



Village of Hall and District Progress Association Inc.

VHDPA Inc.
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Ms Sandra Liburn
Secretary
Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs
ACT Legislative Assembly
Via email to: committees@parliament.act.gov.au

31 March 2009

Dear Sandra,

Submission to the Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

Please find attached our submission to the Inquiry. The Association would be happy to appear at a public hearing to elaborate further.

I can be contacted on 6230 2977 or by email – a.crombie@effect.net.au. Jo Hall was President of the Progress Association at the time of the school closure. She can be contacted on 6206 4583 (business hours) or 6230 2166 (after hours).

Your sincerely,

Alastair Crombie
President

President: Alastair Crombie a.crombie@effect.net.au

Affiliated Member Organisations:

ACT Dressage Association
Wattle Park Uniting Church
St Michaels and All Angels Church
St Francis Xavier Church
Hall Pony Club
Hall Polocrosse Club
Hall Rugby Club
Hall Primary P&C Association
Hall Preschool Parents Association
The Rotary Club of Hall
Hall Village Brass Band

Village of Hall and District Progress Association Inc

Submission to the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

Summary of Recommendations

1. Broaden the Towards 2020 treatment of the Priority Enrolment Area for Hall village to embrace the increasing population of Hall and district in revisiting the decision to close Hall Primary School
2. The ACT government pursue a cooperative arrangement with NSW in reopening Hall Primary School
3. To restore the principle of choice for parents when it comes to size of school
4. To enrich the ACT education system by re-opening the small rural primary schools at Hall and Tharwa
5. The negative financial, social and environmental impacts resulting from its closure should be repaired by re-opening of Hall Primary School.
6. To the extent that a decision to close Hall Primary School required authentic and effective consultation with those affected, that decision should be re-visited.
7. That the Committee recommends the re-opening of Hall Primary School, consistent with the strongly held view across the community that its closure was a mistake, and great benefits would flow – to the Hall and district community, and to the ACT school system - from its re-opening.

1. The ACT Government's *Towards 2020* policy including:

1.1 Demographic factors influencing regional planning in the delivery of educational services;

One of the most problematic aspects of the Towards 2020 proposal with respect to Hall Primary was its blinkered perspective on the boundary with NSW.

The complex cross boundary issues of water, health services, secondary education, primary education, fire management, policing, environmental protection and so on are a reality of living in the ACT, yet the Towards 2020 proposal, subsequent “consultations” and policy would not acknowledge the relationship between Hall and Hall district.

Hall was established as a community long before the ACT was created. It services a large district, most of which falls within NSW. Before closure the Primary School was thriving, with 128 students, of whom 82 were from NSW (2006 figures). The majority of those NSW students have parents

working in the ACT. These are people who live in an area which has always seen Hall as the local community centre, and who continue to make a contribution to the development of the ACT.

The cross border issues proved a sticking point in the ‘consultations’. In our submission at the time, we suggested that the ACT should consider, for example the economic and social benefits to the ACT of commuters from Spring Range Road, Wallaroo Road and Murrumbateman into the nation’s capital city for work purposes, making use of conveniently located Hall Primary School.

This position was ignored. Neither was there consideration of the growing population on the rural fringe of the ACT that continues to make Hall Primary viable. The Yass Valley is the sixth biggest growth area in NSW, with population growth of 2.5% between 2001 and 2007¹. The demographic oversight of arbitrarily setting a Project Enrolment Area for Hall Primary that included only the village of Hall is a major flaw in the argument for closing Hall Primary. Ignoring the greater Hall district is unfair and unreasonable, and has simply resulted in NSW students now attending different ACT schools.

Recommendations

1. Broaden the Towards 2020 treatment of a Priority Enrolment Area for Hall village to consider the increasing population of Hall and district in revisiting the decision to close Hall Primary School
2. The ACT government pursue a cooperative arrangement with NSW in reopening Hall Primary School

1.2 Configuration of school environments and educational outcomes;

Hall Primary School offered families a small, rural, community-based school for preschool and primary education. It had ‘an exemplary and enviable record of family and community support’² and was essential to maintaining socially and economically, a vibrant, environmentally sustainable local community.

Research has demonstrated the ‘diseconomies of scale’ in closing small rural schools elsewhere; there is overwhelming evidence that small schools are beneficial for children, being cost effective and value adding. The long-term costs to society are evident with a larger school model in higher incidence of bullying, violence and parent and student alienation. Long-term financial costs such as added tiers of administration, additional maintenance, administration staff and transport costs, lend weight to the argument for retaining small schools.

Other research demonstrates that children in smaller schools, such as Hall are more academically successful than those in larger schools and are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities, also linked to academic success. We argue that the research points to academic, social and emotional benefits for students in small schools.

Hall Primary was a small school, embedded in the community. It prided itself on nurturing connections between teachers, parents, students and community where individuals knew, shared with and cared for each other. It attracted children from families outside of Hall and district who believed in the philosophy of a small rural school and sought that for their children.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that experts may be found in support of almost any view about school size. While we might argue long and hard over the benefits of a small, rural community school, the heart of the issue is one of choice. Parents should be able to choose the type of education they feel is best for their children, including the size of the school.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics

² *Hall Public School 1911 to 2011 and Beyond*- Submission to the ‘Towards 2020 Taskforce’

There being only two villages in the ACT, the choice offered through their small rural schools was an asset to the whole of the ACT education system. Those sending their children to these schools were exercising their right to choose. They were seeking all the advantages of a small rural school above sometimes less facilities in other aspects.

The notion that the whole community and not just Hall benefitted from Hall Primary School was demonstrated in a 4000-strong petition in support of keeping historic Hall Primary open, which was tabled in the Assembly (copy available to the inquiry). As far as we know, no response has been made to this monumental evidence of support.

Recommendations

3. To restore the principle of choice for parents when it comes to size of school
4. To enrich the ACT education system by re-opening the small rural primary schools at Hall and Tharwa

2. The impact of school consolidation and closures with a focus on:

2.1 Community experiences and attitudes;

The inadequacy of the consultation process and subsequent summary closure of Hall Primary School left the community, including parents of children attending Hall Primary School, feeling disempowered and disenfranchised.

It also left affected children disillusioned about the democratic process and the relevance of the ACT government; a seriously regrettable effect of the school closure for our future generation. Many parents involved in the ‘consultations’ spent many hours away from their children during the six month effort to keep Hall Primary open – an estimated 5,000 person hours in community meetings, at protest meetings, researching and drafting materials. The announcement of the school closure was a serious shock to everyone, who could not believe that the ACT Government was truly going ahead with such an unjustified decision. But worse still, when our children asked “why” we really couldn’t provide an answer as so little had been provided to us.

The process seriously undermined community confidence in the democratic process in the ACT, reflected in the election results in 2008. Restoring community confidence will be measured by the degree to which the government takes seriously and acts on the findings from this inquiry.

2.3 Financial, social and environmental impacts.

The school-community relationship is multi-faceted: schools have positive economic and social impacts, provide a resource for community development and offer a delivery point for social services³. Our repeated request for a full financial and social analysis of the impact of closure of Hall Primary School before any decision was taken to close it, was ignored. Social impacts in particular were not addressed in Minister Barr’s Notice of Decision, 15 January 2007. We are now living through the consequences of the closure.

Financial

³ *What Difference do Local Schools Make?* A Literature Review and Bibliography Prepared for Annenberg Rural Challenge Policy Program by Priscilla Salant, Department of Agricultural Economics Washington State University, Pullman, Washington and Anita Waller, Ephrata, Washington September 25, 1998

With less through traffic, and fewer people coming to the village, local businesses have suffered and are less able to expand. There is also less reason for new businesses to locate in Hall without a school to attract them.

Businesses interviewed in March 2009 report varying degrees of downturn related to the Hall Primary School closure - coming on the back of the local medical practice closing. Hall General Store and Post Office reports not only reduced turnover but also reduced growth, preventing capital investment and expansion. The Service Station also has a long history in the district and reports the unexpected school closure severely affected petrol sales and made it difficult to keep or attract staff (parents of children at the school). The Hall Antique Shop reports decreased turnover. The Wood Duck Inn reports annual growth patterns are down and decisions on future capital investment have been curtailed.

The current climate, with prolonged drought and global economic recession, places the future of small business in the heritage listed precinct of Hall village in jeopardy. Re-opening the Primary School at Hall would boost local business confidence and encourage local investment.

Social

The closing of Hall Primary School has had a significant impact on the Hall community. The school was the centre of the community, and as such, drew residents of Hall village, the surrounding rural farms and nearby suburbs together. Community events⁴ revolved around the school and it was school community members who often took on community leadership roles. Families grew up together, children all knew each other and the community thrived.

Something has died with the closure. It's harder to draw the community together, it's more difficult to get engagement and the neighbourliness of Hall has suffered. At a time when communities want to draw together and to feel a sense of belonging the school is not there to act as the catalyst. Social support networks are particularly important in a semi rural and rural environment such as Hall district where opportunities for social contact are less than in the urban environment. It is the wider community (and the government that represents it) that will suffer if communities become disengaged and alienated.

Hall Primary School provided a good all-round education. Its graduates have gone on to many different careers bringing with them the sense of community developed at Hall Primary. They also have friends for life.

Environmental

Increased travel times for students, either by bus or by private vehicle will have had inevitable environmental consequences. Students from Hall village who previously walked to school are now catching a bus or being driven to Lyneham, Marribyrnong etc. Students from NSW are now travelling much further distances to school.

The opportunity for environmental education in a rural area has been lost. The Hall Primary Junior Landcare Group, very active since 1990, is gone, along with its environmental projects in Hall village and district. Such work in a rural area helped develop a practical respect and understanding of the environment among students.

Recommendation

5. The negative financial, social and environmental impacts resulting from its closure should be repaired by re-opening of Hall Primary School.

3. Community responses, including;

⁴ Examples are spelled out in our original submission in response to the ACT Government's Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools Proposal, Village of Hall and District Progress Association, November 2006

3.1 Review of the consultation process, including how public submissions were considered and incorporated into the final reform package

There was no consultation on 'Towards 2020' prior to its release on 6 June 2006. In our view this was the most fundamental of errors in the consultation process (and a view shared by Labor MLA Wayne Berry at the time). The document had every appearance of a *fait accompli* rather than a proposal for genuine discussion.

Thereafter the focus was on particular schools earmarked for closure rather than a community vision for the ACT education system. Unable to pin down the government on their particular criteria for choosing certain schools for closure it became very difficult to engage in a constructive dialogue. Add to this the lack of transparency, contradictory information and withholding of vital information, such as the Costello Report, and the community grew increasingly discouraged and disenfranchised around what clearly was a foregone conclusion.

Some examples of our frustration with the consultation process follow:

Trying to find out the criteria for school closure

Early in the process we were led to understand that the cost of maintaining and renovating the school buildings was one of two reasons that Hall was targeted for closure. (Minister Barr, ABC Stateline, 9 June 2006)

The cost of maintaining the school buildings was eventually revealed to be \$143,800 over the five year period 2004-09. Two of those years had already expired and the amount is relatively tiny - particularly when set against funds allocated for refurbishment of the school site at Hall - \$1,451,760. Neatly, some ten times more. .

The cost of maintaining the buildings clearly was not an issue.

This example illustrates a frustration experienced through the consultation period, when we were unable to pin down what criteria were being used to target Hall for closure and therefore felt alienated from the consultations.

NSW students at Hall Primary

The second reason given by Minister Barr on ABC's Stateline was to do with NSW childrens' education at Hall⁵. The Commonwealth Grants Commission system for cross-border compensation provides an estimated \$6,800 per student for NSW school students attending ACT government primary schools. Throughout the 'consultation' period the apparent shortfall in this amount was raised as a reason to close Hall Primary (where 82 of the 128 students were from NSW).

We noted that the ACT Government had not viewed the amount per child received through the Grants Commission as an issue prior to mid 2006. While the ACT government had made representations to the Grants Commission on other issues, such as health, it had not done so for primary education.

We repeatedly emphasised that those NSW children would continue to be educated within the ACT, as is the case. The fact that Hall Primary had a relatively high proportion of NSW students (as does for example Campbell High School) was neither here nor there when it came to the need for the ACT Government to renegotiate the cross border arrangements. We even wrote to the NSW Government to try and gain their support.

⁵ In fact at that time, Minister Barr seemed oblivious to the Commonwealth Grants Commission system for cross-border compensation for government schools education when he stated that NSW does not contribute to the cost of educating their children at Hall.

It turned out in the end that inadequacy of cross-border compensation was not part of the reason for closing Hall Primary (Notice of Decision, Andrew Barr, 15 January 2007).

Defining the "Priority Enrolment Area"

Towards 2020 sets a disingenuous boundary for Hall Primary's Priority Enrolment Area, encompassing just the 120 houses in the village of Hall. The Notice of Decision argues that 'only 43%' of parents from within the village chose to send their children to Hall Primary. While it is true that around half of the children actually in the village went to Hall Primary that particular year (with only about a dozen primary age children living in the village at the time the use of a percentage is spurious), but this argument totally ignored the main case presented throughout the 'consultations' and in our 13 page submission in November 2006 that:

- the school served the district, most of which falls outside the ACT defined PEA.
- the school attracted people from outside the PEA because it offered choice for families wanting the small, rural, community option for educating their children.

Projected enrolments

Later in the process, Minister Barr said that Hall was not an expensive school, although trying to get accurate figures, particularly details around projected enrolments, proved impossible.

The Towards 2020 proposal includes a projected enrolment figure for Hall Primary of 110 children. The average school enrolment figure based on census figures over the previous twelve years at Hall Primary School was 142 children (at a reasonably steady level). The latest Department of Education projections⁶ available on their website at the time that Towards 2020 was released predicted a steady annual enrolment figures of 140 children at Hall Primary School for the years 2007, 2008 and 2009. Undisputed school census figures show that actual enrolments at Hall Primary were increasing – from 118 in 2005 to 128 in 2006.

The Department was unable to give details about why they revised their July 2004 projected enrolments of 140 children to 110 in Towards 2020⁷. We do not believe there was any basis to support this sudden 20% reduction in projected enrolments. Evidence was to the contrary, for example the population of the Yass Valley grew 2.5% in the period 2001-07⁸.

Financial information

Costs of education at Hall Primary were cited as \$10,937 per child (based on the lowest enrolment figure in the last twelve years⁹ – 118 in 2005), compared to an ACT average of \$9,570. If we use the Department's original projected enrolment figure of 140 instead of the 2005 figure of 118, the cost of educating a child at Hall Primary would fall from \$10,937 to \$9,218, well below the ACT average. Even if we use the *actual* enrolment of 128 children, the cost per child reduces to \$10,082. We dispute the cost per child figures because they are based on Hall Primary's lowest enrolment year.

More importantly we dispute the projected savings of \$1,933,000 between 2007-10. The government has already contracted an indicative \$1.4 million for refurbishment of the site¹⁰. The cost per student at Hall Primary School is roughly the same as at other ACT schools. The ACT government remains responsible for future site maintenance and the site will remain in government ownership. We do not see how any major savings could have resulted to the government from the school closure while former students are educated elsewhere in the ACT system. Moreover the federal government's recent

⁶ "Projected enrolments 2005 to 2009", July 2004

⁷ It was only after questions were asked, that in August 2006 the July 2004 document was replaced on the Education Department's website with a new document (dated July 2005) "Projected enrolments 2006 to 2010", which happens to match the Towards 2020 Proposal figure of 110 for projected enrolments.

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics

⁹ ACT Government and Non Government School Enrolments, February 1995 to 2006

¹⁰ 2008 Hindmarsh contract, Project No 2008 0411

offer to fund school buildings would have provided an opportunity for a “one’off” upgrade to the school.

We would like this inquiry to establish whether the reduction in projected enrolment figures for Hall Primary from 140 to 110 was reasonable. We would like the inquiry to establish the actual cost savings to the ACT government in closing Hall Primary School. We would also like the inquiry to make public the Costello Report.

Recommendation

6. To the extent that a decision to close Hall Primary School required authentic and effective consultation with those affected, that decision should be re-visited.

3.2 Views on the *Education Amendment Bill 2008*;

We understand the Bill looks at improving the consultation process if a school closure is being considered.

Given the experience of the Hall community with the consultation process surrounding the closure of Hall Primary School, it is essential that such changes be made. The process initially held out hope to the ACT community that a rational, open and logical process would be used to determine if the community could afford all the schools that then existed. To raise expectations of legitimate consultation, then to dash such hopes with the farce that followed, was the worst of all outcomes. The experience has left a scar that will linger for many years with those who were involved, both the students and the parents, particularly those who committed time and effort to the consultation process. This is underlined by the fact that **the Hall community are still unaware of exactly why the school was closed.**

We commend the Education Amendment Bill 2008 as an attempt to make sure such a process is not repeated. If the Education Amendment Bill 2008 and the inquiry can achieve “open, equitable, respectful and transparent” consultation then they have the full support of the Hall community.

3.3 Interest expressed by school communities to re-open schools listed for closure;

The financial argument.

The Government has argued that schools were not closed for financial reasons. Nevertheless closures were apparently triggered by the ‘Costello report’ and claims have been made about substantial savings to the ACT budget. It was strongly argued that the number of classroom seats available greatly exceeded the number of students to sit on them – ‘18,000 empty desks’.

Hall and Tharwa combined account for, if anything, a trivial saving in the context of the overall ACT budget. All the ‘under-funded’ students from NSW continue to use ACT schools – but have to be transported further to get to them, entailing additional costs of roads and transport. Teachers go with the students so savings on staffing are marginal.

The ‘excess’ school seats in Gungahlin will be easily be taken up in this fast growing satellite city, so that before too long, there will again be a need to create additional places. At that point – one suspects not at all far off – a distinctive small rural school in Hall for 140 or so students might be viewed as a great asset.

It is now a matter of history that within months of the school closure decisions the government announced a ‘better than expected’ interim net operating surplus for 2006-7 of \$117 million.

Any savings achieved in the case of Hall and Tharwa should be viewed against both the overall budget and the major social costs to these communities.

The demographic argument

The Hall community was bemused that the Purdon consultation collected and presented to us demographic data pertaining only to Hall village – total population around 300. The relevant geographic context includes the area out to Murrumbateman, down to the Murrumbidgee, and out towards Gundaroo. Development continues in this ‘over the border’ zone, including rising numbers of young families. There is no reason why this trend will not continue. We understand that the NSW government currently has no intention of providing a primary school in Murrumbateman.

The ACT Government seems to have been unable to perceive Hall as a **district** centre, and come to terms with the coordination required with the NSW government in order to meet the needs of both ACT and NSW children for pre-school and primary education.

The educational argument

Much has been made of the views of a particular academic thesis concerning optimum numbers for a primary school. Educationalists do not differ from economists in this respect; an expert may be found to bolster any view about school size.

This being so, the over-riding principle has been for some time that an education system should seek to provide **choice** – and that having options is a higher order value than every child going to a school of a prescribed size. In our somewhat monochrome system, the small rural village schools of Hall and Tharwa represent a distinct alternative. Those favouring them are entitled to the view that lack of certain facilities is more than compensated for by the socio-cultural advantages of a small rural school. Technology can now fill some of the possible ‘lacks’, and Canberra allows quick and easy access to facilities that can only be found elsewhere.

The reduction of choice within the education system was a mistake which should be rectified – for the benefit not just of Hall and Tharwa – but for the system as a whole.

The social argument

We have the impression that Canberra – the post-war ‘garden city’ – likes the idea of having a couple of ‘villages’ within its borders. Hall has a ‘main street’, a traditional country settlement grid layout, some early buildings, aboriginal heritage, and connections with the Canberra Show and the National Sheep Dog Trials. Many thousands come to Hall once a month for the Hall Markets.

For a hundred years it also had at its heart a small rural school, which was established when the Hall and District Progress Association lobbied the NSW government in the early 1900’s. Four or five generations of Hall and district families have been schooled in the village, and many of their descendants are still living in the vicinity. Together with the shop and post office, the school has been the great community ‘connector’ – bringing families together as parents, being a major focus of community events and activities, and facilitating communication about anything and everything of importance and interest.

The original 1911 school, replete with all the furniture and teaching materials of those early years, nestles in the middle of the present school buildings. The whole is enclosed by an extensive stand of trees planted by the children in 1915. The School site as a whole is listed in the ‘Schedule of specific requirements applied to individual historic buildings’ in the Heritage listing of the Hall Village precinct. This welcome protection – not a feature of other closed schools - seriously constrains the potential for uses other than a school.

This place has been integral to the lives of Hall and its people. Government officials have treated it as a unit of educational production, surplus to requirements. Its closure supposedly helps balance aggregate ‘bums’ and seats in the ACT education system.

Our strong impression is that the social consequences of closing Hall Primary school were not given any serious thought at all. This was not part of the calculus. Passionate arguments from the local community appear not to have made any impression.

Conclusion

The school and its fine site are intact. Given that the site is to serve the community, it is our strong conclusion that its best use is as a school. Every consultation with the Hall and district community (and we have organised many) rediscovers that the preferred use for the site is – a school. At least one non-government school provider is very interested in opening a Hall school. The Wallaroo – Spring Range - Murrumbateman area has a growing population. Some 600 children are bussed through Hall every school day on their way to some other school. Local businesses suffer the loss of student, school staff and parental custom.

Re-opening Hall Primary would be a very small cost to government, but a huge benefit to the community. This is a compelling equation.

We are a longstanding (some 105 years) representative body within the community, with a history of working well with the ACT Government on the unique issues facing Hall. We commit to working closely with the Government to make sure the unique features of the school are maximized in the event the school is re-opened.

Recommendations

7. That the Committee recommends the re-opening of Hall Primary School, consistent with the strongly held view across the community that its closure was a mistake, and great benefits would flow – to the Hall and district community, and to the ACT school system - from its re-opening.

[While we would like to see Hall Primary School reopened as a K to year 6 public primary school, complementing the existing preschool, alternatives could include:

- a P to year 3 or 4 school
- the school operating as a campus of the Gold Creek School
- a private or community school]

Village of Hall and District Progress Association
March 2009