intergenerational hub. There were playgroups and the preschool and lots of community groups using the school already. What we are saying, I suppose, is: we are fighting for something we should not have lost. So a community centre clearly would work considerably better with a primary school at its hub because it is a core activity that brings people to the place daily. It would not be as efficient without it.

MS BURCH: But you are talking numbers of 150-odd. That is considered a small school, which brings us to the question that the Primary Principals Association has serious doubts about the educational opportunities in small schools.

Dr Karotam: Where do you get 150 from?

MS BURCH: I think it is in your proposal.

MR HANSON: It was 179, the enrolments, when it closed and was growing.

Dr Karotam: It had 179. It would have more than more than 200 now and it would—

Mr Nicoll: If you are introducing a childcare centre as well and you have got your preschool there—we are taking into account that the school is going to grow; it is not going to go straight up in numbers straight away—with those three things working together, you have got a very viable model which draws in community, gets people involved. That is where the viability is: the combination of childcare, school, preschool and community.

Mr Hines: A function of the community board is to regulate the tenants and those sorts of things, so that as the school population increases we can decrease the other. It would be a lovely problem if the whole thing was so full that we could not have any tenants.

Dr Karotam: And keep in mind too that school is nine to three, five days a week, in terms, and there are lots of usages that could be done outside school hours. If there were dance groups or sporting groups or those sorts of things, we would encourage them to provide intercurricular or extracurricular activities for the children at the school as well. So that would bring increased educational outcomes for the school that do not come from curriculum as such.

MS BURCH: Would everything else wrapped around it progress? Would the Flynn community progress with establishing childcare, men's sheds, other intergenerational opportunities?

Mr Nicoll: Are you suggesting that you do not want to look at a school for Flynn?

MS BURCH: No, I am just asking: if that is not there—

MR HANSON: The government is on the record as saying that.

Mr Nicoll: The thing is: you have got a model for smaller schools in the P-2—

MR HANSON: Yes, they closed them.

Mr Nicoll: In the P-2 schools you have a model for smaller schools, if that is what you are concerned about. But it comes back to what is going to work best, what is going to be most viable, what is going to replace the social capacity that has been lost. And that is school, childcare and community groups; that is what works best.

THE CHAIR: Can we just—

MS BURCH: But there was a question and you—

THE CHAIR: Actually, if we give other members of the committee a chance to ask questions.

MR HANSON: Given the time, I will be brief. I assume what you want out of this is the government to re-examine the closure and say, “We need to have an open and frank look at whether we should reopen the Flynn primary school.” Is that correct? Is that what you are looking for?

Mr Nicoll: It is that. But really what we are talking about is a multipurpose community centre that includes a school, childcare and other community things. So it is a different model, it is a new thing, and it is a great opportunity for this new Assembly.

MR HANSON: Come back, have a look at the submission, talk to the community and, as part of what goes on at that the old school site, include a school but also other opportunities that present themselves?

Mr Hines: Yes. I realise politics is the art of compromise, but we want the best. The suburb deserves it.

MR COE: I was wondering whether you could describe how the community group has changed, if it has changed, since the closure.

Dr Karotam: I can answer that one. The Flynn P&C obviously was the group involved when 2020 was announced and the school was slated for closure. At the time that group was also joined by members of the community such as me. I had a child at the preschool and I had a small toddler. The whole community was galvanised with the P&C to fight the obvious problem that the closure of the school was going to cause for the community.

The John Flynn Community Group was formed after the school was closed, to promote reestablishment of the community hub that we had lost, incorporating a new educational facility and the childcare facility at Flynn. It also submitted the heritage

application that Eric told you about.

For Flynn, it is much more than just the people who have children at the school. There are people like Melinda Leahy, who spoke before and who has not had children yet; me—I did not have children at the school then but needed that school to exist in our suburb so that my children could walk to it until 2016—Eric; and people who have never had children, right across the age spectrum in the suburb, but who have a strong community connection to that school because we used to go there for bush dances and barbecues. It was an inclusive hub that we have lost. It is part of our culture and the heritage of the suburb; it is not just a sentimental thing; it is a tangible thing that we have lost. We have no way of regaining that unless we get a community hub back that includes a school, community centre and childcare.

Mr Hines: Just to amplify that: I am quietly amazed at the quality of people who have put their hand up over the last year or two. We have some of the best town planners in this country, whom I never knew lived in Flynn, architects, engineers—a huge number of quality people. And this community committee that we are talking about running this will work very well.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We are out of time. Sorry to have you here for such a short time. Thank you once again for the time you have given us today and coming to speak to the committee. I state again that the transcript from today will be sent out to you all so that you can check that for accuracy. Thank you very much.

MR HANSON: Thanks very much.

Sitting suspended from 3.35 to 3.52 pm.

MORLING, Mr BRENDAN JOHN, Secretary, Cook Primary School P&C
NEWTON, Ms DEBBIE, Ex-Public Liaison Officer, Cook Primary School P&C
WALKER, Mr CRISPIN, Concerned citizen and member of Cook Primary School P&C

THE CHAIR: Thank you for coming here today to the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs inquiry into school closures and reform of the education system. I would just like to invite one of you to make an opening statement before we have questions from the committee.

Mr Morling: Sure. I would just like to thank the committee for the opportunity to appear here today and provide evidence. I will make a brief opening statement, Ms Newton may make a couple of other points in addition, and then we are happy to take questions.

Cook's preschool and primary school were well-performing community-based schools. The students were provided an excellent education and those students came from a diverse range of backgrounds. The schools had an outstanding principal and committed teachers. The parents and carers also provided a substantial contribution to their children's education through the P&C and other activities. Through these activities, parents and carers felt that they had a real stake in their children's education—and that, I am afraid to say, is no longer a feeling that is in the community.

But I guess it is the impact on the children that is of most importance in this. The government has had, in our view, a callous disregard for this aspect of its school closures campaign and it tries to pretend that all the children affected have simply transferred to another school as if nothing had happened.

The government's submission to this inquiry runs to some 34 pages, yet I can only find half a sentence on the closure of Cook primary and preschool. This half-sentence provides no rationale for the closures but only a sloppy attempt to link Cook with the closure of Page preschool, and the reason for closing Page preschool was low demand and an ageing population. Page preschool was not part of the 2020 proposal.

In our view, this is consistent with the government's arrogant attitude towards Cook's schools during the 2020 process. The Towards 2020 documentation specifically created an artificial region, the Belconnen south-east region. That did not exist before the 2020 proposal and no longer exists now. The only conclusion we can draw from this is that the government wanted to create an artifice that put Cook in direct competition with Giralang. Giralang did not close, despite having a 36 per cent capacity utilisation factor. I also note that Giralang has fewer enrolments in the February 2009 census, 149 students, than it did in the February 2006 census, which preceded the school closures announcement, with 155 students. I also note that those 149 students now include preschool enrolments.

The Towards 2020 documentation also contained inaccurate and grossly misleading statements such as that enrolments in schools such as Giralang, Cook and Southern Cross had declined over recent years with only 40 per cent of the school capacity being utilised. This is important because capacity utilisation was a key factor in a lot of the government's material on closures.

I would just like to point out to the committee that Cook's enrolments were stable and it was using 91 per cent of its capacity. The statement of 40 per cent capacity is also arithmetically correct when you do the maths. The Towards 2020 consultation report, which was released in December 2006, also contained further bias when it summarised arguments put forward by the Cook community but failed to mention recommendations put forward in our main submission to make an already cost-effective school become more cost effective. However, the document managed to mention that Giralang had put forward proposals to improve its cost-effectiveness.

The government is also trying to claim, in its submission to this inquiry, that any reopening of schools would cost a substantial amount, including in the order of \$2 million. We consider this to be an unsubstantiated figure and we note that the Cook buildings were in very good condition at the time of closure and remain so now.

In summary, the Cook community was dealt with in a disrespectful and misleading manner that has continued with the government's submission to this inquiry. I note that the Greens member for Ginninderra, Meredith Hunter, put out a press release on 24 September 2008, noting that "ACT Greens will review and reassess all school and preschool closures using criteria that include community impact, climate change impact and parent attitudes". Clearly, in our view, any proper assessment of Cook primary and preschool against these criteria would lead to a decision to reopen the Cook schools. We will be watching this process keenly to see if the ACT Greens are indeed serious about education outcomes. That is my opening statement.

Ms Newton: I have some brief comments: the unethical, political nature of Towards 2020 has absolutely stuck in the craw of the Cook community; the fact that at the preceding ACT election the Labor Party made no mention whatsoever of such a massive proposed education change; and the early supposed driver of the whole Towards 2020 process about the massive budget shortfall which had to be filled and which later turned out to have evaporated.

The second main point of contention is the breaching of the rules of natural justice, which was the foundation of an attempted legal appeal which Cook P&C and primary school attempted to mount after the Towards 2020 process. The main grounds were that there was no advance notice that the school was failing to meet its performance criteria, whatever they were, and a lack of consideration of any other option apart from closure, despite, as Brendan has explained, the Cook community's repeated willingness to look at other solutions and be very flexible. The lack of agreed factual data has been touched on.

There was also the lack of an effective appeal process across the whole Towards 2020. On paper, people can appeal against the ACT government through the Administrative Decisions (Judicial Review) Act. We found that to be unusable in practice. We could not find a law firm in the ACT who was able to take the case on. Some were willing. The stopping points were conflict of interest. Larger legal firms had the ACT government as a client and had a perceived conflict of interest. The stopping point at the small end of town was that the smaller legal firms did not have the capacity that they could swing in, in the required time frame, to meet the appeals time line.

I will finish off on some of the many bad policy aspects. The policy debate that needs to be happening in this space is coping with demographic life cycles of suburbs over a 20, 30, 40-year horizon and sensible policy design to cope with peaks and troughs in demand on public school provision within the principles of the neighbourhood school concept which is valued by the Canberra community—an exceptional feature of the ACT. The debate that should be being had is to provide evident and cost-effective ways to keep the neighbourhood school principle alive and well and at the forefront of Australian education but coping with peaks and troughs in suburbs' demographic cycles.

One more point: Cook was a successful model of coping with the peaks and troughs in suburbs' life cycles. We considered ourselves to be an outstanding model. Half of the school building for 20 years had been used by core community tenants—the ballet school, ACT playgroups and a choir—and the other half of the building was school classes, which was 91 per cent used, and both groups used the hall. That was a completely successful, well-established model of coping with peaks and troughs in a suburb's life cycle, and it was completely disregarded by the ACT government.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Newton and Mr Morling, for your opening statements.

I will start with questions, I guess to the whole panel. One of the things we are looking at with the inquiry is the impact this has had on the communities where the schools have closed. Can you talk a little about what those impacts have been? Do you have any information about or are you aware of what other schools some of the children who went to Cook school have gone to?

Mr Morling: Sure. I will start off just generally and then perhaps Mr Walker might want to talk about some of his own circumstances. Essentially, our children were split mainly between Macquarie and Aranda schools. A small handful might have also gone to Weetangera schools. Quite clearly, the first impact is that you split friendships. The best friend of my eldest daughter went to Aranda school and that friendship, which was over two years and was a particularly positive relationship in our view and they enjoyed each other's company, was just split apart. And that has a significant impact.

The other main impact that we see is that the school we were at had a particularly community minded, almost family, atmosphere. The principal knew every child by their first name and, more than that, knew the child's particular circumstances. That led to very much a comforting atmosphere for the children. They knew the principal knew their circumstances, they knew that they could be open with the principal and they felt safe and secure in their educational environment.

When children move to a new school, as much as the schools try, they are dealing with people who have been transplanted en masse there, not by choice but because they are forced out of their old school, and they just cannot cope in the same manner with those sorts of things. That definitely has an impact on your children and their overall wellbeing in their educational environment.

Mr Walker: I am a parent of two children that were at Cook primary school and have now gone to Macquarie primary school. I would like to reiterate some of the

comments that Mr Morling made, in that my sons have had a very similar experience with friendships broken up as parents were forced to make a decision about whether they sent their kids to Aranda, for example, or Macquarie.

I would also reiterate that the community in Cook is an amazing community; it is a really good suburb and a really good group of people. My wife and I moved to Canberra in 2003. We first resided in Cook and it was just an absolute delight to meet many of the parents associated with the school but also we had relationships with the teachers and the headmistress in particular.

I would also like to add one thing about the impact. Brendan talked about the callous disregard of the ACT government in its process. I think this actually flowed through into an unpreparedness in the schools in Aranda and Macquarie to deal with the intake of students that they had, even though they had plenty of lead time. In the example of Macquarie primary school, there were lots of promises made but, frankly, the staff and the education department just were not up to the job. They just had not put the resources in and did not follow through on promises made.

One thing I would also like to reiterate that was made in the opening statement is about the lack of rationale provided for why Cook closed and Giralang remained open, particularly with the capacity argument there. I had a number of letters exchanged with the minister, Andrew Barr, on this and he refused point-blank to give me a reason why Cook closed and Giralang stayed open.

A personal observation is that possibly the Giralang community were a bit noisier than the Cook community. We went along with the process. The consequence of that was that there was an enormous emotional investment in the community and the families of the kids at school. There was a huge effort by Brendan and the P&C committee to put the original submission up. But essentially there was no rationale provided, and the effect of the school closures on the community and on my family has been quite devastating, actually. There are still some very strong friendships through the time in the community, but the community has been ripped apart because we do not have the regularity of seeing people. We do not have that warm and friendly nurturing, caring environment that we had at the Cook school.

Macquarie primary school is not a bad school by any stretch of the imagination, but it has taken years for my kids to feel comfortable and make new friendships. They have been forced into that situation because we had the choice of sending our kids to a small community-focused, really well-run, really well-equipped and high-capacity school such as Cook primary school. So the impact has been pretty significant from my personal perspective. In the new school, my second-eldest son has had bullying experiences and it has taken a long time for him to feel comfortable again. My eldest son is also a special needs student and basically just did not get anywhere near the support that he had at Cook primary school. So I think this points to, again, a disregard from the minister and the department about what conditions Cook students were going into.

While I say that Macquarie primary school is a good school, the conditions that our children have there are a degradation of what they had at Cook, from an IT perspective, from a facility perspective, and the general feeling of togetherness in the

community. There was a very strong sense of us and them for Cook students coming in and that has taken a long time to heal. So that has been a difficult impact.

MS BURCH: It was a small school, an enrolment of 130 children, which is a small school?

Mr Morling: 135, yes, but you have got to remember that the official capacity was 150, as measured by the education department twice.

MS BURCH: Either way, it was a small school, and the Primary Principals Association have raised concerns around educational standards for small schools, around the curriculum that can be offered.

Mr Morling: Let me just stop you there. The primary schools and certain people might have raised issues, but we had absolutely no concerns about the educational standards we were receiving and, to be honest, I certainly considered them superior to what I am receiving at my new school, which is close to 300.

MS BURCH: And there are schools 800 metres away, in Macquarie, and less than two kilometres to another two schools, from Cook, so they are still within cooe of Cook school?

Mr Morling: Let me just make some points about that. I am not sure about the 800 metres; it might be a kilometre or a kilometre and a half. But the thing is that you have to cross now a major arterial road, Redfern Street. My children used to walk every day to Cook primary and in fact I was prepared to let them walk, basically unsupervised, to Cook primary. I am not prepared to let them walk across Redfern Street unsupervised.

The other point I would make is that I really do not understand this point of an education policy based on geographical dispersion. It is just madness. Even in the post-2020 situation you have got two schools in Kaleen. You have got no schools in Page, Cook and a number of other suburbs across the other side of Belconnen Way. I just do not understand why geographical dispersion is a factor in educational policy. I think the factor that needs to be taken into account is how effectively you are using the facilities that are made available. As Debbie Newton said, we were using 90 per cent or 91 per cent of the school facility; the other facility was being used by community groups in a very effective manner. We were using those facilities in an effective manner.

MR HANSON: Thank you very much for appearing before the committee, for your submission and also for the continuing interest that you are showing in the Cook community. I congratulate all of you on that. The issues that you have raised in your submission and also here today are consistent with what we have heard from other areas and other schools in the community about the consultation process, the lack of rationale, the disruption to the community and the disruption to students.

But, moving forward, and I appreciate this is somewhat anecdotal, if the school were to reopen—and I imagine that that is your longer term aspiration—would you be able to generate, within a reasonable period of time, those same number of students back

into the Cook school? Some have left and that was disruptive. Do they want to be moving back? What is your view on that?

Mr Morling: The demographic projections used by the government in their original submission were based on census data that was basically five years out of date by the time they used it. It did not factor in several clear policy issues run at the federal government level, including the baby bonus, which means that birth rates have increased since then, which has been picked up in the 2006 census. So there is a cohort of people there ready to come through into the schooling system. Our question is: if you do not reopen Cook school, where are you going to educate those children? We are already looking at large class sizes and reasonably crowded conditions at both Macquarie and Aranda.

The other thing is that the government has a significant proposal to develop Molonglo. We consider that a number of those people will also want to work in Belconnen. If they are driving from Molonglo to Belconnen, Cook is ideally located to school those children. It is a well-located place that is close to your workplace and on your way home. The other thing we would say is that the facilities, in our consideration, are still in very good shape and were in good shape when they were closed. We think it would be a much more cost-effective solution to reopen Cook school to deal with both the increasing demographics in the area, with the proposals to develop Molonglo, than to open new schools.

Ms Newton: To add a perspective, my youngest boy started high school this year, so I have no direct link into the primary school community any more, but I am representative of a raft of people who would work tirelessly for a re-established Cook primary school, even though we have no actual children in that cohort any more. There is widely-based community support in Cook.

MR COE: I agree very much with what Mr Morling said earlier about the artificial construct about south-east Belconnen. To me it sounds absurd. I do not think people even associate with the electorate of Ginninderra, let alone with a construct like south-east Belconnen. One thing that obviously people did resonate with was the Cook primary school and the community, especially in terms of the public signage that was everywhere in the campaign—on the letterboxes, the banners by the side of the road, the bumper-stickers, the general street signs, everything. Going on from what Ms Newton just said, how has the campaign for reopening the school changed since the closure? Has it still maintained that same intensity?

Ms Newton: I do not think that is a fair question.

Mr Morling: I am happy to answer it, basically. We are now at the point where we went through six months of what we thought was a consultation period. We might have been naive, but clearly it was not a consultation period. The documentation, to us, just shows that this was not a proper consultation process. So we went through six months of that and then basically got the decision that they had made in June 2006 in our view. So that in itself is a sort of deflating experience.

Then we had one more year of attending Cook school, and the numbers stayed up quite remarkably, given what the government had done to us. In 2008, our children

were then split basically amongst two schools. So you have divided the community again. Not only have you deflated the community's goodwill and commitment to the school; you have then divided them amongst three schools. So you cannot expect the intensity of the campaign to continue over three years under those circumstances, given the way the government treated us in the first place.

But what I would say is that there is still an underlying commitment to Cook school. I think Ms Newton has really made that point, that there is still a very strong underlying commitment to Cook school. You may not see it in terms of the sort of visual things you were talking about in your lead-up to your question, but it is very strong. People are very committed and I personally am no less passionate about what happened and what I felt was good about the school than I was in June 2006. That has not diminished one bit, and there are more people like me.

MR COE: You still see the campaign; you still see the bumper stickers, the letterbox signs and the street signs.

Ms Newton: I have still got the sign in my front yard. If I could turn the question around back to Mr Coe as the questioner: if it would be beneficial to get petitions to you within the next four weeks to reinvigorate signage campaigns around Cook, we will do that. I am not convinced it is useful. That is why we are not wasting our energy doing it. If we saw a point, we would assemble visible support.

MS BURCH: How many children attended Cook school that were from the area?

Ms Newton: Sixty-two per cent is my memory of that figure.

MS BURCH: So 60 per cent; so 40 per cent were from out of area?

Ms Newton: Attracted to the school, yes, and people who—

MS BURCH: But only 60 per cent went to the local school; the other side of that—

Mr Morling: That is right, but that was not the lowest figure. If you look at the 2020 documentation, even within that artificial area, 62 per cent was not the lowest figure.

THE CHAIR: I am sorry but we are out of time. I do apologise that we only got you here for a short time. We have a very tight schedule today. Thank you once again for taking the time to come in and speak to us; we appreciate it. A transcript from today will be sent out to you so you can check that for accuracy.

JOHNSON, MR GARY, President, University of the Third Age for the ACT

THE CHAIR: We will start straight away, given that we are already over time. I do apologise for that. Thank you for coming in today. I draw your attention to the privilege statement, which is on the table there in front of you. Mr Johnson, would you like to make an opening statement before we ask questions of you?

Mr Johnson: Certainly. I am Gary Johnson and I am the president of U3A, which is the University of the Third Age for the ACT. I assume you have read the actual submission we have made, so I will not waste time going through that. I will make a few quick points so that you have got plenty of time for questions.

We run something like 200 low cost courses. At the moment we are bursting at the seams. The numbers are swamping us. We are taking something like 50 locations around Canberra to provide these courses. The whole organisation is voluntary. We do not pay anybody. We have got coming up to 4,000 members now, and about a third of these are north of the lake.

If you look at the official projections, in another 20 years the proportion of the ACT over 65 is expected to be somewhere between 20 and 25 per cent. Say our population is only 400,000—and it could well be more by then—if you take 25 per cent of that, that is close to 100,000-plus people who are going to be using the types of services provided by U3A. U3A, just in the last five months, has had 500 new members. We are a bit like the old woman who lived in a shoe. We really are splitting at the seams. We are very interested in Cook, and we have had an application into the ACT government for community space for years now—10 years. The Victorian government actually bought a building for their U3A. We live in hope, but we would be quite pleased if we could get a bit of space at Cook.

Your last speakers here were talking about the life cycle of schools in a community. What we are really interested in is the life cycle of people. You can join if you are over 55. Those numbers I gave for the 100,000 are over 65. We have 1,500 members on the north side, that is, over the lake. If you look at the south side—and we have got somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 there—we expect to get another, say, 3,000 members fairly quickly, say, in five years north of the lake.

U3A does not just provide educational courses, although that is the linkage to get in. As well as the actual courses, it has got a very useful social function. You know, once you retire, what do you do exactly? There is just so much golf and being a grandmother and all these sorts of things you can do, especially in Canberra. A lot of people have got tertiary qualifications and they want to keep up massaging their grey cells. So there is that great social aspect. Who do you actually link in with? There is only so much you can do with your church. Your ex-work colleagues tend to be disappearing. Many of them go down the coast. So U3A has got that great social network.

The other thing is that it provides a lot of confidence for older people. When I say older, you realise now that we are getting down to over-50-year-olds, because this is when they start making noises, especially if they are retrenched. We make allowances, but definitely you can come in if you are over 55. We run a lot of computer courses. It

is fine to know how to use a computer to run Excel or something. But, if you do not know how to use Word, gradually you get a little bit behind when you have not got your IT area to ask. So we provide those sorts of courses. A good example is that the best room we could get for our digital photography had space for 10 and we had applications from 120 people. So that shows you the pressures we are under.

Finally, it is just a matter of mental health, keeping people involved, trying to keep up with grandchildren, who know all these things. We are running courses on up-to-date things such as ecology. If you read the *Canberra Times* you will see that half of the letters to the editor are from U3A members. You probably know their names. It is a bit more than providing a course. It is all these things—the opportunity to participate et cetera.

I was interested to see that the last people here were the Cook school advocates. We have had an application in for Cook. In fact, we have been talking with the design people. We could take over three or four classrooms, as is. They would have to be changed slightly and now, of course, it has got to be refurbished. They were talking about the numbers of school children. We think that, once we are up to speed, we would have somewhere between 400 and 1,000 there. There are some big numbers. For example, the women's choir has got 80 members and they cannot take any more, simply because they have not got any more space. We could really run another choir for another 80, as well as music groups, art groups—those sorts of groups. It would be pretty good usage.

The other thing is we only operate during the week, really from nine to five. I do not know if you have seen the proposed plans for Cook, but we are co-located with the heraldry and genealogy society. They mainly meet in the evenings and on the weekends. So for us it is quite a good fit. We can provide a reception office service because we have got a full-time volunteer office at Hughes, and we could do that at Cook. So, from our point of view, unless the ACT government feels rather generous and provides some other accommodation, really places like Cook are about our only option.

Just as a final point and from a personal point of view, I was around when they closed Griffith school as a primary school. There was a tremendous outcry—that it was going to cause endless problems. I lived in south Canberra. It is amazing. A child's primary school life is, say, six or seven years and the time is very important. Young parents tend to be very forceful, but it is amazing after a few years how people adjust.

The oldest current U3A member is 92 and still going to courses. So, if you are looking at people, say, from 55 to 92, you have got a long life cycle for using them. We would prefer Cook. That is our big choice. If it is too far out, there is a question of access. We need north Canberra because Hughes covers south Canberra. We understand the parents wanting to reopen Cook, but on the other hand I think we see a need for our age group.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Johnson. You have probably actually answered the first question I was going to ask. It was the issue of whether Cook was the location where you do want to locate. I guess you have just said you wanted a location in north Canberra, so that is why Cook was a good location. It is an issue of space for you, I

guess, in terms of the demands on your services and being able to find an appropriate space for that.

Mr Johnson: Yes. Firstly, it makes a lot of sense to be north Canberra, north of the lake. It does not really help being out at Weston or Melrose because we have got Hughes. We use five rooms at Hughes community centre now. We are linked in with COTA, the Council of the Ageing. We have had dozens of requests from people asking, “When are you going to get something on the north side? It is a lot of travel coming down to Hughes or University House or what have you.” So, Cook, plus the fact of the rooms. It is a classroom situation, often. It has got a community hall, which is terrific. We are co-located again with hagsoc—heraldry and genealogy. Those sorts of things fit in very well, which is why we want Cook, please.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Burch?

MS BURCH: Thank you, Gary, for your opening words. Whilst you are talking for U3A, and it is a very strong community, there are multiple other community groups out there that struggle for space and options about where they can, you know, hang their keys, and school sites provide opportunities for those. Do you think that is a useful addition to the community structures, where they are? I mean, it is a benefit to U3A to have a place to call home, but does that home then benefit the community in which it sits?

Mr Johnson: I think so. A good answer to that is we are just linking up with a new project with the John Curtin School of Medical Research and we have put in an application for \$100,000 with them to the commonwealth department of health. The idea is to run a whole series of education programs on health matters for people over 45. I call it educational, but it is wider than that.

You have got to have those sorts of facilities. For example, we spend a lot of money on computers and PowerPoint presentations. There is nowhere else you can set all that up on screens and what have you. We are prepared to run the booking service, that sort of thing. Have you seen—I am sure you have—the outline of what they are proposing at Cook? Have you seen that? Have you seen all the groups that might be going?

MR HANSON: I have scanned it. To be honest, I cannot recall, off the top of my head.

Mr Johnson: I heard the last people say this, but we have been actively involved in this for quite a few months—a couple of years now. At Cook what they are proposing is to have groups like Companion House, which is the counselling service for migrants and refugees; groups like Free Range, the theatre groups; Canberra Quilters, the ladies making quilts; the youth ballet and a couple of others in there. There are certainly children in there somewhere. I think it is the playgroups, those sorts of people.

Given that you know there is a limit on how much money you can spend on refurbishing, we can use the existing footprint of the Cook school pretty much to satisfy what all these groups are seeking. It has got to be repainted and all that sort of

thing, but there is not going to have to be big structural changes.

MS BURCH: Are there many options, other than Cook, for you?

Mr Johnson: No, there is not. We have been trying for five years. We have looked at rental accommodation. There are a lot of other groups that put on education programs. You have probably heard of the Weston Brain Gym, which puts them on. For eight weeks they charge \$140. For most of our courses, for an eight-week course we can do it for under \$25. So there is a big difference. If we have got to start paying commercial rents, we just cannot really operate unless we charge a lot, lot more.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson?

MR HANSON: Firstly, thank you very much for coming in. I think we are learning more about the University of the Third Age. It is something that I want to do, so maybe we could meet separately. I really do not have any further questions for you because I think you have covered all the topics pretty comprehensively. We appreciate your submission. Certainly what you are intending at the site there is very worthy. There is no question about that.

THE CHAIR: I am aware of the time. There was just one quick question I was going to ask you. Is the Cook site going to be accessible in terms of public transport so that people will be able to get there quite easily?

Mr Johnson: That is what is not bad for us because most members, 75 per cent, have their own cars or pool cars, and we are getting more and more bicycle riders. We find at Hughes—

MS BURCH: Bicycle riders, Mr Johnson?

Mr Johnson: Yes, pedal bicycles, not Harley Davidsons. The architect is providing disabled access into Cook, which it does not have now, and they are providing more parking areas and simple things like bike racks and what have you.

MS BURCH: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming here today and giving us your time.

Mr Johnson: I thank you.

THE CHAIR: The transcript from today will be sent out to you for you to check its accuracy.

Mr Johnson: If you have any more questions, just let us know and we will be pleased to answer them.

THE CHAIR: Will do. Thank you.

McCAUGHAN, MRS TRACY LEA, President, Canberra Preschool Society
DARCY, MR JOHN PAUL, Secretary, Canberra Preschool Society
FAULDS, MS AMANDA, Treasurer/Executive Officer, Canberra Preschool Society

THE CHAIR: Thank you for coming to speak to the Standing Committee on Education, Training, Youth Affairs today in our inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system. I draw your attention to the privilege statement which is in front of you. If you can have a quick look at that and be familiar with that. I invite you to make an opening statement before the committee asks questions.

Mrs McCaughan: The opening statement that we would like to make is that we support the Towards 2020 education reform. It has its good sides and it has its bad sides. I think what the CPS would like to make very clear is that we would like to continue our excellent relationship with the department of education and with the Legislative Assembly in working through some of these issues in the future. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McCaughan. I will ask the first question. You said that you were generally supportive of the policy when it was implemented. One of the comments you make in your submission is that you are not confident the current reconfiguration of schools has advanced educational outcomes. I wonder whether you could talk a little bit about that statement.

Mrs McCaughan: I think what that is referring to is the fact that we are, in some cases, starting to move away from a play-based curriculum into a more primary school year 1, year 2, year 3-type curriculum. It is very important that our preschoolers learn through play, and to see those things change would be, I think, to the detriment of the preschoolers themselves.

Mr Darcy: We have had feedback through our organisation and through personal contacts from preschool teachers as well as parents involved in preschool. Some preschool teachers that have spoken to us have done so on condition of anonymity because they are concerned about speaking against their employer. But they have had specific challenges to what they are doing in the preschool—from the primary school, from the principal and from others involved in managing the program at the primary school.

I was supplied with some specific quotes. “Those children are playing outside too long; they should be inside doing real work.” This is a concern because real work for a four-year-old is playing. “Bring the littlies up to the whole school assembly; they can sit down in front with the kindies.” The concern there is the attention span of a four-year-old is not good for a whole school assembly and the whole school assembly, with four-year-olds through to 12 year-olds, is quite confronting.

The next one was: “The whole school is participating in a science mini event or program between weeks four to six this term and we would like to see your integrated programming as evidence of your participation.” It is very difficult to come up with an integrated program for preschoolers, in a play-based environment, in regards to a science program. Science, for a four-year-old, is just encountering the changes in the world as they happen.

For example, it is autumn now. To a four-year-old, that is nothing more than the leaves changing colour and it is getting a little bit colder. How they experience that is that they might go outside and collect some pretty-coloured leaves and come back in and stick them on paper in a montage, looking like trees, for example. That is playing but that is learning about the fact that it is autumn and the leaves change colour. Obviously a fifth-grade student is going to do something completely different when it comes to the science of changing seasons. How do you integrate a play-based program into the program for the older children? That is the difficulty that is being faced.

Continuing that theme, the next quote was: “Integrated programming on whole-school themes is required prior to the beginning of the year, with the fuller programs being made available prior to the beginning of each term.” Programming in a play-based environment for children at four years old—some of them actually come into the preschool at 3½ years old—is a dynamic process. They may set a program at the beginning of term 1 but, by the second month, they have made significant changes because they have learnt about the children, their capacity, their interests and their development stages and what is engaging them. But expecting the preschool teacher to integrate their whole program into the school’s program months in advance does not sit with the early learning structure which is advocated in the curriculum framework.

MS BURCH: There are positives in the other side of that, when it works well, when there is an enrolment transition and a learning transition through a safe, known environment?

Mrs McCaughan: There are, for children who continue on to that primary school, but preschools provide an introduction to education for children who do not go to that primary school as well. While it has its bonuses for those children, for the other children, it is really a bit of an introduction but not particularly; they are not meeting their kindy teachers; their library will not be there; their canteen will not be there. While it does have its advantages, it does not particularly advantage every child that is there.

MS BURCH: And what are your thoughts on P-2 schools?

Mrs McCaughan: P-2 schools, I can see a definite advantage for children who start that early and who will continue on. But again for children who do not go on, you have the same issues as well. But I certainly can see, especially with early intervention units and things like that, it would be really good to have them continue on.

Mr Darcy: It is mentioned in our submission that the society supports the establishment of the early childhood schools. There are only a few of them at the moment and there is not one established and there is not one planned for the highest population growth area in Canberra, Gungahlin. There should be more of them; they should be all over Canberra, to provide choice. Others who have sat in these chairs before us have gone on about the need for choice in school sizes and types. I am sure you heard that from the P&C yesterday.

Ms Faulds: I would make the comment that, in areas such as the Hall preschool and primary school which have been integrated into the Gold Creek primary school, the issue also is a significant one for the parents in that area. Persons with a mindset to live in a rural community such as Hall or even further out perhaps are not finding that they are transitioning well into the community of a more suburban community like Gold Creek or the Gungahlin area.

Having the preschool off site from the primary school in a completely separate location such as that does create a lot of disadvantage for the parents and the children, in that they are not integrating into the community that is most local to them. They are finding that they are going to school in one place and living the rest of their life in another place. And the integration that we hoped for is just not there.

MS BURCH: Just on that, we have heard from a number of the schools that there seem to be only around 60 per cent of enrolments from local areas. There appears to be a trend because of parents' choice, whether it is easier to access through work or a whole number of things. So that 40 per cent is large. Would that be reflected through the preschools as well?

Ms Faulds: Sorry, I do not have those statistics with us. We could take that on notice and come back to you.

MS BURCH: That is fine.

Mr Darcy: I do not think we have specific statistics on that either but it would vary greatly across areas. In Theodore, for example, you would not find 40 per cent from out of area simply because of the shape and location of the suburb and the fact that there is another preschool in Calwell and another preschool in Richardson.

MR HANSON: Thank you very much for your submission and coming today. It is very informative. Some of the schools that have closed and some of those that we have had the bulk of the submissions from, Hall, Cook, Tharwa and Flynn, are smaller schools and there are different views being presented by some about the educational outcomes from a smaller school as opposed to larger school. So a lot of people from those school communities are saying, "We liked it; we thought there were better educational outcomes for our children." People on the panel are presenting evidence that says that you are better off in a bigger school. What is your view on that? Is the size of the school important? Is there a point at which you do not get as good an educational outcome or should we look at the size of schools when we are considering educational outcomes?

Mrs McCaughan: My son is at Conder preschool. We have Tharwa as well. Tharwa preschool runs with about 15 kids and eight families keep that preschool going. It is a fantastic preschool. Conder has 104 children enrolled and probably 100 families really involved in that. It is a fantastic preschool as well. I think what you have got to look at is that, regardless of the number of children there, you have to give them the best possible start to their education that you can, whether that is in a 15-child preschool in a remote location or a 200-children preschool. Amaroo, I think, has 200 children. I do not see any issue with the number of children; it is about how you

teach them and how we get them started.

Ms Faulds: And the other issue on that is that the early childhood training of the teachers themselves, as opposed to being trained in primary or perhaps even secondary education, is very different. The professional development of an early childhood educator, as I am sure you are aware, is a very different kind of professional development than for a more senior level—sorry, I do not mean “senior” in seniority, I mean for a primary school or higher education teacher. It almost becomes a different mindset in the teaching methodology and, dare I say the word, pedagogy.

Mr Darcy: On Mr Hanson’s question, there are a range of factors besides the raw numbers involved in a school. Community engagement, especially when you are talking about preschool, is very important. Tracey made that point eloquently. Tharwa, with only a small number of kids and a handful of families, has a dynamically engaged community in the preschool. Amaroo, although it has 200 children enrolled in multiple classes, does not have 20 times the community engagement. They may have advantages, in terms of size, in what they can do and how much support they can generate—they may have—but it is not the same; it is swings and roundabouts. It works both ways.

MR HANSON: Can I confirm that, when my three-year-old brings the leaves in and scatters them about my house, I should consider that a science project?

Ms Faulds: Embrace the moment—and the vacuum cleaner.

MR HANSON: I will be very positive: “Look how well he is learning, dear.”

Mr Darcy: You get him to drop one leaf from the left hand and one leaf from the right hand at the same time and see whether they hit the ground at the same time.

Ms Faulds: See which one falls faster.

MR HANSON: I will do that.

Mrs McCaughan: Then you get the vacuum cleaner out and teach him how to vacuum.

Ms Faulds: A little bit of domestic education as well.

MR HANSON: That is the bit where it all falls apart, unfortunately.

THE CHAIR: There are learning opportunities everywhere.

Mr Darcy: Off the topic, Mr Hanson, you have got a three-year-old. Will he or she be going to preschool—

MR HANSON: He. He is at a preschool childhood centre in Weston.

Mr Darcy: So, he will be in a preschool next year?

MR HANSON: He will be.

Mr Darcy: You will learn what we know.

MS BURCH: I have a question following on from your statement about the understanding that teaching the little ones is quite different to teaching the older primary school students. Has this reconfiguration given opportunities for enhanced professional development? Teachers are perhaps part of a larger team; so the resources available backfill. I am just trying to tease out the benefits of that.

Mrs McCaughan: It has. I know, from speaking to my son's teacher—she is now involved in a much larger, if you like, pool of resources—there has been some professional training put in place for the preschool teachers at my son's preschool. While I cannot speak for every other preschool—this is just what I know from speaking to her—I would expect that that would be the same. There has also been an increase in the number of meetings they have to attend and things like that which can, for my head teacher, sometimes take her away from the children because they are held during contact hours. So that has been a little bit of a concern for her but—

MS BURCH: And that is a part of that larger corporation model and the various necessities that come with bigger groups?

Mrs McCaughan: As I understand it, she is also doing some work with Tharwa preschool as well, which has been a bit of an opportunity for Tharwa and Conder to work together with teaching resources and things like that as well.

Ms Faulds: I would note that often at our meetings—we have a monthly meeting of our representatives on the PPA—it is brought up that the teachers are not universally early childhood trained, that there are teachers teaching the preschoolers that are not necessarily early childhood trained. That does become a bit of an issue for some of the parents associations. They feel that their children are perhaps not always having the benefit of the play-based learning that they might otherwise get.

THE CHAIR: I am going to ask a question about what you mentioned in your submission about changing a section of the Education Act so that you would be able to have a representative on school boards. Do you think that, if that was incorporated, that would address that situation, I guess, where there might be some situations where the play-based learning is being effectively—

Mrs McCaughan: It certainly cannot hurt. Really, a lot of our preschool parent associations are saying that they do not have a voice on the school board. This is effectively the group that runs the school-based management program that allocates funds, that decides where money will be spent and how the principal will apply certain decisions and things like that. If our preschool parents do not have a voice on that board then they have no say really in what happens with their preschool. Now that voluntary contributions are being requested from our preschool parents and that money is being applied to the preschool, we think it is completely appropriate that our parents have a voice on that board.

Ms Faulds: To add to that, our representatives report back that, in some schools, there is a feeling by the principal and a push by the principal away from the preschool parents association having a voice on the P&C committee of that particular school, to the point where they feel they are being almost intimidated by the principal to wind up the PPA and just amalgamate into the school board and be run wholly and solely by the school and give all their resources back to the school to manage. There are a lot of unhappy parents associations out there who feel that they are being pressured toward winding up and just amalgamating entirely with the school and losing their identity as they—

MR HANSON: Is that as a result of 2020 or was that an ongoing thing anyway?

Mr Darcy: Yes

Ms Faulds: In simple words, yes.

Mr Darcy: It is all an ongoing factor of the amalgamation of the preschool into the primary school under the primary school management. As we have outlined in our submission, there is a discontinuity between different parts of the act. Part of the act talks about the school board and excludes the preschool from its coverage, but the preschool parents must be involved in the conduct of the preschool. That is in a different section.

To whom do the preschool parents go to be involved in the conduct? The department has offloaded the management of the preschool to the school; so it must be the principal. But the principal is having difficulty engaging with the preschool parents association because they have a P&C as well. There is confusion on the ground because of that, and that is why we advocate a particular change to the act to bring the preschool under the governance of the school board.

MS BURCH: Being a member of the P&C of a school that was reconfigured into a P-10, I can say there was a discussion. It was a discussion on enhancing the enthusiasm of the preschool parents and managing a governance structure of a large school. If I can just go back to your answer about the preschoolers being taught by non-early educators, is that a result of 2020 or is that a teaching availability—

Mrs McCaughan: Yes. What is happening now is that if a preschool teacher is sick for a session, that principal will go to the school and say, “Okay, whom have we got? Who can go over? We do not want to shut this session down because there are 25 kids who would be sent home.” If you do not have a preschool teacher, you cannot run a session. What we have found is that teachers who are not particularly trained in early childhood are covering sessions.

THE CHAIR: In the past, if we had not had that amalgamation or incorporation, what would have happened? What would normally happen if a preschool teacher was sick and could not run a session? What would have happened in the past?

Mrs McCaughan: There is a pool of substitute teachers but, if one could not be found, the session would be closed. And effectively that could still happen now. If there is not a substitute teacher, the session is closed; the children are sent home, basically,

with their parents when they turn up. This can be difficult if you are a working mum or dad who suddenly finds they have their four-year-old for the day.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, once again, for your time today and for coming to speak to us at short notice; it is greatly appreciated.

Mrs McCaughan: Could I extend an invitation to any of you or all of you to attend our meetings. We have one on 12 May, a general meeting, that, unfortunately, I will not be at because I will be in Fiji. You are more than welcome to attend any of our meetings.

MR HANSON: Where do you have those?

Mrs McCaughan: At the Centre for Teaching and Learning. There is a list of meeting times on the CPS website, or you can certainly ring the CPS office.

THE CHAIR: Is it every month that you meet?

Mrs McCaughan: They are not quite every month; it works around the school terms. We meet so many times a term; so our next would be 12 May. Then I think it is 2 June for the next general meeting. We could check that for you.

THE CHAIR: Yes, if you could send the information to Sandra, the secretary, then we can—

MR HANSON: Maybe we could look at it when the report is put together and then people can ask questions.

Mrs McCaughan: No problems.

THE CHAIR: We will see how we go. If we get the information anyway, then we have got that.

Mrs McCaughan: We are more than happy to have you there.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful.

MS BURCH: Thank you.

Mr Darcy: I have a question for you. You have had two days of hearing so far and continuing next week?

THE CHAIR: 13 May is the next hearing. The minister will be at that.

Mr Darcy: The questions is: what is your schedule for getting through this and reporting and—

THE CHAIR: We have estimates and the budget coming up. That takes over the whole of the secretariat. We are aiming for mid-August, September.

Mr Darcy: Because we will be asked, when we go back and talk to our members—

THE CHAIR: It will be midyear, given that estimates and the budget take up a lot of time. Probably August, September, but midyear, the midyear term. The transcript from today will be sent to you so that you can check that for accuracy.

The committee adjourned at 5 pm.