

Submission
No 27

INQUIRY INTO CLOSURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Carcoar P & C

Date received: 9/08/2015

Partially Confidential

SUBMISSION: Closure of public schools in New South Wales (Inquiry)

Carcoar Public School - A DEC targeted act of destabilisation and closure in progress?

In December 2014 the acting Principal of 7 years at Carcoar Public School (CPS) was notified, while on class teaching, that her services would not be required in the role next year as the DEC was transferring in a Principal from a closing school (Corinella). The entire community rallied against this with many letters being sent to various DEC staff, (from the Secretary down), to politicians (the Minister for Education and our Local Member amongst others) and protest rallies were held at the school. TV, radio and print media all took an interest in our cause but to the detriment of Carcoar, the DEC and the minister for Education did not.

The plea from the Community, AS PER DEC POLICY we were due for and we wanted to have a merit-based selection (interview process) for the permanent Principals position with community representation on the interview panel, so that the best person could be chosen for this key community role. We made repeated representations to the DEC who used several different inconsistent reasons, on different occasions, for their decision which were not backed by their own policy. Regional Director, [REDACTED], sent us a letter (after 4 letters from Carcoar P&C) saying that this was an 'incentive transfer', our research into the DEC policy showed this not to be the case. Neither Carcoar nor Corinella are incentive schools. We feel that the DEC acted contrary to their own policies in an abuse of power to force their flawed decision onto this community. Our pleas for community consultation were repeatedly refused, the DEC claiming they had to move this Principal into our school in spite of there being a suitable vacancy at a school close by, which they were choosing to fill with a temporary principal.

Eight years ago Carcoar Public School almost closed under a 'serial' or 'repeat closer', the DEC's internal terms for Principals that are moved from one school closure to effect another closure of the next small school they are placed within. The community had very real fears that we were being given another 'repeat closer' as this individual had already overseen the closure of 2 other schools. When this was put to our Local Director of Public Schools, [REDACTED], the question being "But what will happen if this Principal doesn't work out and enrollments [at CPS] drop?" The answer was given quietly, with a small smile "If enrollments fall and the community does not support the school, then the school will close." We feel we have been set up for failure, targeted by the DEC by placement of someone who has already closed other small schools, against the wishes of the community. This would appear to be borne out by the rapid drop in enrollments at CPS during the 2015 school year. The year started with 13 students under the new principal, 5 families have left and just after the midpoint of the year, enrollments are down to 8, with more students likely to leave in the short term.

In 2015 when all our efforts to have a merit-based selection for our principal were ignored by the DEC, and their nominated Principal was installed, the Carcoar P&C also repeatedly asked to be moved under a different Director of Public Schools, other than [REDACTED], as there were still outstanding complaints from the community about the conduct of this Director that had mishandled the appointment of the principal and there was a perception of unfair bias. This was also refused by the Regional Director, [REDACTED], in a letter advising that any further correspondence from us would be filed but not responded to.

In January 2015 a petition of over one thousand signatures was sent to the Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli, begging him to listen to our community and intercede to allow a merit-based selection for the position of principal with community representation on the interview panel. Although the petition was acknowledged to have been received during a phone call to staff in the Ministers office,

no response was ever received by the community from the Minister. For a Minister that likes to talk about community consultation being very important he has ignored all our letters and the petition with no attempt to engage on this matter. We are left to feel that the misconduct of the DEC is approved by the Minister who is content to see these small schools and the communities they are part of disappear.

In 2012, Deputy Premier Troy Grant, gave an impassioned speech to parliament about Corinella Public School being the heart and soul of a small community and the importance of small schools. Less than 2 years later Corinella Public School has been permanently closed. We believe this is what the DEC would like to see happen here too.

Small schools offer unique benefits to many children who do not do well in larger schools and also greatly benefit the communities they are part of. But they are fragile ecosystems and placement of the wrong person in the wrong job can have devastating consequences for the schools and the community. Carocar was very aware of this and that is why we fought so hard to have a say in who leads our school. Unfortunately we were not listened to or consulted with, we did our best to have a voice but the DEC appears to be a law unto itself and all their online policies and procedures and rhetoric about community consultation have, in our case, proven to be worthless. We also believe that the DEC are very aware of the effect that the 'wrong person' can have in a small school and that these individuals are used in a targeted way to destabilise small schools in preparation for closure and that this has been the case here.

Government needs to start considering these small schools an asset rather than a liability; they keep communities active and vibrant, they keep jobs locally, they strengthen local economies, they keep young families in small towns, they engage the older people in the community, they allow opportunities for volunteering - all things that contribute to happy, healthy communities.

One small example of the flow-on effect into the community of a thriving small school: The Carocar P&C cater for bus tours at the local School of Arts Hall and monies raised are split between the school and the hall. The funds that go to the hall are a big contribution to it's running costs, keeping a beautiful historic building, that also houses the local RSL museum, available to the public and part of an active community. The tour groups also enjoy the hospitality of the historical society, the local businesses and tour other local buildings. The loss of these tours in this village would be a big one and deeply felt. The actions of the DEC in this matter have the potential to have dire consequences for the entire community and rural and regional NSW as a whole.

We believe that communities should have a say in how their schools are run, local knowledge is a valuable asset. If 'local schools, local decisions' actually meant something our community would still have a vibrant school, with a passionate, caring leader who is part of the community. DEC policy needs to change, their internal term 'serial closer' needs to disappear. A Principal who has closed a school (let alone two or more) should not be put in charge of another small school. The DEC manoeuvring and bullying that sees these small schools fail with the school deliberately made unworkable by the DEC, only for the DEC to stand back and say "...but the community didn't support the school..." needs to stop.