

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

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 9/08/2015

Partially Confidential

Submission into the Closure of public schools in New South Wales.

I am making a submission to the Closure of Public Schools after the consultation process I experienced since 2009 with the relocation of Gosford Public School. I hope the committee might be able to take into consideration the impact on our families when schools are closed and relocated or merged into other schools. There are impacts on a generation of students when decisions to make changes are made for future students that cannot be measured.

Public schools are the centre of many communities. The location is important and should be accessible by public transport so that the facilities such as the hall and playgrounds can be used by the wider community. This is also an important source of fundraising revenue for schools to provide extra resources for their students. Many schools rely on volunteer help and Gosford Public School has experienced a loss of revenue and volunteers as there is not enough parking and it is no longer on the public bus route at the centre of Gosford. Closing down schools is disenfranchising the least advantaged members of society who rely on public services, particularly women or people with disabilities who might not drive or have access to a car to take children to school. There is also value in being able to walk to your local schools and promote healthy living and communities. There are financial costs and things like extra travel and increased fees in changing schools. There is a toll on the community and it is hard to measure the socio-economic impact. Not everyone has the time, energy, experience or resources to participate in the process. To just remain informed required parents to be pro active and attend meetings as little information was communicated in the newsletter and the community was sometimes informed via the local news.

Much of the process was political and went around in circles between the schools, the Council, the Education Department and different branches of the government who all seemed to have more interest in the value of the old school site as opposed to the outcome of relocating a school. To this day the Minister of Education has still yet to visit Gosford Public School even though he was on the Central Coast during the election. In the end it is the community that are left to carry out the decisions of the government and there is an importance in consistency of care in overseeing transitions for students and staff. Though some changes have been imposed by bringing in new executive staff and closing discussions as they have their directives and have no need to honour past promises.

It is hard to argue the purely educational benefits of new facilities or access to more resources at larger schools to the exclusion of the wider political and historical context of small school closures. Public schools were sold off in Sydney and now there is a problem with overcrowding. It seems that they are setting our schools up for the same problems because while promoting growth and development in regional areas the government closed down Wyong Grove Public School which had student numbers just under 100 and merged it with Wyong Public School. Gosford Public School with over 500 students was co-located with Henry Kendall High School when there were other options in Gosford where the DEC owned the land. Though Henry Kendall High School would have missed out on much needed renovations if Gosford Public School was built on an independent site.

We documented everything and collected photographic evidence of the process of demolition and construction but are pretty powerless to do anything about the lies and misrepresentation. The school collected a petition of over 10,500 signatures to have the relocation of Gosford Public School into Henry Kendall High School debated in parliament but it was used by the government to promote their own policies. They did not address or alleviate community concerns and as predicted the school was not finished by December 2013 and in fact the contractor boasted of completing the works four months early to open in term two 2014.

Despite years of consultation and planning, the primary school was rushed to be built. The concrete is cracked throughout the school and is not sealed properly as it is still dusty. The field was not accessible for the first term on site. There were safety issues with unfinished railings and it was just not the state-of-the-art new school it was promoted to be. New facilities age quickly and surely better planning and preventative action saves time and costs in fixing up faulty building works later. The larger modern classrooms are an enormous improvement to enhance the learning areas but this was a given.

It was continually reiterated at many meetings about the relocation that what the school had at the old site would be replaced in the new school. So all the playground equipment, COLA's and covering for the walkways were given to other schools. Gosford Public School P&C were told to prepared for was the cost of replacing the air-conditioning in the new school but not all the additional costs. It will now take years for the community to save for appropriate shade for the quadrangle. The P&C has been able to cover the cost of replacing the play equipment and shading that area, equipment for the hall and other resources because the school is fortunate to be the beneficiary of the Chapman bequest. A small school would find it impossible to raise the hundreds of thousands extra in costs associated with the relocation. The landscaping and playground looked nothing like the concept plans that were presented in the DA despite the millions invested by the government.

We were told it was a unique situation but there are schools in Sydney that could easily demonstrate that putting two schools on one site creates more problems with overcrowding than consolidating resources and it actually cost more to make it work in this case. Putting two schools on one site means the schools are at full capacity and there is no room for growth at Henry Kendall High School or Gosford Public School and it may mean installing portable classrooms on limited playground space unless the department changes the zoning to keep the numbers capped or builds another school. There was a period of misrepresentation where it was promoted that the schools would be completely separate but the schools in fact share a building and playground. It seems there was an ability to manipulate the evidence to suit decisions made long ago and obtain exemptions to avoid compliance with government guidelines and standards. Gradually there was just a loss of confidence in the process and we just have to accept the inevitable and the school was just left to manage problems as they arose and appeal internally to the DEC to have things fixed.

The relocation of Gosford Public School was a public process so there were many levels of consultation throughout the years and the DEC produced plans, pamphlets, PowerPoint presentations and seemed available to answers questions but sometimes they didn't have the answers either. Everyone seemed to be following directions but not even the Education Minister appears to take responsibility for the relocation.

It is unfair of politicians to give false hope and say they will keep small schools open if they can see that their enrolments will increase because Wyong Grove Public School was closed swiftly at the end of 2013. The DEC have known exactly what schools they would close for years and they don't get the same level of consultation or transition time or funding to merge with other schools. There doesn't seem to be any process to be able to save our schools and even if a public school could legally challenge decisions imposed on them, the funding would be better spent providing better facilities or resources for the school.

There were public announcements and funding invested in promoting the old school site for development made long before consultation with the community and approval had been given to

relocate the school. The government invested millions of dollars in demolition and initial works at Henry Kendall High School pre-empting the approval process.

The Development Application to relocate Gosford Public School had a hearing before the Joint Regional Planning Panel in 2012 so I accept our appeal was unsuccessful. Small schools don't have any of these opportunities to be heard. It is very difficult to get a meeting with the Education Minister and our representatives only got a meeting after being interviewed by Alan Jones on 2GB. Attached is the letter received responding to issues raised at that meeting.

After such a lengthy consultation process the community was worn out. What broke my spirit was that the Department of Education could not even keep their promises and assurances that they would not demolish the old buildings at Henry Kendall during school hours. They also promised Gosford Public School would not be moved until the new school was complete. Instead of packing up the school over the holidays and relocating when the new school was complete as promised, they started packing up the school, closing off playgrounds and digging up the site during term. Even the sign was taken down before the school closed, there was no respect.

The final consultation meeting in December 2013 before the relocation of Gosford Public School, Mr Singh the representative from NSW Public Works was withdrawn at the last minute so we couldn't ask specific questions about the building works. All the school could do was run a generic presentation to advertise the new school despite the many pressing questions that could not be answered. Meetings throughout the years of consultation went on like this and discussion is limited.

As a community we tried to take preventative action and participate in the process because building a new school should be a wonderful opportunity but it feels like our efforts were in vain. So not only was trying to participate in consultation of relocating the primary school to a new location nerve racking the works at Henry Kendall High School didn't get the same level of consultation with the school community as they were internal works. Therefore the renovations started long before approval to move the primary school to the site was given. This impact on the staff and students was just collateral damage as their spaces were reduced. The contractors seemed to take no care to do major works during school holidays and in the extended times authorised outside of school hours. These kind of major reconstructions impacted on a whole generation of students. The Principal did the best he could to manage the difficult conditions, including dust and noise, but he wouldn't have had to if they worked outside of school hours and during school holidays.

There have been many ideas about what the community wants for the old school site but it was a thriving school. The government representatives lied to the people saying the site was needed for a performance arts centre and there were ideas that it could be combined with the school. Since this time the local Central Coast Grammar School built their own performance arts centre, now that's state-of-the-art. What the public got was two schools on one site. The schools have halls side by side that required another investment for sound proofing and to improve the acoustics in both halls instead of the shared block. We were told the school needed to move because the old site was too small but the new location in the high school is no bigger, it is over crowded and noisy sharing a site. The former school had separate play areas for infants and primary students and so the playground areas have been reduced further. Bell times between the schools had to be synchronised, instead of staggered for more play space, due to the noise. This has added increased hours on the canteen and loss of revenue.

Even though there were obvious unfinished conditions when the school opened the DEC couldn't confirm that the all clear was given for occupancy of the new school especially keeping in mind the

age range of the students. I couldn't get an answer about whether there was a Design Certification Certificate issued. Information from Council said this would assure all the building codes and standards had been met and they complied with the conditions of consent. It was just something for the experts to manage and we were just told it was safe and that the teachers preferred to move into the new school sooner rather than later. Delaying the move would have saved the disruptions to the students studying for the HSC in 2014 but there seemed to be a rush to occupy the old site as well. The old school site now lies vacant so what was the real hurry to demolish the old school? It was the 60th Anniversary of the school on the waterfront in 2014 and this year is 150 years since Gosford Public School first started in 1865. They could have waited until the school was fully finished to relocate instead of being rushed off site, this was disappointing. We had a lot of consultation but were the teachers or parent representatives even heard?

The plans to "improve footpath access, and road and parking on Faunce Street West" are yet to be completed by Gosford Council. The school is no longer in a convenient location, the traffic is congested, there is not enough parking and there is no public bus stop at the new school. It has been known for decades the infrastructure is inadequate in this area of Gosford with unfinished streets, steep terrain and no footpaths. A school crossing was promised in the DA but the Council's Traffic Committee decided it wasn't needed. With buses driving on the wrong side of the road and cars not following the road rules, the safety of pedestrians is compromised by their decision to withdraw the crossing outside the school. What can you do? The community no longer has the energy to continue to lobby for what was promised and is just getting on with education and leaving it all to the Principal and teachers to manage as best they can.

These decisions imposed on schools are blamed on the ebb and flow of government yet when we ask for the government to help the parliament seems reluctant to intervene into the Department of Education decisions. It goes around in circles. Who enforces the basic requirement to consult with communities that already exist around school closures?

"Independent consultants" are recruited from within the Department of Education. So when they appoint the Principal from the neighbouring school to review a closure or relocation their independent status is questionable but complaints go nowhere. As a parent and member of the P&C I often felt I was sent in circles to find the truth about what was happening between the P&C, the school Principal, the various people in the DEC responsible for answering my question, the Council to the local member and the Premier, who only make false promises at election time to obtain votes. It is hard when the community are up against powerful people and groups who are paid to lobby the government and consultation seems to just be going through the motions as everything is predetermined. The community may even be seen as a nuisance rather than key stakeholders and regulations are just hurdles to overcome. Rather than consultation at times divisive instructions were imposed on our community to silence dissent and if we complain about the outcome or the process it appears as if we are critiquing the school or public education. This is not the case as the school continues to thrive in a new environment and the students outcomes prove they are good schools.

Throughout the whole process the schools had to operate as normal and it is a credit to the Principals and staff that the schools managed with the transition so nobody wants to undermine all the hard work they have done. They have had to put in a lot more extra hours and work over the years to make the transition to a new school work with little thanks. Though this school can afford to cease lobbying because they do have the money to cover the shortfall, other schools would not have this luxury. The community made the most of what we could of the due process available to save our school and were still disappointed every step of the way. I feel that small schools don't

even get that level of consultation. The reforms imposed on the P&C Federation have also limited parents at public schools ability to network, lobby and have a representative voice on public education.

There seems to be little consideration for the length of time a school may have been established and the historic value of a school at the centre of communities. There are many differences in public schools in one area let alone in the state which arises to suit that community's needs. By having a range of small schools and larger schools the Department of Education can cater to the diversity of students and families in a wider community learning area with different schools specialising in particular services.

I thank you for the time to outline some of the experience of closing and relocating Gosford Public School. Even one of the top schools on the Central Coast with a large student enrolment is not safe from having their school sold off because it is in a good location. The only consideration in planning seems to be selling off public assets and misleading the public into believing they will get some benefit out of it. The Education Minister, The Minister for the Central Coast and the local Member identified our school as a surplus site, when the school was at capacity. There should be measures to stop schools being pushed off site like that and pushed out of their cities and communities. We raised a very large lobby campaign and it was dismissed as being lead by the NSW Teachers Federation which was not true as the concern was raised by the school community and we reached out to every politician and organisation that would listen. What do small communities do?

People put their lives on hold, jobs were impacted, relationships affected and such a process can be quite divisive so it impacted our P&C and school community. You had to be persistent to remain informed because we were excluded from the process at times and so could not ask questions about what we did not know until long after decisions were made and it's too late. At times when parents asked legitimate questions we were at best placated and told not to worry or have fear of change, and at worst we were treated with contempt, intimidated, threatened with legal action, sent in circles and silenced in meetings. There was discrimination towards parents but is too much to ask to remain informed and for the DEC to keep their promises?

There has been a lot of reform in the Education Department but schools are competing for resources and the promises politicians are able to make to improve some schools and not others during elections must not help to make the best planning decisions. Public Schools are a valuable asset in building communities and make up a big part of our lives. It doesn't make our children feel very valued when they can be so easily pushed aside and not consulted either.