

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

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Partially
Confidential

Our Perspective

When we moved to Sydney and settled in Pymont 5 years ago with a 2 year old in tow, we didn't give any thought at all to what school options were around – it all seemed a long way off.

In the years that ensued, we heard bits and pieces from time to time about something concerning a new school, or that the school would be closing down, but we didn't really worry about it too much, trusting that the Public School system would ensure we always had a place to go when the time came – why wouldn't it?

When our once 2 year old was 4, we started to be curious about what our options were. We looked at IGS, and quickly discarded it for multiple reasons. We poked around the website, talked to people we met in the area and ultimately enrolled at Ultimo Public.

We attended the induction sessions in the lead up to starting Kindergarten. We were impressed at the friendliness, openness and welcoming atmosphere that was clearly apparent, and clearly remember looking at the photos of the indigenous players from the Swans hanging on the wall in the Hall and thinking how wonderful it was that they were held up as role models for the kids. As the next year started we sent our now 5 year old off to start one of life's biggest adventures without reservation.

During that first year, we were constantly amazed and surprised at the levels of inclusiveness, respect, the lack of stratification between age groups in the playground, and the consistent approach to encouraging and welcoming diversity. As parents, all we had were our own school experiences to prepare us, and we were delighted to see that (at this school at least), all the 'bad' things that we remembered happening like being 'scared of the big kids', bullying and being picked on for being 'different' had been completely eliminated. The more we learned about the teachers, students and parents that were associated with the school, the more we came to realise what a special place we had been lucky enough to find.

There were few conversations initially about the 'new school' or the future of Ultimo Public. Whenever they happened, we were assured that the school would continue – regardless of when or where any sort of redevelopment would happen. We are generally open to change and new things, and the thought of a new facility really excited us and we realised what a great opportunity it would be for our (now 2) children to be educated in a brand new facility designed around contemporary pedagogical thinking.

In December 2014 as the Lindt Café siege was underway we experienced an incredible juxtaposition - that terrible event, contrasted with genuine delight in learning that a deal had been struck for the Wattle, Fig and Jones site which meant that we would soon be starting the process to design a new school.

There was much joy displayed at by some at the school. There was a sense of achievement and progress. We were happy that our shared future was underway.

Then the news 6 months later via word of mouth from the P&C that the deal had fallen through. Not only that it had fallen through, but that the bulldozers would be at the front door on the last day of the year tearing the walls down, together with horrendous horror stories about bussing our kids 2 hours each way during school hours to another already full school, and that there was no plan in place past that for Ultimo. Naturally, our reactions were pretty strongly. We didn't know it then, but what we were being told was at best cynically inflammatory and at worst, utter fabrication, designed to stoke anger, fear and distrust in the DoE.

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While there was an obvious personal impact on us, as construction industry professionals we also felt that there must have been more to the story than we were being told. At that point it wasn't clear who was concealing what, but the rationalisations and logic being presented was absurd. Of course we were being told daily via the community that the DoE was incompetent, but that still wasn't enough in our view to suggest a better outcome wasn't still possible. Our response was to try and talk to someone from the DoE familiar with the project to get a first hand account of what had gone wrong and try and get them to empathise with our position, but this was discouraged by our representatives despite the fact that we were now involved in the P&C executive committee.

At the extraordinary P&C meeting at the school on the evening of June 17th 2015 where Murat Dizdar tried to explain the reasons behind the decision, it struck us that the meeting was not intended to allow multiple viewpoints to be heard or to allow people to become well informed of the details behind the decision. It was a partisan political rally, an opportunity to vent and spill anger, an exercise in blame rather than making practical progress. Representatives and views from the City of Sydney (painted as the good guys) were welcomed, and from the DoE (the baddies), were not. In our eyes, political grandstanding and weasel words were flying left and right and people were being presented at best with an editorialised message and at worst straight up propaganda. This was a massive red light that there was more going on than met the eye but we still didn't know exactly what. What was even more disconcerting was the groupthink that was cultivated (and allowed to propagate). There was however, a small group of parents for whom what was happening didn't pass the sniff test and we were keen to uncover the mystery, so we began to pool resources and contacts.

We were discouraged by our P&C from taking any initiative to talk to the DoE at any level, or the project managers or anyone involved with actual knowledge of what had transpired and why. We were uneasy about that approach, favouring knowledge over hearsay and believing that open communication solves most problems. In hindsight it seems ridiculous that we allowed ourselves to feel isolated from the DoE. This happened because the prevailing culture from our community representatives was to totally limit contact and the flow of information between parents and the project team when their role should have been the opposite. Looking back it feels like we were manipulated into believing that the DoE are staffed by a bunch of child-hating evil devil-monsters intent on destroying our school community for all time – yes, it was that silly. In the absence of ongoing direct communication from the DoE to parents, or information from those with the leadership skills and authority to turn the tide of sentiment and anger, many parents and people in the community had nothing else to believe than the false emotional hogwash that was being pedalled.

Not long after this incendiary meeting the DoE released the Douglas Partners contamination report on the Wattle/Fig/Jones site. We had not been previously aware of the high levels of contamination on the site and what we read was alarming. We were concerned that this site had ever been considered to be appropriate for a school and quite why our community representatives were so keen for our children to be put at such risk is still a mystery. We completely agree with the Department's decision to use the costing for full decontamination of the site rather than the lower cost options but it's also self-evident that if you do, the site becomes prohibitively expensive.

We now understand that the City of Sydney refused DoE consultants permission for meaningful testing and analysis that would have determined with far greater accuracy what the remediation costs for that site would be. It is our firm belief that this approach was undertaken in order to

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maintain a negotiating position that maximised the sale price and profit to the CoS, at the cost of our community, and we believe is ultimately why negotiations ceased. For the CoS and their supporters to continually and solely blame the NSW government and the DoE for this whole situation is ironic.

Our community representatives completely rejected the report and to this day contend that it and the remediation costings are a fabrication at the behest of the DoE. We're really reaching tin foil hat territory here. Still with the vain belief that facts might change minds we interrogated the document ourselves and built a digital 3D topographical model of the bedrock to verify the Quantity Surveyors calculations. Our calculation matched the estimate that was in the report, which gave us confidence that the costs were based on sound data. To this day we are convinced that the majority of the community is oblivious to contents of the Douglas Partners report on the Wattle/Fig/Jones site and it's implications to the ongoing health of the community.

Putting the actual decontamination levels and how they are remediated aside, the prospect of spending \$100 million on one site (without starting to build the building itself) and the inevitable result that this would have on other public schools and children in NSW seemed highly unnecessary in our view - given we have a perfectly uncontaminated, lovely site that is already owned and that brings continuity and meaning to our community, having had our school on it for a century already.

In July 2015 a position opened up on the Project Reference Group (PRG) and our anxiety rapidly dissipated subsequent to attending the first meeting. After trying to decode scant information for months, it was instantly obvious that the school community had been treated as mushrooms by their own representatives. In being able to speak directly with the people responsible for delivering the project, we quickly found that information was freely shared, questions were rationally answered, there was a clear plan to resolve uncertainty (and there were no child-hating evil devil-monsters trying to ruin our lives). Personally, we were now confident that our children's future and education at UPS was assured. Sleep came fast that night and we woke up smiling.

So how could we pass on that relief and confidence to others? We have simply listened to and empathised with concerns, encouraged people to ask questions and seek answers for themselves rather than insisting on blind belief in our perspective, highlighted avenues for information and communication and have tried to replace emotion and fear with optimism and facts wherever possible. It turned out to be easy for some people to accept they had been deceived, but has proved almost impossible for others.

We now know that what we had been told about our school being demolished in 2015 was a complete fabrication by our 'community leaders'. As were the stories about being bussed for 2 hours each way to an already full school (or multiple schools). It seems pretty clear that 'community leaders' attempted to restrain and discourage direct communication with the DoE in an attempt to control and 'create' information that suited their prevailing views. Their assertion that "we must remain united as a community" was an attempt to crush any and all opposing views. There has been continual dismissal of the Douglas Partners Decontamination report as incorrect and overstated. 'Community leaders' have sustained a campaign that has led to a huge degree of mis-information circulating in the community, appears to be acting against the educational outcomes for our children, has increased levels of stress and anxiety for many families, and led to a reduction in the school population in a community that is supposedly growing exponentially. All of which in our view is ironic and incredibly sad.

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Additional to all of this is the almost inevitable decay in the culture of our school given this backdrop. Our school community is split in ways unimaginable before all this started. There are some who are willingly ignorant of the attempts the DoE have made to communicate the positive and constructive progress that is being made - and hide behind that ignorance in order to maintain their rage. There are many who are unwilling to get involved because of the overbearing personalities in the community who do not support any form of pluralism. There are those who are so upset at the lack of leadership being demonstrated that they have actively disengaged from the process and from school life itself in order to regain a sense of personal equilibrium. Those of us who are trying to engage in a positive manner with the process are ridiculed, belittled and aggressively challenged as to why we are not “supporting the school” – even within P&C meetings at the school (where we had believed that such behaviour should be abhorrent). There has been picketing and badgering at the front gates of the school in front of the children, treating them like political pawns in an adult game, using the children themselves to pass out fliers and pose for fatuous media articles utterly devoid of investigation and balance, and not in the least for being ostracised for merely holding differing views.

This is no longer the same school that we were delighted to find wholeheartedly embracing of respect and inclusiveness, and that felt welcoming and warm. Diversity of opinion on this topic has not been welcomed or encouraged. The positive momentum regarding the progress the DoE and their consultants have made is not clearly and directly communicated or indeed, championed as well as it should be through standard school avenues. For us and many others, this is no longer a school community as happy as it was. It is tense, it is fractured and increasingly dysfunctional. So much time, effort and unnecessary emotional turmoil has been spent on this topic and has drowned out other, much more valuable aspects of school life.

Thankfully, with the resolution of the location for the pop up school site, parents are now beginning to express relief that the future seems to be nowhere near as dark as was predicted; in fact far from it. Those peddling a bleak future are increasingly marginalised while paradoxically screaming their outrage louder and louder. For those who are engaging in the process and are positive there is palpable excitement about what the pop-up school and new school represents in terms of pedagogical opportunities not only for our children, but for those who continue at Ultimo Public School long after ours leave - which surely should have been the focus all along.