

**INQUIRY INTO ENROLMENT CAPACITY IN INNER CITY
PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

Name: Ms Lisa O'Brien

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To General Purpose Standing Committee No. 3 (f) Any other related matters As a parent of two Ultimo Public School attending children I am saddened by the negative effect the short-sighted 'redevelopment' decision of the Department of Education (the Department) is having on our community. I would like to provide a chronology of events I have experienced since becoming part of the Ultimo Public School community. In 2012, I attended one of my first ever Ultimo Public School P&C Association meetings and witnessed a presentation by the Department of Education, who advocated a 'cost-neutral redevelopment solution' to an increase in enrolments in the school (due to increasing inner-city residential developments). I was horrified to hear a proposal that a multi-story residential building would be built on the existing small Ultimo school site, with the Ultimo school included as a 'tenant' as part of the proposal. Every parent at the meeting objected to what was obviously a ridiculous initiative, one that did not consider security or the full range of education curriculum, including sporting activities and children's socialisation. Soon after this presentation, that highlight the current government's concern for cost effective solutions over optimal education outcomes, it was announced that this plan would not go ahead. In fact, Minister Piccoli said in November 2012, "Media reports ...indicated that the P&C did not want to pursue the option the department proposed. The Premier and I said that if the community does not want it, it will not go ahead - end of story."(<http://www.altmedia.net.au/government-scraps-ultimo-school-sell-off/66084>). In 2013 the school's enrolments continued to increase due to increasing multi-story residential developments. In December 2014 Minister Piccoli MP, visited the school and announced as a pre-election commitment, that a Liberal Government would deliver a new school for Ultimo on a new site on the corner of Fig & Wattle Streets by "Day 1, Term 1, 2018" (<http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/about-us/news-at-det/media-releases1/new-site-chosen-for-ultimo-pyrmont-school>). Our school and community was thrilled to know that a new, larger school would be co-located with other well-considered community facilities including child care, a school that would meet the needs of our

area for many years to come - there was much rejoicing! No doubt, it had its desired effect of ensuring local residents voted for the Liberal government's forward thinking. However, in mid-2015, immediately after the State election, the Department of Education returned to their original 'redevelopment' of the existing Ultimo school site idea (on the pretext of mis-budgeted decontamination costs). This was a complete shock to our community and a disgrace by the Liberal Party. It is important to note that while Minister Piccoli announced the pre-election commitment of a new Ultimo school in person at the school with much media fanfare, we have not heard from the Minister or Liberal since - it was clear that they had got our vote and that was their only aim. Since that time, our community have been asking Minister Piccoli and the NSW State Government to reconsider this shocking 'back flip', however, the key message has been that the pre-election announcement was in principle and its reversal was a Department decision, based on a blown out costing methodology for the remediation costs on the site. At no stage was the Ultimo Public School P&C or community consulted about this issue, nor were we, or the 'Inner City Schools Working Party' (a consultative party suddenly disbanded by the Department), provided the opportunity to work with the Department on viable solutions, including public private partnerships. The proposal as now stands, means my children will be educated for two to four years in a tiny demountable school on a dog track. It is far from ideal, and a real reason why I am considering moving my children from this great school to an alternative, stable school. Just as Minister Adrian Piccoli has said himself: "Every parent, teacher and student knows that learning in a demountable classroom is no alternative to learning in a real classroom. Our kids should not be languishing in second-rate facilities like demountable classrooms"

(<https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/committees/DBAssets/InquiryEventTranscript/Transcript/9737/Transcript%20-%20Uncorrected%20-%20160829%20-%20GPSC3%20-%20Education%20-%20Piccoli.pdf> - p. 6). I also believe that schools are critical connecting hubs for children and families, especially for those

living in high-rise apartment buildings rather than in a traditional street community environment. It is a place for children to meet friends, to learn and be physically active. A place of stability and security, where they are able to run within safe natural spaces, and to participate in a wide range of sporting activities with fellow students and neighbouring schools. Sport and space are so important in an age of increasing obesity and other health related issues, and is in line with the whole-of-government systematic approach by the NSW Government goal to “reduce overweight and obesity rates of children and young people by 5%” per their ‘Keep people healthy and out of Hospital’ target as outlined in the NSW 2021 State Plan. Public schools with enough classrooms and green play spaces are currently available to children living in many established suburbs and towns in New South Wales - they help children explore and reach their full potential in every area of ability. It is time for the renewed Ultimo & Pyrmont suburbs to boast that they too have a school with sustainable and first-rate sporting and community facilities that are 'fit for the future'. Our community is culturally rich and diverse, and is the most densely populated region in our state. Our community deserves no less. Current and future generations of inner-city children must be provided with the best possible public educational facility while there is still land available. Yours faithfully Lisa O'Brien Ultimo Public School P&C Association (Treasurer)