

Submission  
No 25

## INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Partially Confidential

Submission regarding the role of the principal in school closures

There are a lot of misconceptions about small schools and school closures. The general view is that school closures happen to one-teacher schools. That is partly true, but the DEC's enrolment profile of all schools is illuminating here. Looking at the enrolments of each school over the past four years it is possible to see which schools are at risk and in decline. It is even possible to predict which are due to close within the next year. One of the most striking patterns is the tendency of 2-teacher (P5) schools to have a catastrophic fall in enrolments and then close or come under review as a school with fewer than 10 enrolments while they are still technically classified as a p5. (A one-teacher school is a p6) in fact the 2-teacher school seems far more at risk than the stable one-teacher school with low, but fairly steady enrolments. The major reason for this is that fluctuations in enrolments will not affect the number of teachers at a one-teacher school, whereas a fairly minor fluctuation in a two-teacher school can result in the loss of a teacher. This has a big impact on the organisation of the school and tends to affect parent confidence. Pearces Creek School went from a two-teacher school in 2007 to a one-teacher school in 2008 and a school with one child and subsequent closure in 2009.

Eraring School went from 35 students in 2013 to 11 in 2014 and closed that year. Numeralla school went from 33 to 17 to 8 at the beginning of this year and has now 2 pupils enrolled. There are others, but these are illustrative. Bellata has declined in numbers in the past two years and became a one-teacher school in 2014

Conversations with parents at these schools are illuminating. Eraring school has been slated for closure more than once, presumably because its anomalous position as a consistently small school in a hugely growing area. For many years it consistently maintained an enrolment of around 36, which is a healthy size, and had an excellent reputation. It did not grow, however, which in schools of that size makes them a target for the DEC. More than a decade ago an attempt was made at closure. The community rallied, and the SED (School Education Director, now known as Director Public Schools, Swansea network) at the time was one of those who opposed closure. That is an indication of how much things have changed and how much the process of closure has tightened up and become far more rigidly controlled how much more inflexible and powerful the DEC has become. At present it would not be possible for a SED to oppose a school closure. In 2012 the Eraring principal retired. [REDACTED] was appointed. [REDACTED] had been an assistant principal, which I believe is the same level as a p6 principal. As Eraring was a p5, which is larger, this may have been a promotion. [REDACTED] was the type of principal known in vulgar parlance as "a closer." sometimes this is a principal appointed to oversee closure, sometimes it is a principal who makes closure possible. Eraring was expecting to lose 7 children from year 6 at the end of 2012. The DEC records 35 children there at census date 2013. I have been told that parents attempted to enrol kindergarten children but [REDACTED] would not accept enrolments thereafter, and in 2014 at census date there were 11 enrolments and the school

closed that year. There is bad feeling in the community about the DEC's actions.

“ERARING Public School has closed its doors after 90 years. A Department of Education and Communities spokesperson said the school of four students closed on Friday December 19 because it had no enrolments for next year.

“The DEC spokesperson said the community was consulted late last year and throughout 2014 about the school's declining enrolments. By term four this year, parents of three students had chosen to enrol them in government primary schools next year.

“The fourth student will start high school next year.”

This excerpt from the Newcastle Herald illustrates perfectly the divide between the blanket statements made by the DEC and the reality of what happened. [REDACTED] offended some parents, convinced others that their children would be better off elsewhere, convinced some that they had no hope of saving the school, and refused to accept enrolments. “Declining enrolments” indeed: the school was annihilated. The DEC spokesperson, probably [REDACTED], put a different spin on things. There are some bitter people in the community, but it is even worse that there are some people who believe that the school was doomed by circumstances, it really was a genuine school of four students, and it could not survive. [REDACTED], having doomed the school, was posted to Argenton School in term 3 of 2014. This school had had a temporary principal from 2012. The school had fallen from 42 to 30 students, and was therefore in a vulnerable position. Under [REDACTED] enrolments declined rapidly to 23 in 2015, falling below the magic 2 teacher level. I would expect the school to close this year. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] may be promoted, or, being an expert closer, may move on to close more schools.

Both Eraring and Argenton cannot be fitted into the usual profile of small country schools. Both are in Lake Macquarie, a hugely populous area on the edge of Newcastle, though Eraring is semi-rural. Both are located in the suburban but leafy village-like groupings so characteristic of Newcastle-Lake Macquarie. For many years there was strong community cohesion in these suburbs, even in the heart of Newcastle. These community bonds have been severed in many suburbs now because of development, population growth and the decline of institutions such as churches, community service organisations and locally owned businesses. Nonetheless a surprising number of suburbs still have defined boundaries and stable, relatively small - though not tiny - schools. It appears that schools of modest though functional size which remain stable as to enrolments are DEC targets.

The situation at Pearce's Creek is dealt with in another submission and has other issues. Nonetheless it is worth pointing out that the principal, [REDACTED], is another type of closer. [REDACTED] was appointed to a school which had an enrolment close to the 3-teacher level. In about 4 years the school had closed. Parents do not think that [REDACTED] was put there to close the school initially. There are certain people who are perhaps unsuited to being principals, or unsuited to particular schools or groups of people. The resulting conflict is not deliberate, but does result in damage to the school. Sometimes such people are sent in to country schools in particular as country schools are often hard-to-staff, and teachers who have not proven to be very successful may be placed in these schools because they cannot compete for more popular areas. At times they are even sent to rural schools as a form of punishment. Country schools are sometimes unfortunate in their staff as they are often staffed by people who are doing time to accrue transfer points towards a move to the area of their choice. Be that as it may, the principal at Pearce's Creek reduced the enrolments at the school to below the magic 2-teacher number. The DEC was aware of the problems at the school, as formal complaints were made by parents and staff. It is the SED's role to manage such situations, but the principal was never disciplined and the problems were not resolved. Once the school's enrolments had declined and the teacher had been lost, more parents took children away. The principal at that stage seems to have become a more active "closer" and definitely been "on side" in the school closure. The DEC seems to have allowed the problems at the school to take their course, exploited the resulting discontent, and then moved in at the appropriate time to finish the school off. Although they did not direct the principal to alienate parents, they chose to allow [REDACTED] to continue when it became apparent that [REDACTED] was doing so. They may have been aware of [REDACTED] reputation at previous schools and expected the result: hard to say. It is very unfortunate for the children who suffered through this, as well as for community cohesion. [REDACTED] apparently went on to a school of similar size and created similar problems, but I am not aware that the school closed, as I hear anecdotally that [REDACTED] was moved on. These people deserved better. It is also illustrative of the attitude of the DEC to parents and children, particularly, but obviously not confined to, rural residents.

A similar picture emerges at Numeralla, which may have had the same type of "closer." The principal arrived in term 2 of 2012. By 2014 February census date enrolments had fallen to 17, and a teacher had been lost. Most students had gone to Cooma, 20 kms distant. Parents are not prepared to state that the dissension surrounding the principal was [REDACTED] fault or was deliberately provoked, or that [REDACTED] posting to the school was intended to bring about a reduction in numbers, but it is certain that the DEC took full advantage of the decline. Whatever [REDACTED] role in the previous two years, it is plain that the permanent principal was not a sufficiently committed or expert closer to finish the school off, and a thoroughly ruthless closer was moved in for 2015. The permanent principal was moved - according to the DEC, to fill a temporary vacancy, thereby creating a temporary vacancy at [REDACTED] own school, and who is to say that the DEC is not so illogical that this may have seemed like a sane idea to them? - and a relieving principal appointed. Numbers at census date 2015 were 8, and at the time of writing had

fallen to 2. Yesterday the consultative committee appointed to review educational provision at Numeralla held its first meeting, and the 2 remaining families believed that it was likely to recommend immediate closure. The relieving principal had set about dismantling the school upon arrival, using a mixture of offensiveness and persuasion. Parents were quite certain about [REDACTED] role, which [REDACTED] stated openly. Anecdotally I have heard that [REDACTED] had previously closed other schools.

Again, at Byabarra, the principal was an inadvertent closer, but the DEC was very quick to exploit the situation. In 2004 or 2005 a principal was appointed, and in parents' words "did a lot of damage." Numbers fell, as many parents sent children in to Wauchope, 21 kms distant. It is not likely that the principal deliberately caused the exodus, but complaints about [REDACTED] fell on deaf ears. The DEC's response was to announce the closure of Byabarra School. It is illustrative of the difference between school closures even as far back as 2005 and now, when the "protocols" have limited the options for schools, that the DEC agreed to postpone closure of Byabarra school for six years until all enrolled pupils had moved to high school. In the ensuing years new enrolments were permitted, which led to a rather anomalous situation as enrolments did not decline. The DEC had become less flexible in the interim, and although the school was not declining the closure was duly carried out. A temporary principal oversaw the closure, as is usual.

Bellata school is in a slightly different situation. Being some 50 km from both Narrabri and Moree it is not an obvious candidate for closure. The principal has presided over a decline in enrolments from 30 to 21. The second teacher was moved in 2014. Parents are variously concerned about the decline in enrolments, and the removal without notice of the second teacher. The DEC apparently promised that consultation would take place before the teacher was removed, but this did not happen. The teacher was simply withdrawn without notice. Communication about the matter was particularly poor, with inconsistent information from the principal and the DEC. It seems that the subject may have been the principal's discretion to spend a casual staffing entitlement on a second teacher, but that communication was unclear. I believe that there are now 2 teachers 3 days per week through a variety of funding sources. Parents feel that they are not threatened with closure as yet, given that the school is quite a long distance from other schools. However, I have spoken to a parent whose children do not go to the school, and her concerns echo those of Numeralla and Byabarra and Pearce's Creek. She felt that the principal was uncaring, that some children were permitted to be disruptive and uncontrolled, and that the principal was indifferent as to whether new enrolments were obtained. One parent recalled that a special needs child was withdrawn from the school and enrolled in special unit in Narrabri on advice from the principal that more funding for necessary facilities would be available there and the funding was not available at Bellata. This is not actually true, as disability funding is tailored to the child, but it is a story I have heard from a number of people in such situations. The pattern of declining enrolments due to a principal who is probably either not up to standard or the wrong person for the job is also similar to these schools. Whether the school's considerable distance from other schools will be sufficient to save it or whether moves

will be made to finish the school off remains to be seen, but in either case it is plain that rural schools get a poor deal from the DEC. Declining enrolments which are stated to be due to problems with the principal warrant action on the DEC's part, especially as parents in this area have very little choice about schools. It is unsatisfactory that the DEC should stand by and wait to see if the parents can outlast the damage done by the principal or whether the school will fail. Some parents are prepared to drive 10 km and put their children on the bus to Narrabri, but they should not have to do this. Rural parents and children deserve better.

A parent at Wombat public school noted the DEC's insensitivity to the influence principals have in small schools and the instability they can cause. She cited the training days and meetings which teaching principals undertake and the DEC's lack of recognition that these can cause disruption to the classes such principals normally teach. No attempt is ever made to fit them in with principals' normal admin days. she said that the DEC does not take into account the individuality of schools or that the people within them are humans with individual needs and wants. she also said that the DEC did not understand that small rural schools are a part of their community and form an important part of community ties, and that this in turn has an effect on the children and their sense of contributing or belonging to the community

Williamtown School near Raymond Terrace is again in a slightly different category. Although it is in a rural area it is near Port Stephens and areas of very high population. Following withdrawal of personnel from the residences at the nearby RAAF base the school's numbers declined from a peak of 200. At the time it was placed into recess it was a p5 school. The school required work to soundproof it against the noise of the RAAF planes, and its historic buildings required considerable maintenance. However, the DEC's penchant for doing ill by stealth was very much to the fore. The school's enrolments were not declining, but over a period of time the DEC persuaded parents to move their children. The relieving principal remained neutral, but the school was slowly dismantled. Parents were persuaded to move their children, parents with special needs children were persuaded that they were better off elsewhere, and once "consultation" began on the school and rumours began to circulate the enrolments declined. The school was not officially closed, simply put into recess once enrolments were sufficiently low. Parents say that the DEC just "chipped away" at parents until few were left. The process was unpleasant, with uncertainty and a certain amount of distress and dissension arising among those loyal to the school and those seen as deserters.

These schools are illustrative of certain patterns of closure. The DEC makes public statements about how small the schools are and the implication is that this was a natural progression, but this is often deliberately dishonest. Schools may have been thriving a very short time before closure, and may still be technically p5 schools at the time of closure. There may have been one or two types of closer at work on the schools: almost invariably there have been one or two staff changes in a relatively

short time. The inadvertent closer may be an abrasive or unsuitable principal whose influence may reduce enrolment numbers. This principal may have been placed there deliberately or quite by accident. As numbers fall and complaints mount, the DEC does nothing to address the problems. When the school's numbers have fallen sufficiently consultation may occur or rumours and uncertainty may already be rife, in which case numbers tumble. The DEC may then put in an efficient closer, who dismantles the school and moves on, sometimes to close again. If consultation and dismantling occur, distress and rancour and frustration and uncertainty among parents leaves a legacy of bitterness.

### **Really small schools**

I am addressing the experience of actual p6 schools here rather than two-teacher schools which have been reduced in numbers. One-teacher schools are less popular than they once were and are vulnerable to many things, not least of which is the DEC's determination to wipe them out. The DEC has always disapproved of one-teacher schools. In the 1970s a huge drive was made to wipe them out as the DEC, like the railways, discovered road transport. Railway lines all over the state disappeared, along with small schools. In some small towns where both of these were terminated, like Neilrex and Merrygoen, the town itself died at the hands of its own state government. In the triangle roughly formed by Gresford, Dungong and Paterson 15 schools were closed. Martins Creek and Wollombi survived, oddly.

In one teacher schools various direct methods are used to undermine enrolments and community confidence. Sometimes there is a very personal interest by the local SED in getting rid of schools. In the case of Wollombi I do not know the history, though I know it had survived possible closure more than once due to a strong community, but I do know that Frank Potter was personally involved from the start. Frank Potter maintains an "under-10 list" of school enrolments and acts on it. He is involved in the minutest details of school closures. I believe that Frank Potter does not tolerate resistance to his authority. He does not discriminate between employees of the DEC, employees of other organisations, parents or even disabled children in this regard. I believe his abnormal interest in Martins Creek and Wollombi and in everything to do with [REDACTED] was a result of the fact that they had opposed authority in the past, were doing so again, and, in the case of [REDACTED], were an obstacle to Frank Potter's power and were perceived by some as being a valid obstacle. In the usual manner of the DEC the Wollombi principal was treated disrespectfully and dishonestly represented as participating in legitimate processes when [REDACTED] did not. On 1 November 2013 at a meeting between parents and the DEC's [REDACTED], [REDACTED] informed parents that Step 1 of the protocols had happened on 29 October and their principal had discussed with him the options for future educational provision at the school. This had not happened and the principal, in the attached email, makes it clear that [REDACTED] does not appreciate being misrepresented and Step 1 had never happened.

Frank Potter is displeased, and waffles dishonestly about [REDACTED] having had that discussion several times - despite the point at issue being the discussion of the 29th, the official first step of the consultation process, which [REDACTED] says never took place.

Just to show how honest and efficient the DEC is in adhering to the protocols and everything else, the document "approval to consult locally" which is necessary before implementing the protocols, dated and signed by Greg Prior on 23 October, states that the principal and [REDACTED] met on 14 October, and in line with current protocols the relieving director and the principal discussed options for the future delivery of education at Wollombi public School. In light of the current enrolments and future anticipated enrolments the relieving director and the principal have commenced discussions around the future viability of the school.

So on 23 October Greg Prior had approved a document which contained a complete fabrication. No meeting of any sort had taken place at all on 14 October, but what the hell. Talking with parents on 1 November 2013, just to cover his tracks, [REDACTED] changed the date to 29 October when he had at least been present at the school, but no such discussion had actually taken place, and still hasn't! The principal's angry protests at these lies does not please Mr Potter. Nor do the insubordinate parents who will have a meeting about the school for reasons with which Mr Potter has given no approval! One of the comic aspects of this correspondence is that Mr Potter's outrage is expressed at meetings which will be - and he knows this ahead of time and without being present - "short on fact!" Fine words from someone who condones statements which state that meetings took place which did not take place, on dates on which they did not take place, at which things were discussed which were not discussed. And then he says, oh, well, I thought someone had discussed something with you some time, maybe even [REDACTED], so what does it matter if I say it was [REDACTED] and alter dates to suit? Let us not get fixated on details!

Did [REDACTED], principal Wollombi, know about the arrangements that were made while [REDACTED] was on leave on 20 August 2013? [REDACTED] had not indicated that [REDACTED] was leaving Wollombi, but the DEC was going to offer [REDACTED] a job at Weston school - and there is no question that [REDACTED] will accept it! Mind you, [REDACTED] doesn't know that yet, but we have ways! Note [REDACTED] is asking Frank Potter whether to advise staffing that the school will not be open in 2014, will have a temporary principal or a substantive one? Frank is to decide that on the spot, without any discussion, and [REDACTED] is sure that he can do so. Wasn't that a matter that was supposed to be decided after extensive community consultation, on the basis of rational, considered and responsible decision making? Or maybe on the basis of what Frank decides when he's settling down to read his paper on the train, because [REDACTED] needs an answer for staffing pronto? And when he decides, what role does the consultation process have since Frank has already got it all stitched up? Frank does not think the "emotive imminent closure" propaganda from the parents is nice at all, but he is already giving the principal the boot so that if he thinks he can

get away with it the closure certainly will be imminent, and he'll ring up and let [REDACTED] know - or otherwise perhaps imminent but a bit less so? [REDACTED]

As it happened the new principal was appointed temporarily and was a typical closer. [REDACTED] was hostile, victimised the child of the parents trying in good faith to secure the future of their beloved and effective school, and employed casuals up to 3 days a week in order to work on the school's "finances." There would have been very little casual allocation left at that rate, and it is hard to imagine how a principal of a school containing 6 children could need 4 admin days a week ([REDACTED] gets one admin day as an entitlement) to work on its finances. If the Martins Creek principal had avoided [REDACTED] teaching duties in such a manner I can imagine what would have happened. The parents complained - and guess what, [REDACTED] was found by the DeC to have been without fault. As are they all when they are doing Frank Potter's bidding.

This is even more ironic as [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] in their famous "Is the principal on-side?" email about the Martins Creek principal, express wide-eyed wonder at when [REDACTED] actually taught, given that there were so many specialist teachers and extra support in the school. [REDACTED] opined that [REDACTED] didn't teach much - but at no time did [REDACTED] and the other DEC personnel ever admit that if there were so many extras at Martins Creek as to do the principal out of a job, evidently "a wide range of staff and expertise" was available at Martins Creek. No, they were sure there was more elsewhere. This may be a lack of logic, or it may be ill-natured and vicious dishonesty. The jury is still out - maybe.

Carcoar had a fairly typical experience with the DEC moving a loyal, effective principal in order to close a school. Perhaps there is a quota to fill, as there was no problem with the school, which was growing. The principal [REDACTED] had been a teacher at the school and had been made temporary principal. In [REDACTED] seven years in the role the school had begun to grow, and more importantly, while fluctuating, had not declined. The DEC perhaps ran out of patience with a school which had had a temporary principal for so long because it had been expected to die a natural death. At the end of 2014 the principal was removed, and the principal from Corinella, fresh from having closed that school, was appointed. The community reacted, having finally secured a significant increase in enrolments for the following year. The SED, [REDACTED], stated that the transfer was an incentive transfer, which was patently absurd. When pressed, [REDACTED] agreed that it was not, but it was a nominated transfer. The parents argued that since the previous principal's position had been centrally filled, the school had a right to fill the appointment locally. Communication broke down. Parents have since refused to deal with [REDACTED], citing [REDACTED] dishonesty and hostility as reasons. Naively, they contacted the regional director [REDACTED], not realising that he was in fact the originator of the move. After a number of complaints, none of which was upheld, [REDACTED]

informed them that they were vexatious - not in so many words - and that all future correspondence from them would remain unanswered. This is a common ploy by the DEC. Parents complain and ask questions, the DEC evades and lies, the parents stick to their guns, the DEC lies and evades, the parents ask the questions again, and they are deemed vexatious and can be ignored. This has nothing to do with the merits of their communications but with the fact that they keep asking instead of agreeing to be fobbed off.

The new closer principal has reduced the school's enrolment to 9 and falling. The school is expected to close this year.

I have spoken to a number of other parents and community members from small schools, including Bellimbopinni and Wyangala Dam. Their stories are similar in many respects, but the saddest aspect of these affairs is not the anger and frustration of parents who understood what was happening and spoke out. It is the ones who accepted that there was no hope. Some believed that what they were told was true, and that somehow they were and should be doomed, because in the world we live in they and their schools and their communities had no rights and no merits and if the DEC said that they must do as they were told, then it was so. Others believed that the DEC was both ruthless and omnipotent, and there was nothing that could be done. Many were such innocent people, so straightforward in their own dealings, that they could not conceive of the web of lies and malice in which the DEC operates. Others wanted to protest, but felt they lacked the articulacy, the legal knowledge or the power.

All the schools contacted said that the community had suffered. School closures are always divisive. At all places there had been bad feeling between the ones who supported the school and the ones who sent children out of area. Oddly, the parents who sent children out of area were often more resentful of those who stuck with their local schools than vice versa. The existence of these little schools was somehow seen to be depriving other children of resources. A parent at Carcoar told me that several people who sent their children to out of area schools had quoted the per capita net recurrent income for the smaller school to her as an indication that small schools are extremely expensive and children there consume more money. This information was given to them by staff at other schools and fed to the media by the DEC. Some were pleased that the school might close as the local schools would then get all its money, and were incredulous at finding out that school budgets do not work that way. Very few of these parents could understand that if they sent their children to the local school it would become bigger and the per capita income look smaller or that there might be virtue in so doing.

At Numeralla a parent told me that there would be nothing left in the town. Sporting teams had ceased to function as children attending school in Cooma played sport there. A Byabarra parent told me the same thing. Several parents told me that the local hall was dependent on the school, as school functions were held there and local families helped to run the P and C and the hall. When people had no tie with the school they tended not to be involved in other community activities because their children's focus was elsewhere. A Carcoar parent confirmed that the same people did all the community work: sometimes people who were new to the district would become involved, but often they did not have a common purpose with the locals or any real community ties as they worked elsewhere and their children went to school and sport elsewhere. A Pearce's Creek resident told me that the school was the major user of the hall, and she was one of the organisers of events there. She had helped to organise the hall's centenary even after the school closed but had withdrawn from involvement after that, and the hall was not expected to survive. At Wyangala Dam school the community will lose a number of benefits, including the \$50,000 Stephanie Alexander Kitchen garden facilities, paid for by the Stephanie Alexander Foundation.

At Martins Creek the parents at the school have also been the mainstays of the church and the hall, but both families will be withdrawing from the community should the school close, and have already withdrawn from the hall committee due to the pressure of fighting for the school. Community events at the hall have now ceased. The divide between those whose children are at the school and those whose children go elsewhere is great, and sometimes acrimonious. There are definitely two camps, and again the parents who send their children out of area often have the attitude that they are somehow doing the right thing, and the neighbouring schools have more right to exist than ours. They are large, which is inherently more virtuous. There is a generally apologetic attitude to being from the country and being small: rural people are regarded as lesser beings not only by urban dwellers and the DEC but by themselves. The weakening of community bonds is also often a matter of practicality. Children simply do not see each other and have drifted apart even though they live nearby. I have friends whose children have left the school, and they remain my very dear friends, but I see them much less than when we all met at the school each day.

Again, while this is not universally true, the people who support their local school often cite the effect on the community as an important consideration in retaining the school, and, as I have said, are likely to support other community institutions. People who send their children out of the area cite their right to parent choice and the advantages they see for their children in so doing, and can often become angry at the suggestion that they owe anything to the community. As I have said, this is not always the case, but is quite well summed up by one parent who said, "They don't care about the community. They're doing everything for themselves.(sic)

## Martins Creek School

Martins Creek School has for long occupied an odd position vis a vis both the DEC and the surrounding community, and has provoked an amount of animus in the breasts of DEC personnel and community members which no sane person could credit.

There is a history to the extreme hostility directed at Martins Creek school by the DEC, and some of it explains the hostility shown to [REDACTED]. Part of this hostility concerns a reorganisation of schools which was at one time planned for this area. The SED in charge of Martins Creek school up until 2011, [REDACTED], had a very personal interest in closing Martins Creek school. [REDACTED] spoke quite often of the new “super-school” which was to be built at Vacy (site unspecified) with a sporting complex, swimming pool complex, thousands of children and all new buildings. [REDACTED] idea was that all schools in NSW would give place to new super-schools, and that as Vacy was to have the school for that area all the surrounding schools would be progressively closed. For various reasons Martins Creek eluded closure in 2002 and 2005. So flexible was the system then that 3 new enrolments was sufficient to save the school in 2005. The presence of Sarah Coutts, the disabled daughter of Sue Coutts, brought out the worst in [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] saw her as an impediment to the closure of Martins Creek School and an impediment to the super-school plan. [REDACTED] had no empathy with her and no conception of her as a human being. [REDACTED] never believed that Mrs Coutts was fighting for Sarah’s life when she refused to allow Sarah to go to any of the local high schools. [REDACTED] attitude was and is shared by most DEC personnel. The DEC’s director of disabilities himself, [REDACTED], famously belittled Sue’s concerns with his “Lots of people have heart conditions and live to be a hundred.” Sarah, of course, died at the age of fourteen. When Sarah was due to go to high school but could not safely do so due to her extreme fragility and terminal heart condition [REDACTED] [REDACTED] opposed her continuing at Martins Creek. After a prolonged battle she was allowed to stay, but Sue Coutts was a marked person from then on. So vindictive was [REDACTED] that when Mrs Coutts was meeting with [REDACTED] about Sarah’s educational needs at the District office, [REDACTED] entered the room to say, “they won’t keep the school open for one child, you know.” Mrs Coutts complained to regional director [REDACTED] about this, and wrote a complaint to be sent to [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] rang Sue and asked that she not send the complaint in return for a promise that [REDACTED] would be “strongly counselled.” Unfortunately Sue did not send the written complaint, but she has it to this day. (When directors telephone people it is not because they are applying the genuine personal touch, it is because they are avoiding putting anything in writing so it can be denied later.)

[REDACTED], at the time a member of the Vacy P and C, told me one day in 2010 when we were both attending Kids’ Church at Vacy that the P and C had asked for funding for a remedial reading teacher. The request had been denied. [REDACTED], who oddly enough was a frequent

visitor to the school and attended P and C meetings, had explained to the P and C that it had cost so much money to keep Sarah Coutts at Martins Creek school that there was no spare money for Vacy school. Although my association with the school was of recent duration and confined to attendance at playgroup, and my acquaintance with Sue Coutts and Sarah of the slightest, this struck me as improbable and improper. I would not have thought it discreet or in line with privacy principles for ██████████, whoever ██████ was, to be saying these things, and I did not see how it could be true. Disabilities funding goes with a child, and I did not imagine that funding is ever so localised that if Sarah had given up her funding it would have been handed over to Vacy school, or that for her to be given her entitlement some money would have to be clipped off Vacy's budget. I now recognise it as a familiar way of dividing communities and stirring up hostilities - "they are taking the bread out of the mouths of your children" or "if they didn't exist, you could have their money." ██████████ must have known that disabilities funding was far more complex than this and must have known ██████ was lying, but ██████ apparently had a very close relationship with this school and its dreams of the glorious super school over which ██████ would preside. ██████ was often dishonest and indiscreet. In 2011 I was at a Vacy Arts Centre lunch with ██████████, also a member of the Vacy P and C. ██████ was talking about the school and the fairly recently released NAPLAN results. At a P and C meeting the then principal of Vacy school, ██████████, had informed the parents that Vacy had performed well in year 5 numeracy. They had in fact been the second-highest-ranked school in the Hunter in that test. However, to ██████ distress, Martins Creek school had been the highest-ranked school and ██████ was very upset that after all ██████ attempts to improve Vacy school Martins Creek school should return a better result. ██████ felt it very unfair as it was only one boy who had "blitzed everything" and really Martins Creek should not have results recorded. There are several oddities here. For one thing Martins Creek does not have its results published. It seemed ██████ was protesting at the results being allowed to exist. For another thing, no-one is allowed access to those results unless authorised, and anyone authorised to view results must not share individual results with anyone without permission. ██████████ told me that ██████████ could not know the boy in question's results unless ██████ had the requisite PIN to access them, or had asked ██████ for them. ██████ had not shared them. It appears that ██████████, the SED, had shared the confidential results with ██████████ so that ██████ and the P and C could lament the existence of Martins Creek, where they not only took the money from the poor readers but they took the NAPLAN scores from the year 5 boys. I go into this trivial and nauseating detail because it is illustrative of the standard of behaviour of DEC officers and it is illustrative of attitudes to one-teacher schools which are widely held and deliberately fostered by the DEC. I also thought I had inadvertently moved into a community of mad people, a feeling which intensified when I began to have dealings with the DEC. When we entered our consultation process Mrs Coutts raised the question of ██████████ indiscreet and ill-natured speech involving Sarah with ██████████. ██████████ response was, "I'll give ██████████ a ring," which is not in accord with complaints handling procedures but is what you do when talking to your mate. It went no further. I wrote to ██████████ about the matter of the NAPLAN results, and ██████ wrote a response as though I had spoken of NAPLAN results in the abstract. I attach the response. ██████ basically tells me that it couldn't happen, but if it did then our principal must have shared the information with Vacy school. ██████ never acknowledged,

then or later, that an actual flesh and blood incident had occurred. Unfortunately DEC complaints investigations never get any better than that. I know now that I could have insisted that this was a formal complaint, but of course [REDACTED] would have denied that it happened, [REDACTED] would have denied it, and the case would have been closed. I can be sure of this because I have since made several complaints, as has Mrs Coutts, as have people from Wollombi, Pearces Creek, Carcoar, Numeralla, Byabarra, Paxton, Congewai, Eraring, Crowdy Head, Gosford, North Sydney, Morisset and Bellata, and I have not been able to find one person who has ever had one complaint upheld against anyone in the DEC, either by the DEC itself or by the ombudsman. But that is a story in itself.