

**Submission
No 14**

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South
Wales

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Inquiry into the closure of public schools in New South Wales

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PREAMBLE¹

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Association of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is committed to a free public education system which is open to all people, irrespective of culture, gender, academic ability and socio-economic class and empowers students to control their own lives and be contributing members of society.

This commitment is based on the belief that all students have the capacity to learn and the Government has prime responsibility to provide an education system open to all, which is free and secular. Schools should be structured to meet the needs of individual students and should respect the knowledge those students bring to school and build on that knowledge to foster their understanding about the world.

Parents as partners in the education process, have a right and a responsibility to play an active role in the education of their children. P&C Federation and its representatives share a responsibility of ensuring representative decision making for the benefit of all students.

P&C Federation would like to commend the Government for inviting submissions on the closure of public schools in New South Wales. This not only allows a broader review, but it also acknowledges the partnerships that are essential between parents, the government and the wider community in order to ensure that every child realises success in their formal education.

P&C Federation makes this response to the Closure of public schools in New South Wales inquiry with specific reference to;

- a) The actual or potential closure or recess process relating to any rural public schools
- b) The processes, policies, procedures, accountability, and decision making surrounding the closure of schools in New South Wales
- c) factors considered in determining the suitability of alternative schools in the case of a closure
- d) the transparency of the consultation process surrounding school closures
- e) the impact on local school communities affected by school closures
- f) the role of cost-benefit analysis in the closure process, if applicable, and
- g) any other related matter.

P&C Federation believe that public schools are community resources and public property, no government school in New South Wales should be closed without a full and open public inquiry. This includes the school community but also the wider community as there is often a significant flow on effect from a school closure on the wider community. Public schools especially in rural and remote areas play a significant social role in communities, often being the community hub for more than the education of students. School facilities are often used for other community services and activities such as child community health clinics, playgroups, celebratory or memorial services, sporting club activities, social events, fetes, and community group activities.

When a school closes in a community there is a greater loss to the community than just an

¹ Preamble of Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW. *2010 P&C Handbook* (6)

educational institution. Having schools close especially in rural areas has considerable impact on the community and local area. As schools close families are often forced out of the community to find alternate schooling, as a result communities suffer from loss of skilled workers, experience that may come from those community members having to leave impact on the social and wellbeing factors for those left in the communities.

P&C Federation believes that because it is the fundamental obligation of the State Government to provide schools when and where they are needed no decision to close a government school should be made without full, proper, open and prior consultation with the whole affected school community. Once such a decision is made, a minimum of twelve months notice should then be given of the proposed closure.

There can be no across-the-board criteria for the closure of government schools; and each case of a school being considered for closure should be evaluated on its individual merits, taking into account:

- educational, social, economic, cultural, environmental, community and historical factors;
- school population, including future enrolment projections;
- geographical, transport and safety factors;
- possible alternate uses of the facilities by the community; and
- access for students to alternative government schools.

P&C Federation believes that to ensure schools are provided when and where needed well into the future, that it is a duty of the State Government not to dispose of land which becomes available due to school closures to assist the budgetary needs of the government of the day or for profit to the Crown, but believes that school land should be retained to ensure the future of public education. It is important that when public schools are closed there is an adequate period of time given before the assets of the school including the buildings and land are sold. The future projections of student enrolment are a significant factor in ensuring that a school site is available to, if needed in the future, be reopened. Future student enrolments can be affected by many factors in the community, making it essential to have a full and open consultation with the community the school services.

P&C Federation feel that it would be advantageous to have a representative from local council able to be consulted on decisions such as school closures or recess to ensure a full and open consultation taking into account the community's needs, requirements and possible future projections.

Transport for students has long been a concern that P&C Federation has been active in advocating for. Not only student access to transport services both physically and financially, but also the safety of students travelling on busses, particularly in rural settings. Many resolutions have been made at P&C Federation Annual Conferences regarding seatbelts on busses to ensure the safety of students travelling on them. It is particularly pertinent aspect to be considered as many school closures occur in rural communities and as a result students are forced to attend alternate schools, increasing the travel time between home and school. Many rural roads have speed limits up to 100km per hour and this poses a real safety risk for students travelling on busses without adequate seating and seatbelts to accommodate all passengers.

There is a real impact on students travelling for extended periods of time to attend alternate schools when a school closure is made. Not only is there an impact on the student but on the family unit as a whole. If there is limited or no bus service available to families there can be significant increases to travel times to ensure their child/ren are attending school. This not only impacts on the parents who have to drive to drop children at school but also any siblings that may have to make this trip also. The real issues to be considered when travel times are increased include impacts on wellbeing, physical activity, impact on study time, family time, nutrition, and employment opportunities for parents.

The wellbeing of students should not only be considered when travel is involved but also in making the transition to a new school. The transition can often be very daunting for a student especially when moving from a small school to a larger school. Many factors impact the success of the transition to a new school, these factors should be considered and monitored for all students making a transition from a school that is closing.

P&C Federation members have voiced considerable concern with some reforms that are happening within the Department of Education that may impact on school sizes, enrolment numbers, and site management. All of these factors may in turn result in schools being placed into recess or being closed.

The Rural and Remote education blueprint for action caused some significant concerns for many rural and remote school communities with changes to the way that small schools are managed. The main concern from a number of school communities was voiced to P&C Federation regarding the use of school networks where a principal may be in charge of multiple campuses.

This concern has been further echoed throughout School communities with the new classification structure for schools and principals. The role of associate principal has once again caused unease in small school communities as it takes away from the school community and places decisions in the hands of a base school principal. The classification information states that it will not lead to school closures, however this does not reassure parents and school communities adequately. With multiple changes to the way a school is run and how the administration of the school is undertaken it is believed that the impact over a longer period of time will prove detrimental to the schools involved. When there is decreased confidence in a school or within a school community there is little that can be changed once reforms have been implemented. The value and autonomy of a small school may be eroded and this can result in parents moving children to different schools and the dysfunction and collapse of small school communities.

P&C Federation voices the concerns of school communities and seeks to ensure that these concerns are heard and addressed by the Department of Education. It is important that there is clear communication with school communities outlining the triggers involved in starting the conversation to place a school in recess or close a school. This information needs to be readily accessible and indicate what factors may initiate the process that impacts so significantly on small communities. The process of school closure needs to be open transparent and thorough. All stakeholders including the wider community need to be consulted and a wide range of future projections for the local government area and community should be taken into account.

It is essential that there is adequate consultation and that the voice of parents and school communities are taken into account. After all it is the education of our children that is paramount.

Evaluation is a key tool in assessing the success and effectiveness of any reform. It is important to have a clear transparent and non-biased evaluation of reform to uncover the real roadblocks and difficulties in development, implementation and execution of the reform. An open and transparent review should include all stakeholders. There is a need for all stakeholders to voice their concerns and be heard in an open conversation.

The education of children and young people must be a joint venture between the parents, family, the school and the community.

P&C Federation, as advocates for parents, implores the current government through the Department of Education to continue discussions with all relevant and interested stakeholders. We anticipate that the department will offer valid support for issues that will no doubt arise, and at all times acknowledge and recognise the very real concerns of parents and school communities.

P&C Federation acknowledges the need for continued involvement in discussion and hopes that the government takes into account many of the key areas that concern parents, students and school communities. We hope the comments made in this document are of assistance with discussions around this subject.

P&C Federation would like to thank the government for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the closure of Public Schools in New South Wales. We look forward to seeing the results and welcome any further dialogue this may evoke.