

Submission to ACT Department of Education and Training.

I write to you as a parent of a child at Gilmore Primary School and a resident in Gilmore's PEA.

I would like to state a case for Gilmore Pre and Primary Schools to remain open.

1. The Departmental data pertaining to Gilmore Primary's capacity is seriously flawed. Gilmore Primary, with 270-plus students, is currently at full capacity when correctly assessing its student numbers based on its permanent infrastructure. The capacity of Gilmore is nowhere near the 625 calculated by the Department on its Fact Sheet. It has certainly been a large school in the past - to the detriment of the students at the time. For example, during those times, many eligible children missed places in the school band (not enough instruments, which are allocated, per school, by the Band Program). Nor could all students fit in the school hall for assemblies (classes had to be rostered off). The school had to hire Erindale Theatre for a production most schools would normally hold in their school hall/gym. This is the school size the Government is touting as ideal. Two of my children went through this school during this time; the size was far from ideal. Nevertheless the school has coped admirably, and has gone from strength to strength in the last few years as the numbers have *normalised*.

The Departmental capacity figure of 625 wrongly counts four double portable classrooms that, up to now, the Department has found it convenient to store at Gilmore. They are not fit for use at another school and are not maintained by the Department (though I believe that the Department disputes the latter). I understand that the Principal of Gilmore Primary is currently arranging for these portables to be removed by the Department to allow for a new assessment of Gilmore Primary's true (not falsely and conveniently inflated) capacity.

Gilmore Pre-school is full and thriving, and is currently also assisting Richardson Pre-School by making a portion of its facilities available to Special Needs pre-schoolers.

Neither the school nor the preschool fits the 'capacity criterion' that indicates possible closure. It should remain open due to its obvious numbers.

2. Departmental data showing costs per student shows that Gilmore Primary is not expensive. The average cost to educate a Gilmore student is \$9,261, which is actually lower than the ACT average of \$9,570 per student in a primary school. This shows that Gilmore is economically viable and places no financial burden on the ACT community. This flies in the face of the information disseminated by the Education Minister in the media about the 'high cost' of students in schools earmarked for closure.

Gilmore Primary therefore does not fit the 'cost per child criterion'. It should remain open due to its economic viability.

Gilmore Preschool, which is funded largely from voluntary contributions, is not a burden on the ACT taxpayer. It should remain

open due to its significant role in servicing children in the PEA who will naturally move on to Gilmore Primary (which is viable).

3. Gilmore Pre and Primary Schools have an excellent reputation in the local area, as well as attracting numerous children from out of area. Departmental figures show that 66% of students from the area are enrolled at the school and 23% of students enrolled at the school come from out of area. In a climate of movement towards private schools, 66% indicates excellent community support. Gilmore's local support is higher than two out of three schools in its cluster (Gowrie - 62% and Chisholm - 63%), neither of which are slated for closure. Located on the eastern boundary of the ACT, Gilmore is also attractive to children in newly developed areas (in NSW) such as Jerrabomberra and Royalla. This is because it is easily accessible by road from the Monaro Highway. The Premier of NSW extracted a guarantee from John Stanhope that the needs of NSW students would be considered in the consultation process. Keeping Gilmore open would affirm the Chief Minister's integrity on this issue.

Significantly, Gilmore Pre and Primary Schools have 95% community support (based on door-to-door petition results within PEA, where 95 per cent of the doorknocked homes in 80 per cent of its PEA were against the closures).

Supposed alternative schools for Gilmore families, such as Chisholm, Fadden and Gowrie, are not realistic geographic options for many Gilmore/Chisholm families in the PEA. (Please bear in mind that Chisholm is a large suburb - a good swathe of it is in Gilmore Primary's PEA and some of Chisholm is also part of Richardson Primary's PEA). Walking to Fadden or Gowrie Primary is out of the question for a child from Gilmore's PEA. It involves crossing Isabella Drive and walking through Fadden Pines. It is not possible to walk to the footbridge without crossing a busy road. I doubt if any parents would contemplate this. The other alternative, Chisholm, is in potential walking distance for a FEW in the outer areas of Chisholm (such as my own home - I am equidistant to both Gilmore and Chisholm but in Gilmore's PEA as the lie of the land lends itself that way) but impossible for MOST by foot. This is because of the layout of walking/bike paths.

Gilmore does not fit the 'geographical criterion' for closure. Gilmore is the only realistic geographical location for local families. Indisputable geographical reasons to remain open are Gilmore's strong local and out of area support, and geographical difficulties with the so-called alternative schools (which are not real alternatives).

4. Gilmore, with its 270-odd children, offers a wonderful educational program including its own full-time music teacher. It has two school bands and a choir (which has sung at Floriade for the last few years) and boasts a brilliant pastoral care structure. It has garden beds with children actively involved in their care, and has recently won a Federal grant under the Sustainable Schools Program. It already offers a 'high quality learning environment' and 'opportunities' for its students. Gilmore students will not gain, but will lose, from having to move to another, less attractive and supportive, educational environment. Enforcing a transition upon 270 children and their families can only be detrimental to these children's educational outcomes.

Gilmore does not fit the 'poorer curriculum choices criterion' foisted at schools on the list for closure. It offers a wide range of high quality, varied programs with excellent outcomes (as evidenced by its PIPS results) and closing this school will detrimentally affect a couple of hundred local families. This is unacceptable and grossly unreasonable.

5. Geographically, the school and preschool are in the heart of the suburb of Gilmore. The hall is hired out by community organisations such as tai kwon do, and its oval is well utilised by the wider community for organised sport practice, weekend sporting events and the usual community ad hoc enjoyments such as dog-walking, kite-flying and game-playing. Losing this facility and its shared green space will affect the wonderful, popular amenity of the entire PEA.

6. Most families (including mine) would prefer an educational alternative to a mega-school. I can assure you I don't want the local high school turning into one. It would be wise for the Department to leave a traditional Primary School, offering before and after school care and preschool, in the Gilmore/Chisholm area. All these services are currently available in the Gilmore School precinct. As explained above, Gowrie, Fadden, Chisholm or Richardson are not close enough to be real options for most families in the area. For example, I leave for work (by bus - or occasionally, by car) before any of my children leave for school. One High School child takes a bus, the other two walk to their local school. I do not have the option to drive them as I would be late for work and frankly I can't afford the petrol or car maintenance. If they had to go further than they do currently, they just would not be able to go anywhere. I do not have a partner to 'time-manage' with, and I would expect that with the new IR laws and the hardline Centrelink rules for sole parents/disabled (effectively eliminating the option to stay at home with one's children), there will be an increasing amount of disadvantaged families in a similar pressured circumstance.

There is every indication in the current school closures policy that the people making the decisions either have no children or are so well off as to have every option available so they can actually do what they please. This is not the case for many working families. It is quite wrong to assume that all these changes offer MORE choice. It is obvious to most that there will be less choice, and what remains is most inconvenient to get to by the ones who can least afford to have barriers placed in their educational pathways.

Keeping Gilmore open will ensure a traditional school model that will be chosen by many families (as Red Hill Primary currently is) in preference to a megaschool, and will continue to service those in the local area.

7. Term bus tickets are \$55.00 per student. In my case, my income is just over the health care card threshold (I am an APS 3) so I must pay for school bus travel. The annual cost for three children (if there actually IS a bus from here to their new 'local' school') is \$660. This is most prohibitive, and contrasts with conditions provided in other jurisdictions (for example, NSW) where school travel is free.

Keeping Gilmore open will prevent adding an unreasonable financial burden in the form of travel expenses (that they do not currently pay) on many local, ordinary working families.

8. Closing Gilmore Primary would leave Gilmore and a good part of Chisholm without any school at all, while neighbouring Gowrie would have two schools in their suburb - one public and one private. A reasonable person would re-assess this imbalance.

9. Gilmore Primary has maintained good enrolments and excellent programs despite its above average proportion of public housing properties (Gilmore 12.8%, ACT average 9.5% - data from ACT Housing). The Gilmore school community has proved a reliable local stalwart for its disadvantaged families. Forcing these families (including a relatively high number of indigenous and special needs children) to relocate is certainly not in the best interests of these children. No amount of 'transitional support' will change the fact that their new school is too hard to get to as it is further away. It is unreasonable for a government, who should be governing in the best interests of all its electorate, to place such an unnecessary burden on families.

10. The Chief Minister has stated that closed schools are likely to become 'affordable housing' (Burnie Court?) and/or aged care facilities (OAP units?). Neither of these options are practicable in Gilmore, given the school's central geographical location within the suburb. Any such development would detrimentally affect the entire community by essentially severing the suburb in half. Any monies gained from selling the school land as real estate would be a one-off gain only and the school would not be 're-claimable' when demographics alter. Given the history of other, older, Canberra suburbs a renewal is likely.

11. Closing Gilmore Pre and Primary Schools will not effect a saving for the ACT Government. The Education Minister has stated that there is only a two percent saving of total expenditure for the entire proposal to close 39 schools. This is a lot of pain for very little (if any) gain. Gilmore is not expensive to run (according to the Department's own statistics) and is a good size. Any transitional measure will cost. Furthermore, the main cost of the education budget is the cost of teachers' salaries. This particular cost will simply move with the children to the new school(s).

12. I am appalled that it is being encouraged to find a 'gimmick' to help catch the eye of the Education Minister as a justification for keeping a neighbourhood school open. Well, Gilmore's 'gimmick' is, put simply, its educational excellence based on its traditional model, offering high quality education to local families. This is its task, and it does so admirably by just getting on with it. It does not need a gimmick, nor should it need one. It is a good size, has substantial community support and is inexpensive. **None of the so-called financial, geographical, capacity or 'lack of community support' criteria (given as reasons to close a school) apply to Gilmore.**

Please consider our community and our children and keep Gilmore Pre and Primary, the heart of our community, open.

Meg Blackman