

**Submission
No 38**

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: The Ladysmith P & C Association

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Small Schools Closure Inquiry- letter for submission

The Ladysmith P & C Association wishes to express our thoughts on the closing of small schools within the Riverina and NSW.

Ladysmith Public School is a small school that consists of 42 students. The survival of the school relies on new enrolments each year. We look forward to new families settling in the Ladysmith area and welcoming their children into the school and town community.

Small schools usually derive from towns within farming and agricultural areas. Students often live on farms, but in a lot of cases they live in the villages that have naturally developed in the centre of these farming areas. Our small towns are often a considerable distance from the nearest city. Ladysmith for example is 25 kilometres from Wagga Wagga. While it is possible for children to go to school in Wagga Wagga there are a great deal of reasons not to, which we aim to explore and explain.

Our small school communities are strong. Our small town communities are even stronger. Families that have lived for generations in Ladysmith and those that have moved here to settle down have done so because we love the lifestyle it offers. Our small schools are a reflection and an extension of this.

Our town is safe. It has a population of upwards of 200 people. It is quiet, peaceful, and of course everyone knows everyone. It is a town with a Hall Committee, a Progress Association and a P & C Association. It's a place where people work together to make progress, create and protect what we hold important in our town.

When schools develop in small towns all across the state, and the country, those ideals flow through to the schooling community. Parents are involved in their children's learning but are also involved in the school in general.

A few aspects that stand out as impressive with small schools is the history that is carried on from parent to child. Often the students at the school have a parent that attended the school. This can hold a wealth of information for the students. There are residents in Ladysmith who attended the school many decades ago. While this might not seem important to many when deciding on which schools survive and which ones don't, it is most certainly important to residents of small towns.

Our small schools have as much a supportive community as any other big schools in the state. It could be said that our communities may be even more involved than those of larger sizes. This is specifically due to the size of the school and the town it belongs in. People in small towns are in very regular contact, whether it be catching up at the general store, the local park, or reading updates in the quarterly newsletter (Ladysmith's is call The Village News). What we all have in common first and foremost is the health and wellbeing of the children in our town and most definitely their education. It is important for our children to feel that the support for them reaches beyond only that of their parent's.

Ladysmith Public School is a successful, participating school. The students compete in debating, public speaking, sporting events, singing and music along with other schools in our area. Our students are certainly not left behind and are given every opportunity awarded to larger schools.

Ladysmith Public School has several advantages over larger schools. The school has beautiful, expansive grounds with barely any concrete in sight. It has gardens that have been planted by

students themselves, some that still remain from the generations before. It has a creek that runs up the back treelined by gums and it is in a quiet area at the bottom of the village. The students have a 'lizard sanctuary', an area on the grounds that is to be cared for but allowed to be explored. When they play outside they hear and see Magpies, Galahs, and Rainbow Lorikeets and on school presentation nights we make sure the microphone is turned up to hear over the hundreds of roosting Cockatoos.

Many small schools across the Riverina and state are much the same. These picturesque schools with natural grounds and surroundings should not be made a rarity. They should be cherished and protected.

More importantly, what happens to our small communities when our small schools close? Children that live in these villages and surrounding farms need to feel a part of a community, as children do anywhere in the world. It gives them a feeling of belonging and a place to call home. They make friends that live only a few houses away or up the road, or out on a farm. Usually, the parents of their friends have a history too. They actually don't have to arrange play visits as they can go to the park on any given day and find someone from school to play with.

If children in small towns or on farms are separated and forced to go to larger schools outside of town, they won't make the same strong, lifelong bonds that are made by meeting at school and spending time in the same neighbourhood. This difference can't be underestimated. Parents in our community are very committed to their children and drive the hour round trip to Wagga Wagga and back all through the week. Many of us work in Wagga Wagga, and shop in Wagga Wagga. We run our children in for sport, training, dancing, all kinds of extracurricular activities. However, if our children were forced to attend schools in Wagga Wagga, sustaining our children's friendships made in those new schools would be a very different story. Ladysmith is where we all come home too at the end of the day. It's where our children know the names and faces of most people they see. It's where we build priceless memories for our children full of adventures in the park with any given child of any age on any given day. All our children need is to know that other child.

Children from farming families may experience an even greater loss from the closure of small schools. These children enjoy seeing their friends each day at school and knowing that they will see them outside school as well. They enjoy attending our community barbeques in the Summer time, knowing that when they go they will know the people there.

There have been families in recent years that have moved to Ladysmith specifically for the lifestyle and for their children to attend Ladysmith Public School. The school in effect is sustaining the future of our town. Ironically, small schools are built out of necessity to accommodate a growing, independent, isolated community but eventually become what will keep that community alive.

To continue the trend of closing our small schools would be a great loss to the Riverina but also to Australia. Our small schools are central to our small, rural communities. These communities are an element of Australian country life. Closing the schools will inevitably break down our communities into something of a shadow of what they are now; vibrant, supportive, full of history and stories to hold onto. They are not something to be 'be done with' in the name of progress. They are just as much a part of progression as our children will go out into the world just as well educated but with a very complete sense of identity, belonging, and an entire town's worth of encouragement.

This inquiry should include Members of Parliament making visits to small schools all across the Riverina. Don't only read our letters. We would welcome you to come and spend a few hours with our schooling communities. Hear our children's stories, ask them why they love their school. Ask

parent's why, if it is possible to send their children to school in the nearest town, they don't. Ask why even though it can be difficult for parent's to fulfil their children's needs by travelling a lot more during one week for extracurricular activities and doctors appointments, they choose to live in our small towns. You will find the answers and those answers will support every reason to stop closing our small schools but to do the opposite- embrace, cherish and protect them.