



**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

TUESDAY, 21 JULY 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 2.01 pm.

ZILLER, DR ALISON MARGARET, Director, Australia Street Company

THE CHAIR: I would like to welcome everyone to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs in its inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system. I would like to welcome Dr Alison Ziller, who has come to give evidence today. Thank you for making yourself available to the committee. Before we start, I draw your attention to the privilege statement, which should be there in front of you. I want to make sure that you have read that statement and are aware of the information.

Dr Ziller: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Before we go to questioning, we always give witnesses the chance to make an opening statement. Would you like to do that first off?

Dr Ziller: Yes, I would. I have had a brief, cursory look at some of the materials on the website, but I am not here to comment on the facts of the matter before you. It did encourage me to emphasise some points that might be helpful with respect to social impact assessment. I have already submitted this position statement from the Planning Institute which is called *A guide to social impact assessment*.

Impact assessment is a way of formalising and structuring good decision-making processes. In particular, it is a way of ensuring that economic, social and environmental impacts are taken into account rather than just the financial interests of the proponent for a particular change, or the financial interests of the decision maker.

I should say, having read some of the submissions made to you, that social impact assessment is not the same as cost-benefit analysis, and that is a mistake that is often made. Cost-benefit analysis is something which belongs to economic practice. It is an attempt to quantify impacts and, in the effort to quantify impacts, some assumptions are made that we sociologists might not always agree with, and other things which cannot be quantified tend to be relegated to a footnote or to what is called externalities.

In social impact assessment, we are interested in what the impacts are, whether they are quantitative or qualitative, and within the range of what can be quantified. We are not necessarily interested in what can be reduced to dollars. Sometimes we can quantify things in terms of the numbers of people affected or the size of the impact or something like that, but we are also concerned with the qualitative effects on people and groups.

A good social impact assessment process requires a clear statement of what change is proposed. I notice that in your terms of reference essentially you are considering something where two changes were proposed at once—school closures and reform of the ACT education system. Within that, there seems to me to have been an issue about how many schools would be involved. A person doing a social impact assessment around that scenario would need to know, from the proponent of the change, what was the reform that was proposed, which school closures were proposed and whether or not there were any options around that.

From reading some of the submissions, it looked as though it was a bit all or nothing, but I did not read the original case from the proponents. But you cannot assess a change unless you have clearly in front of you what the change is. The requirement to state what the change is is part of ensuring the rigour of the process. It often turns out that that is where you perhaps do not quite know all that you thought you knew about this proposed change because you cannot lay it out clearly for assessment. If there are going to be options then you would want to know from the proponent what those options were and what the basis was for those options.

The decision-making process that social impact assessment helps with involves making an assessment of probable outcomes from the proposed change. If you have clarified what the change is then we are looking for what the probable outcomes are going to be and which ones of those matter, because there will be some that do not matter, or not matter very much.

There are a number of things that hang around that. The first is that you need some criteria against which to make your decision. They might be very standard criteria, like the precautionary principle, intra-generational equity or value for money, but you need to know what your criteria are. The second thing is that social impact assessment is not a proof, and people sometimes trip over that hurdle. They think they can call in someone to do a social impact assessment who will prove that this is the right thing to do or not the right thing to do, whereas there are so many variables at stake and so many considerations that what you are really calling in is a professional opinion, and it is a professional opinion in regard to social matters. You might decide that there were economic issues and you would need a professional opinion in regard to that, and then it belongs to you to make the final decision. A social impact assessment gives you part of that picture.

I notice in some submissions that people are calling for an evidence-based inquiry or evidence-based decisions. Evidence-based research is much used in the medical profession, where they can have controlled environments—these people get the drugs and they survive and these people do not get the drugs, and we have held everything constant. You cannot do that in real life. I took that to be an anxiety about the amount of research that had been done. I do not think that you can do evidence-based research in the sense of having control groups for a decision like this. But in regard to the research that would seem to me to have been appropriate for this kind of decision, there are a number of areas of research that I would have thought should have been included. They include the research basis for the proposed reform of the ACT education system. Having stated what that was, what the reform was, what was the research basis for that, as well as the research basis for school closures as a mechanism to achieve it?

Then there is the research basis of demographic and other trends that might apply in the areas where these two initiatives were proposed to happen. I would expect that would have included demographic trends and changes in urban form and density. I do not know anything about these areas, but maybe some of these areas have a low urban density at the moment but a town planner might say, “Yes, but they’re ripe for urban infill; any minute now we’re going to have densification in these areas,” which tells you that the demographics are going to change in those areas.

With respect to changes in the way education is delivered, for example, we are using a lot more electronic delivery. With respect to it being over an appropriate time frame, what was the time frame that justified the decision? Were we talking about five years, 10 years, this year's budget or 30 years? We needed to know in order to make that decision.

I would have said that, with respect to something like closing a school and taking account of demographic change, you had to be talking about 20 years; you had to be looking at least that far ahead—maybe 30 years, although that is a bit iffy. You would have to take into account the possibility that there were no children in the school at the moment, or six, 20 or whatever it was, but that things would change quite dramatically within that time frame, in which case the precautionary principle would suggest that you would be ready for it.

A third area of research is researching what is likely to happen to people now who are in one way or another embedded in that school system. So that is your current stakeholders, current students and the various communities that will be affected by the decision to go ahead or not go ahead. There are lots of those communities. It is not just the community, meaning a suburb. There are lots of communities. There are Indigenous communities, there are vulnerable communities, there are low socioeconomic communities, there are cultural communities. We have to decide which ones count and which ones will experience different impacts.

My final point about research is that it is not the same as consultation, which is another theme that I picked up in the submissions that I read. There is a lot of complaint about how much consultation happened. Consultation is a civic safeguard, a process safeguard; it provides the decision maker with important information and it is different from research. So a good decision is accompanied by an adequate level of research, professional assessment and consultation. Some of my colleagues treat consultation as if it were research, and it is not.

MR HANSON: Did you just say that a good decision is supported by—I just want to get that down?

Dr Ziller: Both consultation and research. An assessment calls for both qualitative and quantitative considerations. I have already said that. Particularly, it should assess differential impacts. So who is going to be disadvantaged and who is going to be advantaged by the proposed change, and will some people suffer unduly while other people will benefit, perhaps disproportionately?

With respect to the final two points, social impact assessment should be undertaken by an independent professional. Usually, it is a professional with social science qualifications. Independence is difficult to achieve. Usually, social impact assessments are paid for by the proponent—proponents are often reluctant to receive a social impact assessment which does not support their case—or they are paid for by the decision maker, and if the decision maker is the proponent, as in this case, I think, that makes it difficult. Finally, the process should be transparent and the final document should be a public document. That is my statement.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Dr Ziller. I have a question, following on from what you have just explained about the type of process that would be undertaken in this situation and the type of research which would be used. A lot of reference has been made to the Education Act, having regard to the closure of schools and the reform of the education system. I do not know if you have seen the Education Act or the part that refers to the process that should be used.

Dr Ziller: In the future?

THE CHAIR: No, I will just read it out. The bit in the Education Act that is relevant states:

Before closing or amalgamating a government school, the Minister must—

- (a) have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students' families and the general school community;

Reference has been made to the fact that the process which has been used followed the act because it mentions they need to consider social impacts. With respect to that statement in the act, do you think that ensures that a process like the one you have described would be followed by a proponent or by, in this case, the government in looking at the process around closing the schools?

Dr Ziller: I noticed that, with respect to the social considerations, it sounded as though it related to the current community. The word “community” is likely to be interpreted narrowly; that is the first thing. It probably means the school community—that is, current students and their families. So it foreshortens the perspective and it means that you are only looking at who is there now; you are not looking at the future of that educational institution in that physical place 10 or 20 years down the track.

That is a limitation that is written into the words. I notice that you used “financial” and not “economic”. They are different. Economic impacts concern the wider society; financial impacts concern the government, and your budget. So they are different. I would have expected that an impact assessment would have had regard to economic and social impacts. I would not have qualified it with the words “school community”.

THE CHAIR: The act says “have regard to the educational, financial and social impact of the students at the school, the students' families and the general school community”.

Dr Ziller: Yes. So there is the ACT as a whole. The distribution of schools in the ACT as a whole is potentially an issue. I do not know whether it is in fact an issue, but potentially it is an issue. If you close down 50 per cent of them, it would certainly be an issue. It might be that the ACT has areas in it, particularly those where there are a lot of low income households, for example, where you might not want to stretch the educational provision. You might want to be a bit more lavish with it in those areas. That sentence, to me, does not encourage you in that direction.

MS BURCH: You mentioned that you had looked at some of the submissions. Did

you read *Towards 2020*? The reform is a *Towards 2020* issue. So if it was initiated in 2005, it is looking forward 15 years. With respect to the notices of decisions and the decisions themselves—and I am just trying to see if this covers some of the comments that you made in your opening statement—it was with respect to educational needs across the whole system and in clustered geographical areas. Other things for consideration were parent choice, cost—and that is financial plus the economic overlay—the historical connections of those schools to communities, the social impacts, and the health and safety of communities. If they were considered, would they be elements of a social impact assessment?

Dr Ziller: Yes.

MS BURCH: Towards the end you made mention that low socioeconomic groups could need to be invested in. Some of the school closures involved closing in one area and then generating investment in another area. A number of those sites were in areas that had less ability to move and accommodate those changes. Is that a fair and reasonable thing for a social impact assessment to consider as well?

Dr Ziller: Yes, certainly.

MS BURCH: Again, on the clear statement of intent, the early reform agenda was around *Towards 2020*, and what that reform was about was clearly articulated. It clearly identified the schools that were considered for closure and then it considered the options—whether we would configure to a P-2 structure, a P-10 or a P-12. Is that the clarity that you think is useful in this type of impact study, in how you go out and do research and consult with the community?

Dr Ziller: In order to do it properly, you would need to see the argument for each of the proposed changes and you would want to see that that argument was embedded in the international research literature and that they had looked at each individual case to see what those impacts would be in that place. I could not tell whether they had done that. What I did think about it was that it was a large piece of work. There were two aims and there were 23 sites involved; that is a very big change.

There are two things about that. One is that it takes people time to adjust to large changes, and it is often a better idea to not do it in one fell swoop like that. But the second thing is that if it is a large piece of work then you have to allow enough time for it to be done and for people to participate in the unfolding of the information and the unfolding of how the decision making is going, and for the research to come in. I did not get the impression that there had been that amount of process, but I might be wrong because I did not have it sent to me.

MS BURCH: Personally, I would say there was considerable information. I am just looking at some of the notices of decisions around demographic, economic, trends around equity of education, school size, the capacity of the schools, the curriculum on offer in different schools. That was all part of the consideration.

Dr Ziller: So you are referring to the minister's statement about his reasons for the decision?

MS BURCH: Yes. Each school was given a notice of decision. Some schools were closed quite quickly, at the end of that calendar year, and others were given up to two years notice. So the transition to other school areas and changes that would clearly impact on families were able to be managed.

THE CHAIR: In relation to that, if we are talking about the statement of reasons, when I was looking through the reasons I found it hard to find what research and analysis had been done. When you looked at the statement of reasons, you said your view was that there may have been some limited analysis. Could you see in some of the cases if that type of analysis had been done? I refer to the submission which you have given us—the information from the Planning Institute, where it discusses the social impact and that sort of analysis, having a professional do it and that sort of process. In the cases here, could you see if that sort of analysis had been done?

Dr Ziller: No. The thing that struck me was that the minister's statement is a summary. I could not tell whether the summary was based on three volumes of analysis or half an hour's chat with the head of the department. It probably was not either of those, but I could not tell. And you cannot tell from looking at the statement of reasons.

THE CHAIR: No. I went back and looked at the transcript. Obviously we had the minister come and give evidence, and one of the questions I asked was on the social impact process and equating it to—for people to understand—an EIS process as well. I asked: was there a document, was there evidence there which showed that that process had been followed? The minister did actually say that a social impact statement along the lines of an EIS was not undertaken, and nor was it required, and then referred to the act, saying, "What we did was in adherence with the Education Act." That is sort of—

Dr Ziller: But I thought you said to me that the Education Act required a social impact assessment.

THE CHAIR: Basically what the Education Act says is that it requires social impacts to be considered, among other factors such as financial and others.

Dr Ziller: There is no intrinsic difference between a social impact assessment and an environmental impact assessment other than the subject matter. I suppose the minister is saying that it is an in-house, not-for-public document.

MS BURCH: The notices of decisions have been tabled and provided to each school; so they are public documents.

Dr Ziller: It is the basis on which the decision was made.

THE CHAIR: Yes, and that was the question I was asking. What was the basis, what was the analysis, where is the research which shows how you arrived at that decision? And yes, we have got the statement of reasons but there is not a lot of information on how we arrived at this decision. That was one of the questions. I said, "If you are required to undertake this process, where is that information?"

Dr Ziller: Good public policy would say that a social impact assessment would have been done and would be available.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson.

MR HANSON: Thank you very much for coming today. I found that very informative. It appears that throughout this process the social impact has been a bit of an ad hoc, add-on at the end, afterthought. What you are suggesting is that it should actually be part of the process and before the decision is made rather than an afterthought. This is the impact of that decision. It should actually be an assessment. This is what would occur, and then that would inform the decision maker and be part of the evidence presented. It would appear in this case that it is more after the facts. This is the impact of what might occur. Is that what seems to be the case?

Dr Ziller: I do not know. I cannot comment on that.

MR HANSON: Is that difficult for you to judge?

Dr Ziller: But definitely a social impact assessment should be done before the decision is made because you get a better decision.

MR HANSON: That would form part of the decision making. In line with the consultation, it should have been freely available?

Dr Ziller: Yes. In my book, yes; and, according to the Planning Institute, yes.

MS BURCH: Yes, but some of the elements of social impact then are around demographic trends?

Dr Ziller: Yes.

MS BURCH: Parental input and joint choice, comment, equity—

Dr Ziller: Equity.

MS BURCH: Equity within the educational system so that all children have an equal share of the resource.

Dr Ziller: Relative equity might not mean exactly the same share. Some children will need different shares than others. But yes, relative equity.

MS BURCH: So if we are talking about demographic trends, forward looking, not just in this suburb at the moment, transitional processes put in place, support for change, parental consult and input, with the view of improving the system for children—that is all part of the social impact assessment?

Dr Ziller: There is this thing called mitigations; so quite often a government or a public agency will do a three-part impact assessment—environmental, economic and social—and there will be all these pros and cons. They have got a very difficult decision to make and they finally decide they are going to do X. Because they have

done all the work in advance they know that, whatever X is, it is going to have some impacts that they would rather not have but they cannot avoid them.

Then you get mitigations. That is the point at which you decide, “We really need to make good here or transfer or do something to mitigate the effect.” But you do not decide the mitigations until you have made the first decision, which is: what is the best thing to do? And you do not decide that until—

MR HANSON: Would you not take those mitigations into account to inform your decision? You say, “If we make this decision we can mitigate.” Therefore that softens the decision, so to speak?

Dr Ziller: When I am teaching social impact assessment, which I do from time to time, I always tell people that mitigations are not impacts, because what happens is that people are coming along, they are looking at the possible outcomes, they see something that looks a bit nasty and they say, “We could mitigate that,” and then they have muddied the waters because they have allowed the make-good initiatives that they are going to do become part of the original decision; whereas really you need to separate the two things out into two clear processes so that you are quite clear that this is what is going to happen in all likelihood—good, bad, indifferent, important—and then these are the things, a new separate process, we are going to do about it. And you probably should consult about that as well.

THE CHAIR: Mr Doszpot.

MR DOSZPOT: Dr Ziller, thank you for coming in. I really appreciated your summation of social impact assessment. What you outlined was that a social impact study should be conducted obviously at the start of the process. The time frame you mentioned was preferably looking at information over, say, a 20-year period, but in a perfect world what time frame would be the best way of conducting it? Is it a year out from the start of such a process, two years out?

Dr Ziller: When I was talking about 20 years I was talking about looking that far ahead to consider what the effects might be. A social impact assessment depends on the size of the project. When you are looking at this much change, I am sure you are talking about a year.

MR DOSZPOT: A minimum of a year?

Dr Ziller: It depends how big your project team is. It depends how many resources you are going to put in that direction. But this is a multifaceted change that was proposed; so there would have been a lot of elucidation and clarification that was required and then there were all these different sites. So I do not think it is a particularly quick process. I know it says six months in the legislation. I am reluctant to say that six months would be adequate for a change of this magnitude.

MR DOSZPOT: To follow on from that, at the conclusion of the process, when should a social impact study be made of the outcomes? Is there a time frame that would be the best? Is it within six months, 12 months or the completion of the project?

Dr Ziller: Ideally, the social impact assessment would have a series of stages. One of them might be a literature search on school size and you might commission that and you put it on the website. And then you might do a literature search on options for the reform of the education system and you put that on the website. So progressively you are making information available so that it does not come like a bolt out of the blue.

When the impact assessment is completed, it is like we have all been travelling along this journey uncovering relevant information, coming to, as much as possible, a consensus about what the issues are, hearing people, weighing up the issues, coming to perhaps a general view that some issues are more important than others. At the end of that process, rather than having documents sitting there, you have got two things. You have got a summation of the process and professional assessment and you have got, if you like, the hearts and minds of all the people who have come along with you.

They might not all agree—they will not all agree—but if it is done like that then social assessment is part of the change process. It makes it a bit more complicated for the professional doing it, but again you get a better outcome. I am not sure—

MR DOSZPOT: And the fact that the process has been completed does not negate the need to do a social impact study at the end of it? In other words—

Dr Ziller: Now?

MR DOSZPOT: You get on with life; it is done; everything has been completed. Why look back? That is what we have been told.

Dr Ziller: It did not look like it had been completed to me because I noticed there were people writing to you saying, “Do not get rid of our school premises.”

MR HANSON: I actually have a question very much along those lines.

Dr Ziller: So then I am not sure that it is completed. And have you still not got some schools to close?

MS BURCH: 2008 was the last school closure.

Dr Ziller: Worse still.

MS BURCH: And a preschool in 2010.

Dr Ziller: Some people want them re-opened.

MR HANSON: Indeed. It seems that the original decision was the horse has bolted somewhat. I think there would be mixed views amongst this committee about whether appropriate amounts of social impact assessment were conducted or not. But if you take the premise that it was not, then ipso facto you probably would not have implemented the appropriate mitigation strategies. So if you did not do—

Dr Ziller: You had been lucky.

MR HANSON: Yes. If you did not do the social assessment then you would not know what the impact was; therefore, you would not have understood what mitigation. In some communities—you have read some of the submissions—there is certainly a bit of angst out there about the social impacts.

Is it viable, would you consider, to then say, “Let us have a look at what those social impacts have been,” so that we can then say, “These are some mitigation strategies that we could take”? That might be as far as re-opening a school or it might be other strategies that could be implemented that would lessen the impact. It is a kind of retrofit, I suppose, but it still makes sure that some of the impacts are mitigated. Is that viable?

Dr Ziller: Yes, you could do that, because in a sense you could ask somebody to inquire into the social impacts of making no changes to the system that was introduced or you could ask somebody to inquire into what were the social impacts, yes.

MR HANSON: What were the social impacts of the school closures?

Dr Ziller: Of these changes, yes.

MR HANSON: And you could maybe do it in two parts. One is the reform and then the other is the school closures. And that would lead to—or would you do them together?

Dr Ziller: They are interlinked.

MR HANSON: And then that could lead into mitigation strategies to lessen the social impacts that would have—

Dr Ziller: Yes.

MS BURCH: Following on from that, Mr Hanson made mention of a mitigation which could be re-opening the school. The policy question of that aside, you would need to do a social impact because the resources have been allocated on the structure that is in place now, the enrolments are as the structure is in place now. Change is not so much turning back the clock because the clock has moved on to a different world and the cost and the social impacts of any change need to be considered. It is not as simple as going back to that school and getting back those 150 children when the school had a place for 400-odd children.

THE CHAIR: My question actually just leads on from that. If you had done that overall assessment on the process beforehand, you would presumably have some of that information there.

Dr Ziller: I am confused now.

THE CHAIR: Sorry.

MS BURCH: They are two separate things. The world is not what it was in 2005. The education system has been restructured. There are school systems and configurations now that we have not had before, with the investment that we never had before in the ACT in place and in place now. So any notion to change that would need this system, this social impact assessment, to be undertaken.

Dr Ziller: I suppose—

MS BURCH: Sorry, because there is impact about change but there is impact about no change as well.

Dr Ziller: Yes. You can do a social impact assessment into the proposal for no change. It seems to me that there is always change; so you could simply document what appears were the impacts and is there something left hanging that really ought to be dealt with. I assumed, if you were introducing a new system, you are monitoring it. That means you are considering changing it. You could ensure that the monitoring of the system takes account of social impacts. You could ensure that the monitoring of the system looks at whether the assumptions that underpin the reform process are turning out to be justified. So you could do both of those things.

THE CHAIR: I stated this before. If you had done the process you have been discussing, having that documentation there, having done a literature review and looked at the demographics and then looked at the social impacts—not just the financial impacts but those economic and social impacts—and documented that and done it over a decent time frame you would have—

Dr Ziller: A basis.

THE CHAIR: Yes, that is right. You would have that sound basis upon which to make this sort of decision.

Dr Ziller: Yes and, in fact, you would have a benchmark. And that would have been a very good thing, were it to be there, yes.

MS BURCH: I must admit that I am still trying to separate social impact from a cluster of information, which is parental input and comment, educational disparities and the need to equalise those demographic trends. That is all part of the social impact statement, is it not?

Dr Ziller: Yes, but the thing is: it is not just information hanging there. You are looking at that information in the context of a proposal, and the proposal is to make a given change, which is why I started by saying how important it is to be able to state clearly what is the change. You then look at all that information to see what it tells you in regard to that proposal that is before you. You could look at that same information in regard to another proposal and it would tell you other information and probably, depending on what the proposal is, change the kind of information that you are going to go looking for.

THE CHAIR: Other committee members have some questions. Mr Hanson?

MR HANSON: No, Mr Doszpot.

MR DOSZPOT: Dr Ziller, you mentioned at the outset that research is not the same as consultation, so in fact our consultation is not the same as research. From what you have seen of the process, do you feel that there has been adequate research and consultation done in the introduction of this?

Dr Ziller: You have many submissions saying that not enough consultation was done. I cannot say, because I did not examine the consultation process, but my gut reaction is that when you are going to do a big change the consultation process needs to be extended. In order not to have that level of anxiety afterwards, you need to allow a lot of time and discussion to happen and many fora in which it can happen. I do not know what research they did. Somebody could have done a survey—I do not know whether they did—of parents and affected communities. You can tie the two things together. But if you are going to do a survey and call it research, it has to be a random, stratified sample. It has to be properly selected. It has got to be valid. It is not a case of your making the opportunity available on the website and anybody who feels like it can log on and say something. That is not a survey.

MR DOSZPOT: We have relatively little information on this as well. You might find that hard to believe, but prior to—

MS BURCH: I disagree with that, Mr Doszpot.

MR DOSZPOT: the previous election when a lot of our counterparts were saying that there would be no school closures, if long-term research was done and comments were made that there would be no school closures and then an election was completed and all of a sudden there was a complete turnaround and widespread school closures were implemented, it would make me think that if the research had been done then we did not get the right answers. If the research had not been done then obviously it was a little bit ad hoc in the way the process was implemented.

Dr Ziller: It is never a good idea to leave the question open as to whether or not a major piece of policy has been properly researched.

MR DOSZPOT: Correct.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson, did you have any questions?

MR HANSON: No, thanks.

THE CHAIR: I did have a question. From your experience in conducting social impact types of analysis, are you aware of legislation where this is specifically embedded? Where you have done that, what has been the process?

Dr Ziller: For six years I was a member of the social impact assessment panel working to the New South Wales Liquor Administration Board. That board no longer exists, but on behalf of or to assist that board I reviewed a large number of social impact assessments that were required under the Gaming Machines Act of New South Wales, where venues with gaming machines or venues wishing to have gaming

machines in excess of a certain number had to complete a social impact assessment. That process went on for six years and what happened was that during the six years the board put out a series of guidelines and a small community of people were prepared to write social impact assessments for the applicants. So over that period a level of expertise and a level of understanding about what belonged and what did not belong in a social impact assessment began to be put in place. I am afraid I am focused on New South Wales. The New South Wales Environmental Planning and Assessment Act requires that impact assessments include social impacts, but there is very little guidance. There is no guidance. This is the guidance: that is it.

THE CHAIR: So there is no legislation where it specifically has that as part of it?

Dr Ziller: No. But the health people, mainly in the universities, have put out guidelines on health impact assessment. That is the Rolls Royce of impact assessment. They think a year is de rigueur. That is how you do it; it takes a year. The reference is at the back of this document. Their guidelines are very detailed. I am not aware of what legislation might require it.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DOSZPOT: Just a follow-up question to that. I asked this in a slightly different way before so I will rephrase it. We talked about the end of the process—what is the time that one ought to wait before the social impact study is undertaken to see what impact has occurred. Let us suppose that 2008 is the benchmark. In 2008 the school closures were completed and the communities of Tharwa, Hall, Flynn and Cook had faced, from evidence that we have heard, a number of severe issues in the community. Would it be the appropriate time to start that social impact study at this point, or should this be delayed for any point? Is there an optimum time for doing this?

Dr Ziller: If you are trying to pick up acute impacts, you should do it as soon as possible. Otherwise you will get bigger picture, longer term impacts.

MR HANSON: It is difficult to mitigate, I guess, the longer you wait.

Dr Ziller: Yes. If you want to mitigate acute impacts, you had better know about it, so you should probably do it now.

THE CHAIR: Ms Burch?

MS BURCH: Comments were made around consultation and survey. There were 700 meetings held and 350 formal submissions to the original reform process. It strikes me that there was a fairly solid, open, robust consultative process—700 meetings with school boards, parents, parental associations, community members, business groups. Is that reasonable? I know it is a bit like asking how long a piece of string is.

Dr Ziller: It is not about the number, it is about—

MS BURCH: The process.

Dr Ziller: the quality of the process. If you hold 700 meetings at which you tell

people what is going to happen, it is not highly consultative. I do not know what happened. If you hold 700 meetings and the people who come to those meetings cannot get a record of their contribution then it is not a transparent process. Even if you hold 700 meetings, it is not the same as properly structured research. What happens is that the people who go to consultation meetings are the people who go to consultation meetings. The people who are uncomfortable in consultation meetings, public meetings, where lots of people are excited and shouting and whatever, do not get heard.

MS BURCH: Yes, a different process—formal submissions and written submissions, and even informal emails, an opportunity for those for other folk to contribute. You may have mentioned that there was some comment around research. The list is too extensive, but this is a table of research and evidence that was undertaken through the review process on national and international best practice and items around configurations of schools, learning outcomes, special needs and a variety of education papers. I think that work was done—if this is just a sample of the work that was referred to and used as an evidence base. You also made mention of a survey—

Dr Ziller: Can I just say something about that?

MS BURCH: Yes.

Dr Ziller: I am not sure what you are looking at, but the research outcome that I would be looking for would be the assessment of all that material. I guess I was raising: was the assessment of all of that that somebody looked at all that material? Because that is like your reference list, your bibliography. That is good, but where is the assessment that was made of all that material? That is the document that will tell you how it was weighed and that is what people want to see. They want to see whether it was weighed fairly. If they cannot see the document, they cannot tell.

THE CHAIR: I have not seen that list either. I have obviously seen different information which has been quoted throughout the government submissions, through the statement of reasons and all those different parts which have been undertaken. On my understanding, that is almost like your literature review as well, looking at different research. As you go through the social impact process you are using that information, but you are also having to look at the community and the schools in question and the impacts there and then refer back to that information, instead of making that decision in isolation from the actual situation at hand in your community. It does not actually give you the outcome you are looking for, I would imagine.

Dr Ziller: Yes, that is your literature review. Then you need to apply it to the particular proposed change and the particular location, where that change is going to take place.

MS BURCH: Yes, it has underpinned the policy decisions around the configurations of schools and things. You made mention of surveys and said that it needs to be rigorous. If midway through this school reform process there is an external validation report which is undertaken by the department across school systems—and it is my assumption that that is a well-structured, valid survey—and through that survey process it shows overwhelming satisfaction with the system, including those

communities that have been through change and transition to new schools, would it be a worthy comment to say that these changes, whilst a significant upheaval for some communities in the main, are working towards a reasonable outcome?

Dr Ziller: The department is the department that proposed and administered the change.

MS BURCH: It is to users of the education system saying, “What’s your level of satisfaction across a range of criteria?”

Dr Ziller: The people who are doing the study are the people who did the change.

MS BURCH: It is a survey of the system.

Dr Ziller: By the department.

MS BURCH: Yes, asking teachers, asking parents and asking students. It happens regardless.

Dr Ziller: That relates to one of the last points in my presentation, which is that a social impact assessment—and this is a form of impact assessment—is ideally done by an independent party. In this case, if there is a credibility issue then you particularly need to get an independent party to do the assessment. You have an excellent school of sociology in the ACT, so you have got the skills and resources here. But it is important that the people doing the assessment are not the people who are proposing the change. The assessment needs to be at arm’s length, basically.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson, a further question?

MR HANSON: I will beg your indulgence, Madam Chair, as my question is a little bit outside the terms of reference for this inquiry.

THE CHAIR: We will just have to see what the question is.

MR HANSON: Having read the submission you have put in about social impact assessments and heard what you have had to say today, your view is that if there is a change to the health system that involves turning our private hospital into a public hospital—

THE CHAIR: I do not know if this is really—

MR HANSON: a change of providers across the board—

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson, I do not think this is really—

MR HANSON: It is outside the—

THE CHAIR: No, I think we should be sticking to—

MR HANSON: Okay, I will stick to the—

THE CHAIR: And what Dr Ziller has been briefed on.

MR HANSON: We are talking about social impacts. Maybe I will talk to you after the reference—

THE CHAIR: I know, but we are referring to the school closures and I think that is where we should stay.

MR HANSON: It seems quite remarkable to me that we would just waive consultation.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson, we should stick to the subject matter at hand. We are nearly out of time so I think that is what we should be sticking to. Mr Doszpot, do you have a question?

MR DOSZPOT: There was a question with regard to research and consultation where we seemed to be criss-crossing. There has been what some people would claim a lot of consultation and what others would claim no consultation—there were decisions already made when the so-called consultation was being carried out. As to the fact of independent people to carry out the research, this is not a question I can ask you because I do not think you were part of the process, nor am I aware that there was any independent research done that has been presented to us. The question comes back to the relevance of doing the social impact study, or the danger of not doing the social impact study, which is now all after the fact. But how do we learn if the government has not conducted the correct social impact study or issued a relevant social impact statement prior to the closure of these schools, which the Education Act requires? Again it is an open question, but would you have identified any of these issues had you been doing a social impact study prior to the decision being taken?

Dr Ziller: I think the presence of all the issues would have been apparent. That does not necessarily say that the decision was well-founded or not well-founded in terms of social impacts, but the sorts of things that people are raising are not surprising. They are the kinds of things that I would expect to have found in a social impact assessment. My experience is that when a good social impact assessment is done it is an iterative process and it leads to modified decisions which are better.

MR DOSZPOT: Or better informed.

Dr Ziller: Better decisions. Both—better informed, better decisions. I will just pick up on something you said about consultation. I am a consultant. The iron law of consulting is that never is enough consultation done and after you have letterboxed every street and house, most of them did not get it. However, there are two ways to ameliorate that. People feel very upset about it, and I understand why that is. There are two ways around that. One is that what you did is really transparent. Nowadays people put things on the website, it stays there for a minute and a half and it is not there any more. So it is available, you can track it, you can see that they said they did this and they did that. The second is you do not have very short time periods for comment and you do not try and put a massive change through in a very short period of time. All of those things will fester the idea that we were not consulted, whether or

not we were.

THE CHAIR: Dr Ziller, we are out of time. There are, I am sure, many other questions we would like to ask, but you do have a plane to catch and we need to let you go. Thank you once again. It has been very enlightening. A copy of the transcript of the proceedings will be sent to you so you can check it for accuracy. Thank you.

Dr Ziller: Thanks.

Meeting adjourned from 3.02 to 3.14 pm.

HADDAD, MR KARIM, member, Tharwa community

THE CHAIR: I welcome you to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system. Before we start, I would like to draw your attention to the privilege statement, to make sure that you have seen it, read it and understand the statement.

Mr Haddad: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Before we go to questions, I welcome you to the inquiry and thank you for giving your time today. Before we start with questions, we like people to make an opening statement; if you would like to do that, you are welcome to do that.

Mr Haddad: First of all, I would like to acknowledge the presence of ex-Tharwa primary school students and parents in the gallery. I know there are not a large number of people here because they have been scattered all over the place. That is, in some ways, a real statement about the impact it has had on Tharwa.

Tharwa has been a very strong and resilient community for over 150 years. It was the first settlement on the other side of the Murrumbidgee River, when a small crossing was made there in the early 1830s, and we have had a school there for over 100 years, providing a central focal point for the community. The school has always had about the same number of students the whole way through, with very little variation in the population because it is sparsely populated out there.

It is a real shame to go down and see what has happened to Tharwa today. The main street is quite empty. You do not hear the voices of children, except on Mondays and Tuesdays when the preschool is operating. But that is on a very limited basis. Whereas people would get together and would spend time talking and would be dragging kids out of the school at 4.30 from the playground, it is like a ghost town now.

The fact that there was only one submission from Tharwa is a real statement about the people's morale. They have given up. They believe that they cannot affect what the government is doing. The government have made statements and outlined their policy and, no matter what the community said, that was not considered. It was not part of that, and the community has given up.

It is quite saddening, as a resident of Tharwa, to see the breakdown in a very small, close-knit community over that time. We went through the bushfires in 2003 and survived that with resilience. We have had death in the small community, which has also brought people closer together. But the loss of the school has actually encouraged people to turn in on themselves and forget about community. It has become every person for themselves, basically. And that is a real shame. It is a real loss to Canberra.

I do not think Canberra realises what it has in Tharwa, in one of the few settlements outside of Hall that existed before Canberra did. That showed the kind of spirit that existed in the pioneering days when Canberra was built. And that spirit had lived,

until very recently, in the community. That has gone, and that is a real shame.

As we watch Canberra heading towards its 100th anniversary and all the carry-on, the expense and the ceremony going on, there is a little, I suppose, resentment in the community that it is paying lip-service to heritage rather than actually valuing what is there and preserving and helping to thrive what existed for so long. I will leave that there.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We will start with questions. In the submission which you have made to the inquiry, you talk about how Tharwa's submission to the actual school closure process was handled and you talk about, in general, the management, not the closure of Tharwa school itself. Did you think it had an impact on the decisions that were made about Tharwa—for example, the issue of merging the preschool and the teaching principal, which you have mentioned? They are a couple of things you have mentioned. I am wondering how the whole process of managing it had an impact on those final decisions that were made.

Mr Haddad: From the very outset, it was clear that it was an economic decision, that other factors were not being considered, the fact that the Chief Minister was quoting the price per head of student to educate and how it was significantly above the average of the schools in Canberra. He did that within the first few weeks. He said it was \$19,200 per student and that was outrageous and that the community of Canberra should not be subsidising such a small school.

When we countered that argument by showing that, by increasing the number of students by 10, that average would almost halve, they did not take that into consideration. They dismissed that and said it was not part of what was going on.

We went into the process in good faith. We had numerous discussions with the minister, with his advisers, with the department. We were open and transparent about what we had. We believed that there was a confidentiality about our discussions and we felt that that was betrayed at the last minute. We were led to believe that we were being listened to all the way through and then, when the announcements were made, and the way the announcements were made, we realised that the decision had been made earlier, prior to our putting in our submissions, prior to the reading of any of the evidence, and it was actually ignored.

The fact that the legislation on the Education Act was changed the night before the announcement, on the 5th, at 5 o'clock, with no discussion—and we went through all the *Hansards* and had a look at that—and effectively prevented the community opening a school there was a real blow. We had been putting our proposal that, if the government decided that it could not run the school as a government school, we would apply to run it as a private school in partnership with the Bluegum school. We had been open with that. We checked the Education Act and the Education Act allowed a school to operate an extension of it and there would be no disruption or loss in time and that loophole, or what was seen as a loophole, was closed the evening before the consultation closed.

There was no discussion in the Assembly about it, despite the Greens asking for discussion and asking for clarification. Minister Barr said that it was only

administrative procedure and then pushed it through. Basically he changed it to say that, if a school was going to open an extension, they needed ministerial approval to do that. If they did not do that, the principal was liable to be put in jail for up to two years. That was the penalty. This was all pushed through at the last second.

We were not told about this. When the announcement was made, Carol Harris, the director of schools, came out to our school. She did not go to Kambah high, she did not go to any of the big schools that were closing; she came to our school. She was in charge of all the south-side schools. There were quite a number of them being closed and she came to our one to talk to us.

She sat there and listened as the principal gave the news. We were quite upset and we said: "That is okay. We will start the process of opening our own school." Carol Harris said to me, directly to my face, "That is not possible, Karim." I said: "Yes, it is. I have read the Education Act. We can do that. We are already in negotiations. We started seeking funding for this. We can make it happen. Obviously the government does not see it as a worthwhile thing but we think it is." She said: "No, it is not possible. You will not be able to do that."

She omitted to mention the fact, the reason it was not possible, that the legislation changed the night before. She did not disclose that at all. She came deliberately out there to interfere with us and to make sure that we went quietly and did not cause the government trouble. We were quite vocal in our campaign to keep Tharwa open and she came deliberately there to make sure that there was no trouble in the school.

The fact that the kids were there on the last day and went on their school excursion and came back and were locked out of the school on their last day of school, which was a month after this decision, was appalling. They could not get their bags because the security guys had come in to lock the schools up. They had security placed at the school for four days after the closure of the school to prevent any kind of vandalism.

Over three years later, the school is not vandalised at all. In fact, it is only kept clean because the staff of the preschool and the parents of the community go and sweep it and look after it.

For six months, that school was neglected by the department. For six months after the closure, nothing happened in there. The fridge was still running in May when we opened it, with stuff still in it, left from that last day. It was not even cleaned out. The rooms had been ransacked by the people who moved the equipment out and took all of the valuable things. They were the government contractors that had gone in there. It was an absolute disgrace. When it came to the community fair in May, we spent half a day cleaning up the mess the contractors had made of our school.

That whole process of going through the closure, being open and transparent from our side, and then finding this change of what is going on, we found that very difficult to take. We found very difficult the fact that the preschool was kept open when it was never mentioned in any of our submissions to keep it open and merge it with Conder. And the school was closed and was not given the same opportunity to merge with Conder. That was part of our submission. We put it in to say that, if you merge it, we have the same principal, you lose \$70,000 of the salary. The operating cost of the

school was only \$540,000. And it makes a significant difference to the way the school runs. That was not even considered.

When we challenged the government and we wrote to the minister afterwards and asked why the preschool was left open, we put an FOI in for it, it was refused on the grounds that it was a positive decision and it was a benefit to the community and the reasons did not need to be disclosed, which I find incredible.

THE CHAIR: I am sorry if I have not picked this up in your submission. When did you actually find out when the legislation had changed?

Mr Haddad: I found out two days later when I talked to Roland Manderson about what was going on. They announced it on the Friday. Sorry, three days. Monday, I came in and I was in here in the Assembly, upstairs, and I was talking to them about what is going on. And then when we looked closely at the fine print and what had happened the week before, we realised what had happened. He and I looked at it in the office and opened it and saw these things and I said: "Hang on a second, they have changed the law. We cannot open our school."

Ironically, it was the same day a very large piece of public art was being installed out there, the weave, which would have funded our school for four years. Anyway, we were quite upset about that kind of thing. I was watching the crane go down.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Burch.

MS BURCH: What was the enrolment when Tharwa school was closed?

Mr Haddad: The enrolment diminished in the last six months because of the announcement of what would happen.

MS BURCH: What was the enrolment at the beginning or the end of that six months?

Mr Haddad: At the beginning of the six months, it was 30.

MS BURCH: And how many were from the area, from Tharwa, and how many were from out of the area?

Mr Haddad: I would have to check it. There were a number of students from Smiths Road which were not considered because they live across the border. Smiths Road is a community that I am sure you are aware of. There is only one road in and out, and that goes through the ACT to get to New South Wales. It is blocked by the river and the ACT border and we are the closest school to that, by a significant amount.

They were not considered in the numbers for the school, even though the government was collecting an \$8,000 a year bounty from New South Wales for educating them. There were eight students down from Smiths Road. There were probably, I think it was, 13 or 14 students from within Tharwa and there were a number of students from Conder and Banks for whom the schools there were not working for them.

MS BURCH: The children from Tharwa have now gone to Conder and Banks, in the

main?

Mr Haddad: They have gone all over the place.

MS BURCH: What uniform is that over there—Garran?

Mr Haddad: I can answer that. Students went to all kinds of different schools because of the distances that were involved. My students went to Bonython. Beforehand they could walk to school; afterwards, the amount of time we drive is the equivalent of taking a child from Yarralumla to Ngunnawal every day to go to school.

MS BURCH: From Tharwa to Bonython?

Mr Haddad: That is right; it is 16 kilometres.

MS BURCH: But with the enrolments that were already in Conder and Banks, they do not have a distance to go because they have got local opportunities to go to?

Mr Haddad: No, they went to other schools. They went to Theodore, they went to Garran—

MS BURCH: So they choose not to go to their local school?

Mr Haddad: They choose not to go to their local school. Part of the problem was that a lot of those kids had been victimised or bullied, and the Tharwa environment was a nurturing environment where those kids and their behaviour could be managed very well, when it was not managed well in a school with 500-plus kids.

MS BURCH: The question I am going to ask is quite a hard question—

Mr Haddad: Great.

MS BURCH: but it is about the cost of managing a small school and the cost per student. Where does that money come from across the whole system? It is a hard economic question and I know raising our young ones is bigger than just dollars, but someone has to find those dollars for our wee ones.

Mr Haddad: That is exactly right. We showed in our submission ways in which the dollars could be managed. For over 100 years we had a teaching principal. Then the education department said: “You cannot have a teaching principal. Even in a two-classroom school, you must have a separate principal.” So we had the overhead of \$80,000, plus the superannuation and the other on-costs of having that principal there, which we did not need. The community did not ask for that and did not want that. For years, we had been managing very well with a teaching principal. The costs that have been put in there, when we look at it, were run by the department—the way they lifted up the running costs. It was not the requirement of the actual school.

What I find really difficult, Joy, with respect to your question is the obscene waste of money afterwards on our school grounds. When I challenged it, it was said, “Look, it’s not in the education department, so it is savings.” The management shifted from

the education department to the department of urban services. Two sets of people came out to mow the grounds: one mowed the preschool; the other mowed from that side all the way to the other end of the paddock. Two lots of people came to fix things like the lights or get the toilets working for the preschool. One lot of people came out on the first day that school opened for the preschool and cut down the school crossing, until I rang Minister Hargreaves and gave him an absolute bollocking for it, as to why he was cutting down a school crossing on an open preschool. They said they were following orders. The preschool teacher was there in tears, telling the guy to stop angle grinding the sides down because there was a school there, and the guy refused. It was only after the preschool teacher contacted me, and I rang the minister, that this thing stopped.

Six hours later, the same people were out there re-welding the signs back up. You talk about running costs and waste. You can see it everywhere, and you can see it when you go to my child's new school. You can see the amount of money that is thrown around on things and it is not looked after. I find that quite disgusting. In a community school, a large amount of the cost was run by the community; the cleaning was done by the community and the grounds were looked after by the community. All of that kind of stuff was done.

The department said to us when they were doing the closures, "No teachers' jobs will be lost." That was done to placate the unions. So all of our salaries were kept. No-one lost their job. So that cost was borne elsewhere in the system. The only running cost for the school was \$70,000 for electricity, for looking after the grounds, which still gets paid by the department to manage the preschool. So where is the cost saving? Where is the reduction? This is where you use the maths to make this happen—10 more students, which you take out of any over-full school anywhere. The big thing at the moment for the government is reducing class sizes. They think that is the panacea for fixing the education system, because they have over-full schools. If you take one kid out of each of the classes and bring them to Tharwa school, our average cost per student, which is a rubbish metric, drops dramatically; we become the cheapest school in the ACT to run.

MS BURCH: But a number of folk would not want to travel out of—

Mr Haddad: They did, they chose.

MS BURCH: And others questioned the educational opportunities and the environment of a small school.

Mr Haddad: That was one of the biggest lies pushed by the education department—the opportunities in their large schools. With respect to my son and daughter who are sitting here, last year my son had one excursion out of his school—one. He is supposed to be in a big, well-resourced school. When he moved from Tharwa, he went into a room which was the chair cupboard, which stored excess furniture. There were four computers between 62 children. In Tharwa, they had 18 computers between them all. The opportunities that he had for education have diminished dramatically, despite our pleas to the principal of this new school, to the P&C of this new school, to the teachers of this new school. They can't do these things.

My daughter has now started at this new school. She was given a report that could not give any kind of value statement about her performance. When you read through the report, the most significant line in it is that “Leila can play with a ball”—for year 1. This is the A to E grading thing. There is no explanation, no meeting with the teacher. My son did not get a report last term because his teacher was on holiday. She had written the reports before she left. The principal assured us that we would get the report before he would go, but we did not get it. We still have not got our son’s report, and he started back two days ago. The teacher is back at school. And it is because they were re-editing it.

You talk about opportunities at a big school and how it is so much better. The kids with learning difficulties missed out on the first term after the transition because they lost our transition files. The teachers in Tharwa sat down with each child and each family and went through the transition notes, and talked about what their needs were and how they would adjust these kids’ learning in the bigger environment. And it was lost. Kids with reading difficulties did not get any of the attention that they needed. A kid with cerebral palsy did not get the support he had. He moved through two schools before he got looked after.

When we ask: “Where’s our transition file? Why isn’t it in the file? We assumed they were there,” the department, embarrassingly, said, “We lost them.” I asked them to find it. A month later, they still have not found it, at the end of the first term. I ring the *Canberra Times*. Look, it’s found in two days!

When you talk about opportunities, you can’t just say that because there is a bigger school, there are more chances. We are talking about primary school, not secondary school or college choices. We are talking about primary school, where it is about community, it is about belonging, and it is about extending these people in a social network, as well as giving them foundational skills in reading, writing and all of these important things. Primary school is the most important part of their education. And this government and its department have gone through and systematically ruined it.

MS BURCH: You have made a choice of the school you have gone to.

THE CHAIR: Ms Burch, I think we should—

Mr Haddad: I picked the best one that was on offer. Gordon had bullying issues, Conder was overcrowded and busting at the seams, and I went to the smallest one in the valley.

THE CHAIR: Mr Hanson?

MR HANSON: Thank you very much for coming in. I thank you for that very impassioned and articulate presentation that you made. I also thank your family members and other members of the school that have come in today. It is an emotional issue that comes out.

Mr Haddad: Gus, are you okay? He is still quite traumatised by it all.

MR HANSON: Yes, I can see that, and I can see that you are as well. I appreciate

what you are doing here today on behalf of the community.

I would like to acknowledge the important role that Tharwa plays in the Canberra community. Villages like Tharwa and Hall play a really important part in the community, and that is acknowledged. The school played a very important part in that community. You have expressed that extremely well today. When we hear about these schools being described as “boutique schools”, as they have been previously, and when we hear talk about “cost per capita”, that is not the issue. The issue is the role that they play in both the educational needs and the social needs of the broader community. There is also the economic viability that they bring, not just per capita, on what it costs per student, but to the villages. With respect to both your written presentation and your words today, I thank you very much for that presentation.

Obviously it has been a difficult time for the community, and the school still stands vacant, as I understand it?

Mr Haddad: Empty.

MR HANSON: The government have made it clear that they are going to refuse to re-open and they are going to refuse to support the initiative that you came forward with, whereby the community would put an independent school or a cooperative school there. Although the union came down on the side of saying that what has occurred is an outrage, when it comes to that, they will not support it either.

Mr Haddad: No, because it is not public education.

MR HANSON: That is right. That disappoints me. Are you still of the view, though, that the community would support a public school or a community school, if we can get that message through to the government?

Mr Haddad: The community desperately needs a focal point around the school. At the moment we have a preschool which kids attend for two days a week, because it is a full-time preschool. It is not like some of the other ones in town where they go for a few hours every day. That has actually been a very damaging thing for the school because the parents that bring their kids there only bring them there for one year. So they are very reluctant to get involved in the community; they are very reluctant to get involved in any of the bigger projects that are going on. Anybody that has more than one child chooses not to go to it because of travelling backwards and forwards, from Tharwa into town for one kid and then back again. It just does not work for them.

As a community, we desperately need a new school, or an old school back, or a second-hand school. We do not mind what kind of school it is. We need a reason for young kids to go there for seven years of their lives to get some very important foundational skills.

MR HANSON: I have no further questions. I think you have made your point very clearly, and we have listened.

THE CHAIR: Mr Doszpot?

MR DOSZPOT: I echo Jeremy's sentiments. You obviously are aware of the emotion that closure has had on not only the schoolchildren but the community of Tharwa. The Education Act required that a social impact study be carried out prior to closure. Was there any social impact study conducted prior to the closure that you are aware of? Were you consulted? Or has there been any contact since then to do a social impact study on what has happened as a result of the school closure?

Mr Haddad: No, there has been no consultation beforehand, no impact study and no impact study done afterwards at all, and no consideration for that. It was not looked at. And when we brought it up, it was said, "That is not part of it; it is about money," which is quite ironic now that we are in a particularly bad time for money for the government.

But only a couple of years ago, a year after the closure of the schools, the government actually had a \$200 million windfall in their budget, which was better than they thought, because they sold a couple of car parks in Civic. And the closure of these 26 preschools and primary schools was estimated to save the government \$30 million over four years—that is what came from the department, \$30 million over four years—and they make \$200 million by selling a car park in Civic.

MR DOSZPOT: My follow-up question to that is: you also raised a couple of issues regarding potential breaches of confidentiality during the consultation process. Can you tell us about that?

Mr Haddad: Yes. We had a meeting with David Peebles, who is the minister's adviser. It was in a coffee shop. We sat down and we outlined—that was the first time we outlined it—our intention to open a community school if this does not work. We were discussing openly and frankly with him the process, what our options were, and we were discussing that as one of our options and that we were working on that.

We did not write that in our proposal. It was in a confidential meeting, and that was the only place that that was discussed outside of the Tharwa community. That information then was used as part of the legislation change to close that loophole.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. You have mentioned the preschool. Obviously it was merged or is a separate campus to Conder.

Mr Haddad: It was forced.

THE CHAIR: Because you mentioned that was not considered for the primary school, I am wondering whether you were aware of or whether you did in your submission look at the cost of having Tharwa as a separate campus to another school as opposed to sending the students to other schools and whether there was some comparison of costs for that.

Mr Haddad: Yes, we did. We saw that there was a significant saving in merging the schools, and that was part of our submission. The school ran on \$500,000-odd, \$540,000-odd. \$70,000 was for maintenance, electricity, infrastructure and whatever, internet access and that kind of thing. The rest was salaries. And we believe that a large part of the salaries was for the principal. There were four staff at the school,

and the administration officer that was there who administered it. For the number of students, the administration could easily be done inside and you would reduce the salary cost by about, say, half, by having just two teachers at the school.

You already had a level 2 teacher there. But you had a level 2 and a level 1 teacher running the two classes. And the administration would be done by the Conder school and the principal would be at the Conder school, as they are doing with the preschool. And that is where the money would be saved, and it would be significant. You would halve the cost of running the school. Where else in Canberra could you halve the cost of running something to make it one of the cheapest places to run? In fact, it would be cheaper than putting demountables in Conder school.

THE CHAIR: Had you or Tharwa had any discussions with Conder about that proposal?

Mr Haddad: Had we had discussions with Conder? We talked—

THE CHAIR: Had there been any?

Mr Haddad: Before or after the submission date closed?

THE CHAIR: At any time of the process have you had any talks, informal or formal?

Mr Haddad: Yes, we had. We talked to the principal about it; we talked to the P&C about it, and they were quite open to it. And that is why we were not going to suggest that in our submission without actually checking whether the other people were interested in that kind of marriage. It was quite ironic that the preschool got that. We did not even suggest it. But the primary school, with two other teachers and 30-odd kids, did not get that option. The preschool only had 15 kids.

In fact, we had an option as to how the school could have 46 or 54 kids full time by doing the preschool in two shifts. There is a real demand for preschool education. You know how important early childhood education is, and we have a particularly good one at Tharwa. We run Monday, Tuesday; we could easily run a Thursday, Friday class, with another 15 kids.

We then talked in our submission about how, if you put a demountable there, we could actually offer a kinder-1/2 class, a 3/4 class and a 5/6 class, and you would have the numbers there. We felt that there was certainly a demand. One of the issues about the Tharwa school is that people felt for years that you could not get into it because there was a long waiting list. And there was. In-area kids always got priority but the kids in those southern suburbs which are very close to where the schools are had to go on a waiting list, and we would regularly have 10 or 15 students on a waiting list. The demand is there.

There is a way of running it that is very cheap, and it would cost the government almost nothing now to do it, to open it up—certainly not as much as they are paying right now. They are paying teachers right now. They are paying for maintenance of the building and all of that already.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We are on limited time. Maybe we have to—

MR DOSZPOT: I have a very quick question.

THE CHAIR: We will go to Ms Burch.

MS BURCH: On the preschool, the numbers and the times have not changed. They have always been Monday and Tuesday since the closure of the primary school?

Mr Haddad: Yes, they have. The numbers did dip because of the closure of the bridge. When the bridge closed, the numbers for that first year dipped. Now that the bridge is open, they have doubled again. They have gone back up to their full capacity.

MS BURCH: About what is that, do you know?

Mr Haddad: Fifteen. There is only one classroom that they are allowed to use.

MS BURCH: And they get a mix of those from Tharwa and again from the lower Lanyon area?

Mr Haddad: They are. And one thing that is quite short-sighted in this whole approach is that the demographics done by the department of education were very limited. They did not go beyond 2010. We actually have at the moment the highest birth rate in Tharwa and the highest number of kids under five that we have had in over 35 years. There are more toddlers within crawling distance from the school in 35 years. I do not know why. Maybe the government is handing out money to have babies or something like that. But it is really important to us that they have somewhere to go, that they do not have to drive all the way into town to get looked after.

I have got one last thing to mention that I have not mentioned before.

THE CHAIR: Let Mr Doszpot have one quick question. We are nearly out of time; so we need to let you go.

MR DOSZPOT: Thank you for your submission. Obviously, as you said, it is a very emotional issue. What is your overall assessment? Can the school be re-opened to the community's benefit and to the children's benefit?

Mr Haddad: Yes. It would make a significant difference, with minimal outlay to this government, to repair some of the damage that has been done in that community. There are a bunch of kids that are under five that need somewhere close to go. They need the opportunities to learn and to grow that kids previously, for over 100 years, have had. The community would welcome it.

MR DOSZPOT: There has been no consultation since that to seek any further input from the community as to what has happened to the community since the school closures?

Mr Haddad: Not at all. We have had consultation about what to do with the buildings

and we have been told expressly that we cannot talk about anything to do with education in it.

THE CHAIR: Sorry, we are nearly out of time. Mr Haddad, you did have something that you wanted to say.

Mr Haddad: I did. What I wanted to mention was the public transport disaster out at Tharwa. I put in numerous submissions to both the education department and the department of urban services about giving opportunities for the kids to get public transport to go to school. There is one bus that is run privately by Keir's that leaves at a quarter to eight in the morning, which is not suitable for primary school kids. It is for the high school kids that go to some of the bigger schools in town.

We have asked and asked and asked whether we can have a public transport option to make a big difference to the economic impact. It is costing \$2½ thousand more a year to drive my kids to school because there is no other option. Parents have to choose different work arrangements so that they can pick their kids up and drop their kids off and make it work because we are so far out. Like I said before, it is the equivalent of a Yarralumla kid driving to Ngunnawal every day and back to go to school. And these are kids under 12.

The department said it was fine for my five-year-old to get on a bus with high school kids at a quarter to eight and be unsupervised at school for 45 minutes. I find that unacceptable.

I think that the committee should realise that, when you talk about the impacts of this decision, public transport was not looked at. When they closed these schools, they did not look at how these kids would get there, the cost to people in terms of lost work hours or petrol or any of those kinds of things.

The fact is that my son had to go to school on the walk-to-school day in a car, when for the previous two years of his schooling he could walk every day or ride his bike. It seems quite ironic that the minister is talking about how kids should be healthy and get out there and walk to school when it would take our kids about 4½ hours.

THE CHAIR: I think we are out of time. I know there are other questions we would all probably like to ask but we will have to finish. Thank you once again for your time today. You are finally able to come and present to the committee and fit in with our time frame. I just let you know that a copy of the transcript from today will be sent out to you soon. You will be able to check that for accuracy. Thank you once again for your time today.

The committee adjourned at 3.51 pm.