

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

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

## **Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry: “Closure of Public schools in NSW”**

When the Acting Area Director (AAD) visited Wollombi Public School (WPS) on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2013, six weeks prior to the end of the school year, the closure of the school was firmly in the DEC’s sights. The school community, staff and parents were informed that day that in a “worst case scenario” WPS could close by the end of the year. This was shocking and devastating news.

At the same time, at the nearby school (Laguna), the community was celebrating the news of the arrival of a new demountable and a new teacher in the coming year. Two new enrolments had taken numbers over the threshold.

Clearly there was no consideration at this time, or at any time throughout this process, to utilise existing department resources in the Wollombi Valley schools. WPS could easily have absorbed a dozen additional students without any such substantial increase in resources as was being allocated to Laguna PS.

Shortly after the delivery of our “Death Notice” and much distress and disgruntlement, we were invited to speak with the Executive Director (ED) in the Newcastle office. The ED indicated that a decision had been made to retain only one school in the valley but there was no decision as to which school was to be eliminated. According to the ED, the AAD “should not have told us” about the impending closure of our school.

The ED assured us that a ‘review process’ would ensue. Thus began a gruelling and distressing rollercoaster ride for staff, students and families of WPS from that day on!

The Review and Consultative process, which began in March 2014, lacked integrity, transparency, honesty and fairness. It would appear that particularly low enrolments gave the DEC the opportunity to carry out a long held plan culminating in a predetermined outcome.

The erosion of WPS has been gradual and persistent over some years. In fact, in our 7 years at WPS we have experienced 5 different Principals; a situation that naturally brings about instability and uncertainty. In contrast, the nearby school enjoyed the stability of a devoted, experienced, local leader for the previous 25 years.

Coupled with the Out of Area enrolment policy adjusted by the DEC to favour the nearby school and the premise of better social interaction, enrolments increased, as Laguna School appeared to be the preference for many of the families who resided in WPS catchment area.

In my opinion, a “Review Process” only serves to divide communities and in our case to pitch one school against another in a battle of survival, as irrelevant statistical and demographic data is flipped around to support the case for DEC’s predetermined decision to close a school. Options or alternatives are never

seriously explored. Instead they are given cursory attention before being wiped off the table.

Throughout 2014 WPS suffered under the tenure of the Relieving Principal (RP) whose focus appeared, in my opinion, to be more on ■■■ career and personal gain than on the student's education or well-being. This was evident in ■■■ high absenteeism from the classroom and from school, high use and turnover of casual staff and disenfranchising the parent body. Reducing staff and families to tears through lack of dignity and respect became the norm throughout the year.

Concerns raised with the RP, AD and ED were all dismissed entirely. Any morsel of co-operation or partnership between the DEC and the Wollombi school community disintegrated. In a meeting with the AD parents were labelled "annoying", "judgemental" "intense" and "silly."

Our student's educational and emotional needs suffered. My child has received considerable counselling as a result of the stress, distress and upheaval that he/she experienced throughout 2014 and the way in which he/she was treated by the RP.

Whilst the closure of WPS was felt very deeply on a personal level, I believe that it is a very disappointing outcome for our community. A small, rural school is the heartbeat of a community. It supports many varied activities and can offer a focus for new growth and development in rural communities. Many people now seek environments for their families which can provide unique opportunities and experiences. Smaller, rural schools are special and unique.

The Cessnock Community of Great Public Schools now tragically has one less Great public school. The closure of WPS was, in my opinion, executed in a nasty, undignified sometimes vicious manner to the detriment of our staff, students and families.....achieved by the DEC "at all cost".