

**Submission  
No 25**

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

**Name:** Mr William Anthes

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[Gpsc3@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Gpsc3@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

Inquiry into inner city schools

### ULTIMO PUBLIC SCHOOL

16 YEARS OF MISCALCULATIONS, MISTAKES, INTERRUPTIONS, OVERSIGHTS,  
DISAPPOINTMENTS, DECEPTIONS, WASTED TIME AND RESOURCES

The development of Ultimo Public School over the past 16 years is littered with missteps. Each time the school has required more growing space, the first response from the Ministry of Education seems to have been to select an untenable option, delay for a while, turn around and progress a more reasonable plan, pause, adopt yet another option, and finally delivers a result that takes too much time, wastes too much money and doesn't produce the best result for the long term.

In the latest long running exercise, the Project Reference Group has been capably led and serviced but has been given the almost impossible task of prosecuting and delivering on a highly unpopular, expensive and overly complicated project. The current project is best understood by reviewing the School history over the past 16 years.

2000-2002

The Department of Education determined that Ultimo Public School should close and the site should be sold with students to be transferred to Glebe Public School. The rationale: The school wasn't required because parents living in high-rise units who had children would move to the suburbs.

The Department refused to confirm or deny this determination in spite of rumours that the land would be sold to developers.

The P&C and Pyrmont Ultimo communities mounted a concerted protest against the rumoured closure given the likely increase in the number of students in opposition to the demographic advice of the Department.

Some parents prepared to enrol their children in private schools and public schools in Glebe, Forest Lodge, Balmain, and Fort Street.

The Ultimo Public School P&C lodged an application under Freedom of Information legislation to confirm the rumoured closure. After a lengthy delay, the application stalled because the Department claimed it was too broad.

The Department eventually reconsidered the closure and determined that the school should be rebuilt and that the P&C be consulted at the design stage.

The P&C made a number of proposals that were adopted in the final design. One recommendation by the P&C that wasn't accepted was that 16 classrooms rather than 12 classrooms should be built.

The Department disagreed stating that 12 classrooms would future proof the school for 30 years and that the site was too small and could not support more than 300 students.

The P&C also requested that students be moved to a temporary school on Wentworth Park for one year while the new school was built. The Department determined that getting permission and providing services in the park would be too difficult.

The Department decided that the students would instead be moved to and from temporary buildings at Orange Grove Public School in Lilyfield involving up to 1 and ½ hours travel time each school day for one year.

The temporary School ran relatively smoothly during the construction, but some records and equipment were lost during reconstruction.

#### 2003-2011

The newest school in the city attracted a growing number of students as the population continued to increase in what was planned to be and has become the most densely populated area in Australia. The Department was soon forced to reduce the catchment of the school. New students coming from adjoining areas were no longer able to attend the school. Instead, these students were forced to travel greater distances to other schools or moved into private schooling.

In 2008 (just 5 years into the Department's planned 30 year capacity for the school) a demountable classroom was installed in the car park on Wattle Street to cope with increasing student numbers.

Also in 2008, a second classroom and new toilet block were built on school grounds with Federal Government BER (Building Educational Revolution) funding. The school community had argued for two new classrooms but instead had to retain the demountable classroom.

From 2008 to 2011 the school population grew and further enrolment restrictions were imposed.

#### 2012

Because of continuing development of Pymont, the community was confronted with the ultimate reduction in the school catchment that would result in virtually all Ultimo students being excluded from Ultimo Public School.

On 15 October 2012, the Department met with the P&C Association to propose the alternatives of adding a number of demountable classrooms, moving students to a redeveloped Glebe Public School or selling the school to a private developer that would build a new high-rise development incorporating a new much larger school, residential and commercial units. The P&C immediately rejected the proposal.

Three days later on 18 October 2012, the Minister issued a press release stating that no development would occur until the Community was consulted.

A large Community Meeting held in the School Hall on 7 November 2012 roundly criticised and unanimously rejected all these proposals as totally unacceptable.

The Department established the Inner City Schools Working Party in late 2012 to assist in the ongoing review of public education in the inner city.

### 2013

Between 13 February and 14 November 2013 the Inner City Schools Working Party made up of representatives of Education Department, School, P&C, City of Sydney, Public Works met 12 times and thoroughly investigated all available sites in the Ultimo Pyrmont area including (amongst others) the existing school site, Glebe Public School, 100 Harris Street, and the Council Depot site at Wattle and Fig Streets site. At the conclusion of this series of meetings and in spite of the necessity to undertake remediation, the Depot site was the unanimous choice of the Working Party.

### 2014

The Minister accepted the advice of the Department and on 3 February 2014 the Project Reference Group (PRG) was established. Twelve members were initially appointed including the Project Manager (MacLachlan Lister), school and P&C representatives as well as Departmental and other educational experts to provide advice regarding the design of the new school. Later a further two community representatives were added to the PRG.

In the ensuing nine lengthy meetings beginning 13 February, the committee enthusiastically established a united vision for what was to be “the best primary school in Australia”. Many exciting features were specifically proposed to provide students (most of whom live in high-rise accommodation) with enough space to support a comprehensive educational experience. An important planning element in these meetings was the need to address the growing shortage of classrooms in Sydney. It was agreed that the school should be built to eventually accommodate 1000 students. Discussions also addressed educational principles, the shortage of childcare and OOSH places as well as shared sporting and community facilities. Students and staff were consulted. During this period, a proposed budget for the school passed a NSW Treasury Review. Concept designs were also prepared and reviewed by the PRG.

In mid 2014 negotiations appeared to have stalled over the cost of decontamination. Following the postponement of PRG meetings, the Executive Director of the Assets Directorate of the DoE, Anthony Perrau reintroduced the concept of building a high-rise school on the existing site. Once again the School community comprehensively rejected the idea of rebuilding on the same site that the Department had previously insisted was too small for a larger building.

After another angry public meeting rejecting the high-rise concept again, four PRG meetings were held and late in the year the CoS offered to accept a lower price for the land to compensate the Department for a higher level of decontamination. On 15 December, Community members were greatly relieved when two years after the school reached capacity the Minister visited the School and formally announced in front of the media that a new school for 1000 students would be built on the Council Depot site.

## 2015-2016

Although the PRG continued to meet occasionally in early 2015, the emphasis seemed to have moved away from planning for the school on the new site. Unsettling information circulated within the community about difficulties in negotiations between the City and the Department Assets Directorate with each side blaming the other for delays in completing the contract. Finally with the deadline fast approaching, it was announced by the Education Ministry that the cost of decontamination would not allow the school to be built on the chosen site. This decision was made without any further core drilling having been undertaken to justify these additional decontamination claims. In fact more economical decontamination plans had been recommended by Departmental consultants and repeatedly ignored. Various documents have since revealed that the Education Ministry had for some time been against constructing a larger school on the larger site. It appeared that Anthony Perrau had been pushing to go back to the high-rise concept on the current site. The release of selected documents by the Ministry made it appear that the Lord Mayor's office was responsible for the failure to purchase the new site. One document revealed a plan to mollify the expected public backlash from the community. Both the School and wider communities believed the Minister was cynically renegeing on a promise made before the March 2015 NSW State elections.

The PRG was forced to start over on a smaller but completely different sort of school project to be jammed onto the existing cramped site. The PRG again led by senior Education Departmental staff and the Project Manager and supporting Departmental staff have consistently worked to best deliver on what has been a confusing and expensive exercise in waste. The additional problem of housing students on a temporary site had to be addressed. The designs and negotiations are still ongoing more than a year later. Decontamination of both the temporary and existing sites are still to be fully addressed. The design concepts for the new school are yet to be considered by the PRG but are likely to show a reduction in

classroom sizes and more shared services than other modern schools in NSW. Outdoor and play areas will have to be greatly reduced.

The Minister's backflip over building the new Ultimo Public School continues to cause anger in the great majority of Ultimo Pyrmont organisations and individuals. For more than four years the Minister has likely wasted millions of dollars without one more student place being provided. Instead the School has been unsettled with many parents choosing to enrol their kindergarten students elsewhere. Even more disturbing, some existing students are being withdrawn from the School rather than spending up to three years in a temporary school and then being moved to a cramped high-rise school.

The Project Reference Group continues to work to provide the best school possible within the strictures dictated by the Ministry. However, if this plan is permitted to continue, there is little doubt there will be further disruption to staff and students. Eventually, Pyrmont, Ultimo and surrounding areas will end up with a smaller, overcrowded school built on an inadequate site with fewer shared community amenities at a higher cost for each student place. Importantly, Ultimo Public School will be unfit for the future long-term population growth of Sydney.

William James Day d'Anthes

Life Member and Former President  
Ultimo Public School Parents and Citizens Association  
Member Ultimo/Pyrmont Public School Project Reference Group  
Former Member Inner City Schools Working Party