

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

Name: Ms Sue Coutts
Date received: 17/08/2015

Partially Confidential

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you to the Committee Members
For giving me the opportunity to present my submission to this
Parliamentary Inquiry

Consultation process Martins Creek Public School

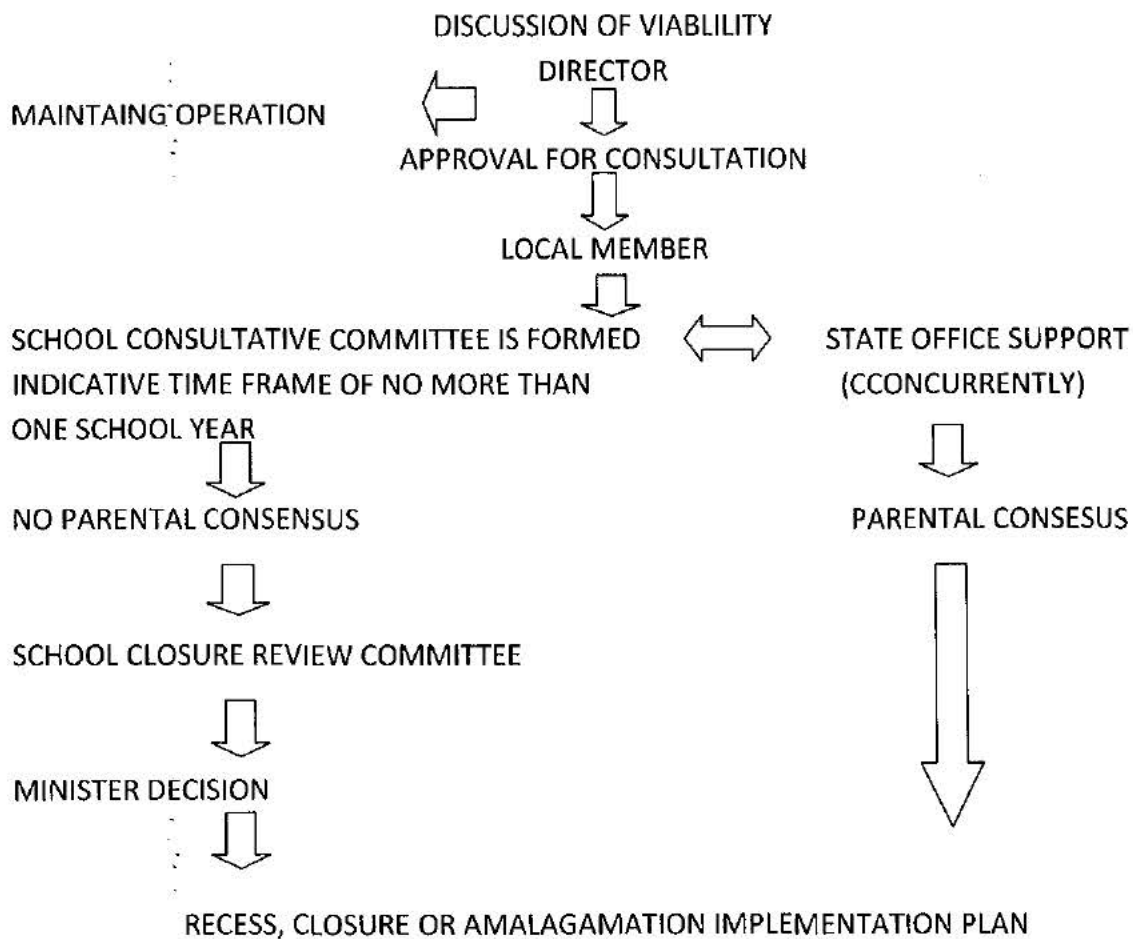
The consultation process to determine the future of Martins Creek Public School was supposed to be fair and transparent. It wasn't and was never going to be.

Parents always suspected foul play by the Department of Education as its highest level and this was proven in the call for Papers. What eventuated during and after the call for papers amounts to spiteful behaviour by the school director, [redacted] and Executive Director Frank Potter

We were given a flowchart where "Protocols for schools where recess, closure, amalgamation or other educational provision models are to be considered. (August 2013) FINAL"

The protocols are **not** endorsed by the Teachers Federation and whether or not you form a consultative committee, the outcome is the same in that the school will close. There was never any opportunity to discuss the viability of the school with the Director, if there had been [redacted] would have agreed to meet with the local Council as I requested in an email. However [redacted] was resolute that [redacted] would only meet with Parents to discuss the future viability of Martins Creek Public School.

PROTOCOLS FLOWCHART



While my Husband and I chose not to attend the meeting on the 27th November, the feedback that I received about the meeting, likened it I believe to be
“Three hit men coming into the school”

It left both the Principal and the Parent representative visibly shaken.

It didn't surprise me much as I had witnessed the Department of Education's bullying tactics in the past. It did concern me that the level of bullying had reached new heights, but that was nothing compared to what was about to come. Targeting anyone associated with

On the 29th November 2013, the Parents placed an ad in the local paper, it was the end of the year but we were hoping to attract enrolments for 2014. The advertisement showcased at its best like most advertisements do. We also ran an article in the paper and parents gave their views.

(Please see attached advertisement)

On the 29th November 2013 sent an email to stating:

“See attached. This appeared in today's Mercury. It's the only school promotion published. I think Mrs Coutts might have something to do with this.”

(thought wrong.)

The reaction from the , was quite bizarre and not at all professional as one would expect from a man in his position. He suspended all enrolments and summonsed the teaching Principal to his office. wrote an email to EPAC's

to question conduct and outlined areas of concern. (Email in the call for papers) It should be noted here, that while was trying desperately to find fault in the Teaching Principal, not one complaint submitted about the DEC by either Martins Creek or Wollombi School were ever upheld by the Department of Education or the Ombudsman.

The DEC became the "Untouchables". Parents at both schools could write to the Minister for Education outlining their concerns. Politicians could make representations to the Minister of Education and nearly all the RML's were handled by from the Minister's office and they all quoted the terms of reference, which implied that Students would be better off at neighbouring schools.

In the case of Martins Creek School, no meetings were ever held with either the Community or Dungog Shire Council.

In RML 13/5225

Mr Piccoli makes a point of saying, "Although there is residential development planned for the area, I am advised that it only involves 25-35 homes and to be significant for the Department approximately 2500 homes need to be built for the investigation for the provision of a primary school."

We are not asking that the government build a new school at Martins Creek; we are simply asking that we keep the old one.

The current population of Martins Creek according to the most recent census is 341. Therefore 25-35 new homes are substantial and could make quite a difference to a small country town like Martins Creek.

stepped down from the Consultative Committee following instruction from Mr Potter to do so, after much fuss was made by the Parents.

chose to be her support person. However attended the meeting more like 's P.A. than a support person for . When asked to step down as her support person, was told by that had to attend the meetings to take the minutes.

The report that was supposed to be written by the Consultative Committee was in fact written by the DEC and it was sent to the Executive Director before it was sent to me. I could not approve the report as I had not seen it before it was sent, to my knowledge has never been given a copy of the report.

There were areas of concern around NAPLAN around around social development, but it was too late, the report had already been sent to Mr Potter, who had already made the decision to close the school before the consultation process had begun.

The process was never going to be fair, let alone transparent.

When I emailed [redacted] about my concerns [redacted] informed me in an email that;

“The members of the School Consultation Committee are the Principal [redacted], the Maitland Primary Principals’ Association President, [redacted], your parent representative, [redacted] and myself.”

This email raised the question of why [redacted] was on the Consultative Committee”, when it never stated that it was necessary for the committee to have a member of the primary principals association and Parents were uncomfortable that the Department of Education were trying to outnumber the committee members in favour of maintaining the school operational.

[redacted] had no place on the consultative committee and his status was changed to (Teaching Principal) support person, [redacted] had not appointed a support person.

There was much secrecy surrounding the Consultative Committees meetings and [redacted] was not allowed to share information from the meetings or the draft report with parents. This seemed quite odd, given that he was representing the parents and that we would discover from the Parliamentary call for papers that there was a significant number of DEC staff working on the report behind the scenes.

When Dr Allingham resigned from the committee and it was clear the remaining committee members would continue to meet, I decided to replace Dr Allingham as the Parent Representative. [redacted] stepped down from the Consultative Committee following instruction from Mr Potter to do so, after much fuss was made by the Parents.

[redacted] chose [redacted] to be her support person. However [redacted] attended the meeting more like [redacted] P.A. than a support person for [redacted].

When [redacted] asked [redacted] to step down as her support person, [redacted] was told by [redacted] that [redacted] had to attend the meetings to take the minutes.

The report that was supposed to be written by the Consultative Committee was in fact written by the DEC and it was sent to the Executive Director before it was sent to me. I could not approve the report as I had not seen it before it was sent, to my knowledge [redacted] has never been given a copy of the report.

There were areas of concern around NAPLAN around [redacted] around social development, but it was too late, the report had already been sent to Mr Potter, who had already made the decision to close the school before the consultation process had begun.

Schools Director

is the SED for Martins Creek Public School, it is role to lead the Community Consultation re the school's future provisions.

A meeting was held at the school on 27th November 2013, to discuss possible closure. Only Parents of students were invited to attend, along with the teaching principal, "No one else is allowed to attend". (email to Sue Coutts 19 Nov. 2013)

It was decided by parents that only one Parent Representative Dr David Allingham, should attend the meeting.

I emailed on the 25 November asking for copy of the agenda, replied with, "Wednesday's meeting will be an information session to the parents as a courtesy, explaining the reasons that the provision of Education at Martins Creek is being reviewed."

I am aware that Ms Goulder emailed some questions to on the 11th November 2013 and received a response from on the 2 December 2013.

In the response from he states:

"Please note that the Department of Education and Communities has established protocols to be followed in the event that a school's future education provision is being considered. A key stage in the protocol requires consultation with the school and wider community to determine the future needs and options for education provision in the area."

Further states: "any decision about the future of the school is based on ensuring the most effective educational provision for students including:

- The ability to provide broader educational experiences such as curriculum breadth, depth and student achievement.
- The provision of a broader mix of students for growth in social development and opportunities in a range of creative, sporting and cultural programs;
- The ability to extend, enrich and provide for students with special needs; and
- Educational provision can be enhanced at nearby schools."

further stated: "Although there have been discussions around the future of Martins Creek Public School, no decision has, as yet been made. A decision to close the school rests with the Minister (section 28 of the Education Act 1990). However, before this can occur, Departmental protocols set out the processes that need to occur before such a decision is made. Relevantly, this includes consultation with the school community, which is currently underway."

For reasons that will be revealed in this submission I had no reason to believe the DEC could be trusted.

In the Briefing for the Deputy Director –General (please find attached)

DGS13/1780

Approval to Consult Locally to Discuss the Closure of Martins Creek Public School

In the last Paragraph under the heading:

Key Information it states:

"There is a Memorial on the school grounds to a student who passed away. The student's mother, who was very active in getting the memorial erected, currently has a student with special needs enrolled at Martins Creek Public School and is highly likely to resist any move to close the school."

Financial Implications

"Local consultation to discuss the closure of Martins Creek Public School would not incur any extra financial costs. Should the process result in closure of the school, savings would be made in maintenance and staffing costs."

The briefing was endorsed by _____, Director, Maitland network and approved by Frank Potter Executive Director and signed by Deputy Director Greg Prior.

Firstly:

A brief was approved that identifies me as "highly likely to resist any move to close the school" because there is a memorial for my daughter Sarah on the school grounds and not only is there a memorial, but I was very active in getting it erected.

It is interesting the DEC believes this information to be so important as to include it in a brief to be signed by their highest officers.

When in fact there is **No** memorial on school grounds for Sarah.

Secondly:

I believe there has been considerable financial cost to the tax payers of NSW in the DEC's attempts to deceive the Martins Creek Community.

On the 27 November 2013

The meeting was held at the school to discuss future provision for the students.

_____, _____ and _____ came to the school to give a lecture on the disadvantages of small schools. I did not attend that meeting. Dr Allingham and _____ were given no choice but to form a Consultative Committee which included _____ (Director), _____ (Principal), Dr Allingham, (Parent) and _____ (support person for _____) _____ did not choose to have a support person, but _____ was appointed anyway.

A Consultative Committee was formed on that day and the correct protocols would be followed with transparency.

My concern has always been _____ and I put my concerns in an email to _____ on the 5th December 2013

"As we are parenting a Child with significant disabilities and high _____ needs I trust the Department will consider his welfare when determining the time it takes to determine the future of Martins Creek School".

emailed me on the 9th December 2013 saying:

"I understand your anxiety around the additional needs of your son. In making a determination I can assure you that the committee will ensure that his needs; and the needs of all students, will be taken into consideration."

As _____ was the School's education director, I had no reason to believe this wasn't true, until the call for papers revealed that at the end of the Christmas holidays, in reference to media inquiries,

Stated in an email to Mr Frank Potter on the 6th February 2014

"I guess the problem is that unless a great storm strikes the school will close and you can be sure that this person will revisit what we say here....."

Clearly the Department of Education had no intentions of considering _____'s needs.

An email from _____ to _____ dated 12 March 2013 asks,

"like Wollombi.... is Martins Creek PS on Frank's less than ten student school list?"

March 2013 _____ had been at school just over one month, transitioning into kindergarten and already _____ was aware that there was a less than ten student school list?

If the Department of Education knew as it did that Martins Creek would be closing because there were under ten students, why on earth wasn't I discouraged to send _____ there?

After all when Community Services participated in _____'s enrolment, they should have been made aware of the school's situation. There's no denying that Martins Creek School was on the hit list.

Emails revealed that I was "vexatious, Antagonist, pulling the wool, spinning the same line" (email attached)

Because I was advocating for my son's right to an inclusive education, at his local school. It was disturbing to discover how the Department of Education viewed me, because it revealed they had no intentions of considering _____'s needs.

The one simple thing that I had asked for throughout the whole process was that _____'s needs be considered.

In March 2014 I arranged a meeting with _____ at _____ office in Maitland.

I took along a support person to take notes as the purpose of the meeting was to discuss _____'s needs.

I found _____'s manner to be hostile towards me, with comments such as, "it's not your call" and "that's your opinion" Clearly the meeting was going nowhere and I ended it.

he

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ed,

While _____, may well have years of experience as a teacher, this does not compare to the experience and training of Psychologists and Clinical Psychologists, advise _____. But throughout the consultation _____'s mental health was not taken into consideration as it should have been. If the Department of Education had addressed _____'s complex needs from the beginning, it would have saved hundreds of thousands of dollars.

I believe it was the DEC's intention to close the school and then worry about what they were going to do with [redacted] once the school had closed.

[redacted] was referred to as the

"Special needs boy" or student with "learning difficulties".

To this day the Executive Director, Mr Frank Potter and School Director, refuse to acknowledge [redacted]'s complex mental illness. They couldn't possibly acknowledge a Down syndrome child had anything other than Down syndrome.

Especially when they do not have the scope to manage [redacted] outside of his educational setting that is working wonders in his recovery.

So in order to save \$34 000 a year they decided to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars closing the school, knowing the harm it will cause

[redacted], not to mention the quality of life or lack thereof that [redacted] will endure. The catastrophic effect on one little boys life and you have to ask the question, what are you thinking Mr Potter?

The problem here is that there are no guarantees that a transition to a new school will work for [redacted]. Many things have to be considered if any transition were to work.

[redacted] is happy at school, a transition will see him lose the environment he has come to know and trust. The group of friends he depends on and of course the staff at Martins Creek School. [redacted] will lose his community support, the people he has come to know in the community.

Then there is the impact on his home life, if he is unable to cope with a transition, his behaviour at home will escalate. We have a younger child with Down syndrome, who was placed with us two months before [redacted], like most "brothers" they are close, it would be heart breaking to see this relationship end.

The Department of Education choose only to see [redacted]'s visible disability which is Down syndrome, they do not acknowledge his mental illness.

It was never the Department of Education, nor the Minister for Education's intention to consider [redacted]'s needs.

The Hon. Adrian Piccoli, Minister for Education declined to meet with me to discuss [redacted]. I was very fortunate, thanks to the Hon. Paul Green to secure a meeting with the Hon. Victor Dominello Assistant Minister for Education in May 2014. The meeting was brief, but I was able to express my concerns for [redacted] and pass a letter about [redacted]'s educational needs. Mr Dominello was kind enough to hear my concerns and seemed genuinely interested in my commitment to [redacted] and his welfare.

I was very disappointed to discover email's in the call for papers that referred to this meeting as if it should never have taken place.

The Executive Director chose to close the school regardless of [redacted]'s situation, knowing the harm this will cause [redacted]

I had followed the correct protocol for [redacted]'s school enrolment at Martins Creek Public School and [redacted]'s case worker and manager were involved in this meeting. As I didn't believe for a moment that [redacted] was qualified to advise me on [redacted]'s mental illness, I emailed Mr Potter on the 12 August 2014 asking if he "would kindly give me the names of the DEC staff who believe [redacted] could cope with transition to another school.

The Department of Education were asking [redacted] to engage in meetings about [redacted] and possible "transition". This was done in secret. I learnt that there was to be a meeting with [redacted] regional manager.

's conduct was not appropriate and this was put forward in a complaint.
handled the complaint and nothing was upheld.

A review of my complaint was sent to who could find no reason to support my claims.

A serious complaint was made about the Consultative process and Mr Potter, the response to this complaint came in the form of an RML from the Minister for Education, which really didn't make any sense at all. Mr Potter denied ever knowing about the complaint in an email to me a month after he was already dealing with it.

The complaint went on to the Ombudsman who couldn't look at the complaint because it involved a Minister.

All mention of the Minister was removed from the complaint and the Ombudsman still couldn't investigate. He did however confirm that Mr Potter, and were handling it.

The complaint went to EPAC and Executive Director was assigned to it, prior to the investigation rang me to inform me that the meeting Mr Potter had arranged with the DEC Psychologists was not a conspiracy, spoke very highly of Mr Potter. It was no surprise then that my complaint was not upheld.

I am sure you will find my submission lengthy, when in fact there is much more to this than I have time to write.

I have no doubt that there is much more inappropriate behaviour by the Department of Education yet to be revealed. I am aware that a Senior DEC Officer saw fit to contact a this can only be a sign that the DEC will stop at nothing.

I believe a thorough investigation into the Department of Education in the form of a Royal Commission is necessary to uncover the truth.

I first became aware of _____ when _____ (school Director) added a piece that _____ had written about small schools to the Consultative Committees report.

_____ sent me a copy of the report on the 13/8/14

(Please see attached documents)

3.6 In 2009, at a similarly sized public school, _____, Leader Learning and Engagement and departmental psychologist, undertook an observational study of the social and learning dynamic in a small cohort. It was found that in that setting the current small cohort was not preparing students effectively to transition into high school and there was evidence that it was creating some very negative learning habits – both social and academic. The students' parents were advised of _____'s findings and supported the implementation of transition plans for their children to neighbouring larger schools.

As parent representative on the Consultative Committee I asked that this be removed from the report and it was.

(please see attached emails)

I have spoken with a Parent whose child was a student at Pearce's Creek and her recollection of events is that the Parents were furious that _____ assessed the students without their permission.

On 29th October 2014

The Department of Education and Communities has requested a meeting between |
's clinician, ,myself and 2 DEC Clinical Psychologists to discuss 's
educational needs.

I was on my way home from Sydney, we had travelled to Parliament House to view the non privileged documents. I immediately felt that this meeting had been arranged by Mr Potter in retaliation for my support for the call for papers. I emailed and told her I did not want this meeting to go ahead. said she was not in a position to influence it as Frank Potter had called the meeting.

(emails attached)

The meeting was scheduled for the 6th November and I was led to believe we would be meeting with two Clinical Psychologists employed by the DEC.

Neither Psychologist had met _____ or visited Martins Creek School during his enrolment there. Certainly I had never met these Psychologists before.

(Please see attached Summary of this meeting)

I was never given a copy of the report by _____ and _____ and my child's _____ was not sent a copy following the meeting.

I did however request a copy of this report and it was sent to me as an unsigned draft.

I emailed _____ for a signed final copy, but _____ politely refused.

I emailed the Deputy Director of Schools, Greg Prior and asked for a signed, final copy of _____'s report. I received a letter from the Executive Director Mr Frank Potter stating that; "the report was unsigned as it was sent to me by email and was advice provided at my request for my use." (letter attached)

Mr Potter requested the advice of _____ for the purpose of his recommendation.

_____ 's report conveniently contradicts three Psychologists working with _____, not forgetting that _____ has never met _____, nor is she experienced in

Summary

the purpose of the meeting was to discover why [redacted] could not undergo a ten-week transition to another school. [redacted] was not aware of the purpose of the meeting, and having just returned from leave to find it arranged was not prepared for it. The meeting appears unusual in that [redacted] was engaged as a consultant and flown from Lismore for the meeting, rather than making contact by phone. Neither [redacted] nor [redacted] has worked or will work with [redacted]. There is no certainty that [redacted] will require a transition and the school or type of school he would attend is unknown. No-one who works with him in an educational setting was present.

The reasons militating against moving [redacted] in nine weeks and hoping for the best are as follows.

[redacted]'s Down syndrome and hearing loss are secondary concerns. His primary difficulties arise from

This is because these situations involve an inherent loss of control and are inherently frightening for him. Should a new school be chosen for him which falls into one or both of these categories he probably will not make a successful transition. [redacted] suggested that "micro steps" could be taken to accustom him to a new school. This concept evidences unfamiliarity with [redacted] or his behaviour and evidences an approach which is too simple to be applied to a child with complex mental health issues. [redacted] does not make gradual adjustments.

[redacted] Around eighteen months appears to be the minimum time in which [redacted] becomes reconciled to situations or engages with people. His transition to Martins Creek School involved such a process and his engagement with the school showed a marked change in approximately term 3 of his second year. It was [redacted]'s great good fortune that at the time he entered the school the enrolment had fallen to six, the staff were congenial to him, the atmosphere quiet and the size, staffing ratio and composition of the school

community sufficiently flexible to accommodate [redacted] in his first, very difficult, eighteen months. His social, personal and academic gains are likely to be severely endangered if he is moved so soon after fully settling into his current school. The school's benefits cannot be replicated elsewhere, and it is extremely unlikely that any larger school could be flexible enough or peaceful enough to cope with [redacted] behaviour for an extended period while he was adjusting to his new situation. Should he or the school fail to adjust it is difficult to see what his options would be.



A theoretical transition plan which does not take these realities into account and which lists as desirable many things which the DEC has already indicated it cannot fund - such as transport and a full-time aide - is unhelpful.

[redacted] is the author of a report into a north coast school at which [redacted] recommended and assisted the transition of students to a nearby larger school. This report was given to [redacted] by Frank Potter as an illustration of current practice in small schools. [redacted] included it in the first draft report [redacted] wrote as part of the review process of educational provision at Martins Creek. [redacted] agreed to remove mention of it on the grounds that its inclusion was irrelevant and misleading.

[redacted] and [redacted] stated that their reason for being at the meeting was to become informed of [redacted]'s needs so that a successful transition plan could be implemented for him should the school close. They had no knowledge of [redacted] beyond documents held by the DEC. They were not instructed to make any recommendation on the school's future.

expressed surprise at the minimum 2 years plus transition time recommended by . Both psychologists indicated that a one-term transition was standard and the suggested two years was outside their experience. They were interested to know 's view of what a two-year transition would involve. It was indicated that was unlike any other child whose transition they had managed.

stated that he had not mandated that period of time but had suggested it as a means of minimising 's reaction to change. He clarified the matter by saying that two years would not guarantee a successful transition and he had certainly not recommended that period. It was his impression that he had only recommended a transition to high school at the appropriate time. His major concern was for the effect that upheaval would have on 's life with particular reference to stress being placed on his

He opined that what had at Martins Creek could not be replicated.

Ms Goulder pointed out that the practical difficulties of putting together a transition plan for included the fact that no school or type of school had been identified as suitable for him and there was no definite indication that any transition would be successful.

Both psychologists acknowledged that the future could not be predicted but that micro-steps could be taken to accustom to a new environment and that a safe place within a larger environment could be created to make him feel safe. They noted that a one-term transition had been employed for his entry to Martins Creek School. Ms Goulder stated that from her daily observation of 's transition to Martins Creek School it had in fact been much longer than one term. He had not engaged with the school until mid-2014, or almost two years after he had begun there, and might not have reached this point at a different type of school. She also said that although she had seen him daily during this time he had "blanked" her until about the same time, and it had taken him more than 18 months of contact before he had engaged with her or trusted her. Sue stated that his pre-school experience had not been successful and in his twelve months there he had not made a successful transition.

It was agreed by all present that Vacy school's team teaching classroom was unsuitable for asked if Paterson school would be suitable in Sue's view. Sue stated that the extra distance and the relative inflexibility of the school's structure would make transporting there very difficult for her and he would need transport provided. Because of his behaviour he might need to and while this was accepted without comment at Martins Creek School it was unlikely that it would meet with such acceptance at a larger school. is aware of and sensitive to derogatory comments.

Both psychologists indicated that they were interested to know what value placed on relationships at Martins Creek School.

Long drawn out negotiation was often required to get to perform even routine tasks. He can sometimes be late for school, and the staff need to be informed daily of his mood and attitude, which the structure of the school can accommodate without disruption to the other children. When his behaviour degenerates at school he responds well to the principal, whose authority he respects. also engages in play and dance with the other children, who are considerate of him.

Both DEC psychologists indicated that would ideally need continuity of staff and of students to make the transition to a new school, and would need full time one-on-one support from an SLSO for some time.

asked where the other children would go to school if the school were to close as it would be desirable that his transition should take place with them. Ms Goulder explained that because of varying personal circumstances only one child was likely to move to a neighbouring school.

stated that a transition plan might not work initially but could be modified daily in response to 's reactions and in theory could be changed as often as required. acknowledged that a transition would involve equipping his new school to cope with him as well as supporting him. did not offer a solution to the problems which might arise if the new school could not adapt to or could not cope with him for long enough to complete his transition.

pointed out that was not eligible for funding to put their recommendations into effect. quoted an email from in which he advised that would not be eligible for funding for

stated that their job was to put forward an opinion on everything would ideally need for his transition and their recommendations did not have to take into account funding realities. They were not responsible for what the DEC could or might choose to implement.

Executive Director Frank Potter

I wrote many emails, letters to Ministers, letters to _____ and letters to Mr Frank Potter. My first letter to Mr Potter was sent in December 2013, I expressed my concerns for _____. I tried repeatedly to engage with the Department to address _____'s needs. Every RML received contained the same response, this was particularly frustrating, because they never attempted to address _____'s needs. It would never be as simple as sending _____ to his closest school and while I tried on many occasions to explain _____'s illness, it was ignored. It was evident that I was fighting an army of DEC officers, led by Mr Frank Potter.

When I decided to look at the possibility of sending _____ to a school with 60 students about twenty kilometres away, the DEC insisted that the learning support teacher attend the meetings.

I arranged with _____'s Psychologist to tour the school with the Principal, my support person also attended. There were a number of issues that couldn't be overcome at the school. _____ would not cope with the class sizes. The school was situated on a busy road, the car park and play ground were a hazard. There were a number of places that _____ could hide that were dangerous, there were steep stairs leading to what would be his classroom. The entire school environment was unsuitable for _____ and would do more harm than good.

Shortly after this meeting, I attended another meeting at the same school with the Learning and Engagement Officer, _____, the learning support teacher, _____, the school's principal, _____ and my support person _____.

At this meeting I asked _____ for a copy of Mr Potter's recommendation to the Minister, a copy of _____'s report and a letter from the Minister stating his decision to close the school. I attempted to discuss _____'s complex _____ and associated behaviour. _____ was keen to send out resources for _____'s behaviour however I declined because I believed it would do more harm than good.

_____ to send her the resources as they may help with other children. I asked _____ to forward the resources on to me as I wanted confirmation of what I knew they would be. I received visuals in the form of cartoon drawings about inappropriate places and parts of the body, what you can and can't do in public places. Pictures of a toilet and shower.

It was evident _____ could not cope in this school and unless we could replicate his current learning environment close to home, a transition would not succeed.

I emailed [redacted] and said my preferred school for [redacted] was his current school at Martins Creek and I quoted my reasons from two of [redacted]'s Psychologist reports.

[redacted] never acknowledged my email, no one from the Department of Education did. [redacted] did sent me three emails asking me for my preferred school for [redacted] and I was given a deadline to notify her by, but I never replied to any of her emails.

I had for the past sixteen months tried to engage the Department of Education and the Minister for Education to discuss [redacted]'s [redacted].

I know that [redacted] cannot transition to a new school less than two years, there are no guarantees that a transition would work and there will be nothing for [redacted] to come back to should a transition fail.

I have seen the call for papers, I am aware that the Department is proposing to build a [redacted] for [redacted]. I am aware that Mr Potter has a hit list of schools he wishes to close at all cost.

But I am also aware of how important the school is to [redacted], it is paramount to his recovery. A Perfect environment to develop trusting relationships, to be valued for who you are.

Martins Creek Public School is small, safe, close to home, free of bullying and intimidation. The staff is highly trained in the area of disabilities and [redacted] is recovering well. He is receiving and education, learning to speak and articulate his words. Modelling appropriate behaviours and forming strong friendships.

The ridiculous amount of tax payer's funds that have been wasted by the Department of Education has to be taken into consideration in the process of closing Martins Creek.

The cost to the taxpayer of a failed transition needs to be considered.

But far greater than any of this is the damage it will do to [redacted].

Sarah Coutts

Sarah Coutts was born with Down syndrome, atrioventricular canal defect, pulmonary hypertension, Wolffe Parkinson White syndrome, trachea oesophageal fistula and discoordinate swallow, requiring a gastrostomy. Upon her arrival home, from hospital aged six weeks, she was dependent on 24hr oxygen and 24 hr drip feeds (via a kangaroo pump) and 13 medications 8 times a day.

I would be fair to say, that we were devoted to her.

I began looking at schools for Sarah two years in advance, my mind was set on Bolwarra Public School and I arranged with a DEC officer to meet the principal and do a tour.

It was the DEC officer that encouraged me to take a look at my local school at Martins Creek. I had met the Principal, [redacted] on a previous occasion; he had been teaching at Martins Creek for ten years and was well liked in the community. I was disappointed to learn that [redacted] had accepted a transfer, but I agreed to meet the new principal,

The benefits of sending Sarah to Martins Creek public School were discussed and the idea of having Sarah close to home took priority over everything else.

We received a newsletter today stating that the Superintendent for Maitland Dept. of Ed. Would be at a school meeting next Monday to talk about numbers.

Monday 20th May 2002

didn't mince his words when told the six Mothers that the school would close at the end of the year unless numbers doubled. has given us one month to find those numbers, before makes his decision.

It's a huge long shot but we've decided to go out fighting.

Everyone got behind the fight to keep Martins Creek School open, we put up banners, contacted the papers, met with our local member and organised a huge open day at the school.

My Diary

Tuesday May 28th 2002

The newsletter came today, saying that I had called a meeting tomorrow night 7pm. I don't know why made the point of saying I had called the meeting. I'm not sure about 's motives; he told me yesterday that "he's not in favour of small schools."

As the children don't get enough interaction, but not to quote him on that.

I met with our local member Mr John Price who was very supportive about keeping the school open.

Dungog Mayor Steve Lowe had heard about the possible closure and dropped by to offer his support and his views on the future population projection for Martins Creek.

The open day was a huge success and we secured three enrolments.

At the next meeting on 24h June 2002 arrived with

congratulated us on our hard work and told us the school would stay open.

said he had made representation to the Minister for Education, who had seen it in the papers; and said they had spent too much money on the school to let it close.

We gathered outside the school and spoke about how wonderful it was that the school would remain open. seemed agitated and said, "There goes my holiday!"

I was informed that the investigation could take up to six months; it took all of six months. Sarah was a fragile and innocent victim, punished because I had fought to keep this communities school open, the grief and the guilt made me physically ill.

The outcome of the investigation came in a letter supporting my claim and one sentence below, "no disciplinary action will be taken".

At that point I wished I had gone to the police. I decided to pursue an apology from the then Deputy Premier and Minister for Education, Mr Andrew Refshauge.

My Diary

Thursday 27th May 2004

I received my letter from the Hon. Andrew Refshauge today, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. It's been two years and finally we will have closure on this. Today I am proud of myself and proud of Sarah and eternally grateful to all those who stood by me.

One would think my story ends there but there is another chapter.

As Sarah's heart and lung condition was inoperable, she was prone to lung infections with risk of blood clots.

I approached the Department of Education in March 2007, just before Sarah's 11th Birthday, requesting that Sarah be permitted to continue her secondary education at her current local school, Martins Creek Public. Sending Sarah to a High school forty minutes away, with 900 students was simply impossible. Sarah was too fragile to make such a journey, sending her to a school with 900 students would heighten her risk of infection and Sarah's Wolffe Parkinson White syndrome presented a ever present danger to her health with the risk of heart attack.

I had all the supporting letters from Paediatrician to Cardiologist, but the Department of Education refused my request. I met with the then Minister for Education John Della Bosca at a Cabinet meeting in Maitland on the 27th May 2008. He seemed genuinely interested, a compassionate man, who understood disabilities, he agreed there and then to allow Sarah to stay at her local school and said he would send a letter saying so. I waited anxiously for his letter, but a few weeks after our meeting he was no longer the Minister for Education,

but the Minister for health and my letters were forwarded to Ms Verity Firth, who refused my request.

I met with the Department of Education's, Disability Director who argued that Sarah had a right to a secondary education. Her medical team argued she had a right to live.

At the age of 12 Sarah was the height of an average 8 year old and she weighed just 24kg. Sarah's oxygen saturations were "normal" at 75%. Her fingers and toes were clubbed and her feet were always cold to touch. The blue tinge around her mouth and eyes a constant reminder of her terminal illness. One would think that if not for common sense then human compassion would have prevailed. It didn't.

Despite this, Sarah was a vivaciously funny young lady, who went to a perfect school in a perfect community, in a perfect world.

I fought the department for two long years, the media vowing to keep her in the public eye and Sarah gained much public support. Eventually the Department of Education agreed that Sarah could continue her education at Martins Creek School. It was a bitter sweet win.

The following year, she died of a lung infection.

It doesn't appear to me that anything has change in the Department of Education since 2002. Their attitude to children with High Special needs was appalling then as it is now.

Summary

In Summarising I believe it is vital the Department of Education support all students with disabilities in schools appropriately. It is the Parents choice where their child is educated and the Department of Education must stand back and allow parents to make that choice with little influence and much support.

I should not have battled the Department of Education for two years to keep Sarah at Martins Creek, common sense should have prevailed. Sarah was in the best educational facility for her, supported by her community and loved by her friends. Sarah was weak, fragile and one accidental shove in a busy school corridor, could have caused irreparable harm.

There are many factors to consider when educating a child with Special Needs, but mostly it has to be that they are in a nurturing environment, free from discrimination and intimidation.

Sarah loved going to school, she experienced total inclusion and modelled the positive behaviours of her peers.

Parents understand their children more than anyone else and we must be allowed to advocate for them without being labelled vexatious or in my case an "Antagonist".

It is shameful that 68% of students with disabilities are dissatisfied with the education in Australia. It is not acceptable that unqualified Departmental staff are using a one size fits all approach to students with disabilities. In _____'s case dec officers, were contributing to the consultative report without knowing a single thing about him and DEC Psychologists were advising in a report without ever seeing _____. Their report contradicted _____'s Psychologists and the reports of Clinical Psychologist working with him. It was a ridiculous assumption by _____ to suggest that because of all his experience as a teacher/principal.

My experience with the Department of Education spans across thirteen years, it's hard to believe in that time, there are few advances in educating our special needs children.

It is of absolutely no use to anyone to have policies, strategies and initiatives if they are not adhered to.

Instead, discrimination is spreading like a cancer through our schools, simply because the attitudes of DEC Officers has never changed. The while the Department of Education hide behind a legal system which protects them by making what they see as "reasonable adjustments". Yet promises are broken, funding is cut, supports are removed and students with special needs are forced into special schools or support classes against the wishes some parents. Parents are too exhausted to fight for their children and why would they it is an unwinnable battle against discrimination and prejudice.

rang me to tell me the meeting had to be brought forward because a decision to close the school had been made. I told that this could not be true as I was the Parent Representative and we were still holding meetings with the DEC and I would know if a decision had been made. was sure and said "those were 's words, a decision has been made". I asked if could confirm that in writing, because if a decision had not been made, would say was misinterpreted, this was standard practise by the Department. I did receive an email from , saying had spoken to and anticipates a decision would be made soon. Apologies for the misinterpretation. (email attached)

I would not meet with and asked to meet with Learning and Engagement Supervisor to discuss I . I refused at this time to enter into discussions about transitioning , but rather to discuss 's needs. 's Psychologist, , and I attended along with my support person Ms Goulder.

The meeting was informative and suggested a minimum two year transition for should it be considered.

's notes were to be included in the Consultative Committees report, however when sent me the notes, they were incomplete, leaving out substantial information from 's Psychologist, including a minimum two year transition.

's life teeters on the edge and it appears the Department of education can't wait to watch to his life fall apart, when they remove his vital supports.

So macabre in fact that they have made completely sure that not only will he lose his school, but they have ensured he will lose his beloved teacher's aide, the only person who can communicate fluently with him through sign language . She has been given twelve months to transition and then take up transfer to a high school five days a week. While

Staffing provided the information; the order came directly from the Executive Director Mr Frank Potter.

Six letters of support were written for two of those in recent weeks, (all are attached) his , his occupational therapist, his speech therapist, his psychologist and two clinical psychologists all have observed . Mr Potter based his recommendation on 's report, he clearly states this in his letters. has never seen or observed him in his school, accessed 's confidential file without permission or notification to either his and doesn't acknowledge his complex in her report. It appears that 's mental illness is not something is familiar with and she should not be advising a transition for

The Department of Education NSW and the Minister for Education, the Hon. Adrian Piccoli must consider the needs of all children in schools, they need to listen to the Parents of our most vulnerable children and they need to ensure "every student in every school" has everything they need to ensure they receive the education that they are entitled to.