

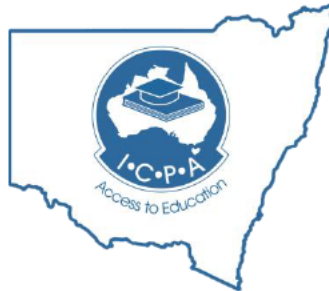
**Submission
No 20**

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW

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Isolated Children's Parents' Association of NSW Inc.



Submission to the
NSW Legislative Council Select Committee
on the Closure of Public Schools

Prepared by

ICPA-NSW State Council
Rural Schools Portfolio

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## Summary of Recommendations

ICPA-NSW recommends that:

1. the Department of Education works with Transport for NSW to resolve potential issues of student transport to alternative schools prior to school closure consultations, so that families can clearly consider the alternative schooling scenarios before providing input into the consultation process;
2. the Department of Education consider features of the NSW Local Health District model that might be of value in enhancing accountability and reporting from Departmental employees to the community, through perhaps the establishment of community driven local education district boards that may amongst other things take some responsibility for allocation of local resourcing, consultation and decision making in local school closures.
3. in cost benefit analysis of school closures, careful consideration be given to the future value of the school as a hub for non-schooling educational (early childhood and tertiary) and non-educational (allied health and social) service delivery in future.
4. likely cost benefit methodology of analysis of school closures is unlikely to fully and properly appraise all the broader educational and non-educational impacts of small rural school closures on the community.
5. if it is simply uneconomic for the Department to maintain a small rural school in its current form, that alternative structures for teaching and administration be considered as an alternative to closure. If closure is inevitable, then the savings in educational resources from the closure are re-allocated to other schools in the local region for at least five years, rather than be immediately transferred to metropolitan schools which on average have significantly better educational outcomes.

## Introduction

Small schools can have large reputations. In 2012, the Hon Troy Grant, Member for Dubbo and now Deputy Premier of NSW, stated in Parliament:

*Tonight I wish to talk about Corinella Public School. This small country school is a largely unheralded education gem.....Corinella, located in the south-west corner of my electorate between West Wyalong, Condobolin and Forbes, is a small, somewhat isolated rural school, with farming paddocks serving as its nearest neighbours. For many years there has been a school of thought among some in the education sector that bigger is always better. Corinella provides a fine example of how a small school can defy the odds.*

*There is enormous pride within this school, much of which can be attributed to the collective attitude of its students, parents, teachers, administrators and the community. Their sense of ownership of the school's future direction and prosperity is a privilege to witness. The intimacy afforded to residents of Corinella by the size of its school would be lost in a larger setting. I believe that I have within my electorate one of the best little schools in New South Wales.*

*Small towns often develop a spiritual heart, or centre. In Corinella's case, it has been its school that has provided that heart. It has provided also the conduit through which the community concentrates its energies on providing activities for its young people and the community at large. Far from inhibiting personal interaction within the school community, Corinella Public School has, if anything, promoted it. Small schools typically serve a community need. This promotes a high level of interest from parents and community members, and leads to closer working relationships among school staff. In Corinella's case, it is not unusual for the teachers, administrators and school board members to get to know each other extremely well. This has no doubt enabled new ideas to be embraced in a friendly, congenial atmosphere, building upon their already strong sense of identification and belonging.*

*Small schools should not be apologetic about their size. At Corinella, I tapped into a community spirit that is notably absent from some other schools. I commend the students, staff, parents and community at large for their dedication to pursuing education in an environment that clearly encapsulates all the advantages of doing so in a small setting. Corinella is a school that provides a meaningful education closely entwined with a community spirit that is second to none. Parliamentary Hansard, 7:20 pm, Wednesday 15th February 2012*

Less than three years later the Department of Education placed Corinella Public School into recess, with expected closure in 2015. None of the extremely positive features of the school indicated in the parliamentary speech by the Hon Mr Grant were sufficient to keep the doors of this small rural school open.

The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of New South Wales (ICPA-NSW) represents families located in rural and remote areas seeking equitable educational opportunities for their children. The small rural school is an integral part of the system of educational delivery in these regions, as well as important infrastructure for the community. Many community services are commonly delivered from the small rural school, though undoubtedly the education of the students in the town and surrounding area remains the most important.

ICPA-NSW has a great interest in the circumstances and consultations surrounding the closure of small rural and remote schools and has participated in many recent Departmental consultation processes regarding school closures. ICPA-NSW thanks the Select Committee for the opportunity to participate in this submission process.

ICPA-NSW responds to the following items of the Select Committee's Terms of Reference as follows:

**(c) factors considered in determining the suitability of alternative schools in the case of a closure.**

In a rural and remote context, the most important factor when considering alternative schools is distance. The interests of children, in particular very young children, in travelling excessive distance by bus or car should be heavily weighted in considerations, as should circumstances where distance education is the only feasible alternative.

Most critically, when schools have insufficient numbers of students to remain open, **student numbers are usually insufficient to formulate a new bus run to the next alternative school**. Generally, the NSW Department of Transport requires 15 students to formulate a new bus run. School closures commonly occur with lesser than 15 students, such that there may not be sufficient numbers to establish or reconfigure bus routes to provide student transport to the nearest alternative school.

Lack of school bus transportation then places a large burden on families with little alternative other than private vehicle travel. Not only is private vehicle travel expensive (as the Private Vehicle Conveyance Scheme only covers part of the family's costs, while the School Student Transport Scheme for student bus travel covers all costs), but takes family members away from paid or unpaid work, with associated loss of productivity. **ICPA-NSW submits this productivity cost is rarely taken into account in decision making around school closures.**

If distances in a rural or remote setting make private vehicle travel impractical, then the remaining alternative may be to transfer children into distance education placing even greater burden on families who then need to supervise the school room each and every school day.

**ICPA-NSW recommends that the Department of Education works with Transport for NSW to resolve potential issues of student transport to alternative schools prior to school closure consultations, so that families can clearly consider the alternative schooling scenarios before providing input into the consultation process.**

ICPA-NSW acknowledges that the Department of Education currently considers issues of distance to an alternative school when making decisions regarding school closures. However, our members experience is that alternative school transport issues are not always fully considered in advance of a decision to close a school.

**(d) the transparency of the consultation process surrounding school closures.**

ICPA-NSW's experience is that consultation processes surrounding school closures are commonly inadequate. At ICPA's 2015 state conference in Broken Hill, the following motion was unanimously carried by the conference attendees:

*“ICPA-NSW requests that the Minister for Education urgently look into why the consultation process is not working in rural and remote schools as per the new reforms of Local School Local Decisions (LSLD).”*

The motion was prompted in large part by poor consultation surrounding school closures. Members involved in school closure processes have often raised the following complaints with ICPA-NSW:

- The consultation is not genuine, and is in truth more in the nature of informing the school community of a decision made, rather than seeking information and community response on which to make a decision;
- The consultation process is in substance run by the responsible Director and School Principal who are employed by the Department of Education, and although there is P&C representation, it tends in substance to be overborne. The Director and Principal will often have an interest in carrying out the policy wishes of their employer, the Department.
- Often the report of the Director to the Department of the sentiment and views of the consultation meeting differs from the recollection of the school community members present;
- That consultations are just “box ticking” exercises, and are an exercise of form only. The consultations are just something that has to be done on the way to implementing the foregone conclusion of closure.
- That community members have commonly felt alienated from the school consultation process, and that any expression of views in support of keeping the school open have often been unwelcome by the Principal and Director; and
- That the Principal and Director are employed by the Department of Education and have no true accountability to the community.

ICPA-NSW considers that, at least in rural and remote areas, NSW Health with its community driven Local Area Health District Boards is in many ways a preferable structure to that of the NSW Department of Education. Local area health services are accountable to, and report to, a community led regional Board that is responsible for allocation of resources within a region. Thus, the regional community in a very real sense determines which services should and should not be provided. Local community health leadership is accessible and responsive to local community concerns and consultations.

In Education, by contrast, the Department allocates resourcing from a central basis and Departmental employees are accountable only to their central employer. It is unsurprising that Departmental employees may not feel any true and genuine accountability or need to report to regional communities in their decision making, other than through altruism.

**ICPA-NSW recommends that the Department of Education consider features of the NSW Local Health District model that might be of value in enhancing accountability and reporting from Departmental employees to the community, through perhaps the establishment of community driven local education district boards that may amongst other things take some responsibility for allocation of local resourcing, consultation and decision making in local school closures.**

**(e) the impact on local school communities affected by school closures.**

The role of the small rural school at the heart of the rural community is often stated, and ICPA-NSW wishes simply to affirm that sentiment as self-evident, and without need for elaboration.

Further, in various current educational strategies and policies, including for instance the Rural and Remote Education Strategy and Connected Communities Strategy, schools are used increasingly as hubs for service delivery outside of school education, both:

- For educational purposes, such as for the delivery of early childhood and tertiary education; and
- For non-educational purposes such as delivery of allied health services, counselling and social services.

The closure of a small rural school will prevent any future development of school infrastructure as a hub for other local service delivery. That may in future hinder not only school education service delivery, but many other types of service delivery in the area.

**ICPA-NSW recommends that in cost benefit analysis of school closures, careful consideration be given to the future value of the school as a hub for non-schooling educational (early childhood and tertiary) and non-educational (allied health and social) service delivery in future.**

**(f) the role of cost-benefit analyses in the closure process, if applicable,**

ICPA-NSW considers that if cost benefit analysis is used in the closure process, then it be broad enough to cover all costs and benefits of school closures. For reasons stated above in this submission, the costs should be so broad as to include loss of economic and other productivity of families having to use private vehicle travel to more distant alternative schools or to supervise distance education school rooms, and also future potential service delivery (both educational and non-educational) from the school. While ICPA-NSW is not familiar with current cost benefit methodologies used by the Department, it is unlikely to be sufficiently broad to cover these significant costs to the community.

**ICPA-NSW submits that likely cost benefit methodology of analysis of school closures is unlikely to fully and properly appraise all the broader educational and non-educational impacts of small rural school closures on the community**

**(g) any other related matter**

ICPA-NSW wishes to make two further related points to the Select Committee:

1. ICPA-NSW acknowledges the budgetary constraints and pressures faced by the Department of Education, as well as the imperative to keep resources dynamic as demographics shift. In ICPA-NSW's experience, families faced with school closure would in the first instance prefer to keep their school open and functioning as in the past. Where that is clearly not possible, our members have generally been willing to consider alternative structural models which reduce costs for the Department while

retaining some educational function in the local school. This might, for instance, include having:

- school administration for the local school located in a nearby larger school, or
- having a non-principal teacher at the local school led by a principal in a nearby larger school.

2. A significant grievance of families facing school closures is their concern that the savings from the closure will be transferred to metropolitan schools (which enjoy significantly superior educational outcomes in any event), to the loss of already disadvantaged rural and remote education and communities. ICPA-NSW submits that parents would be more willing to accept small school closures and travel to alternative schooling if the savings in educational resources are to be transferred and kept by alternative schools in the local rural or remote region for, perhaps, a period of at least five years.

**ICPA-NSW recommends that if it is simply uneconomic for the Department to maintain a small rural school in its current form, that alternative structures for teaching and administration be considered as an alternative to closure. If closure is inevitable, then that the savings in educational resources from the closure are re-allocated to other schools in the local region for at least five years, rather than be immediately transferred to metropolitan schools which on average have significantly better educational outcomes.**

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