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OPPORTUNITY

Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools SUBMISSION COVER SHEET

Please complete and submit this form with your submission to:

Towards 2020 Submissions

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Organisation: Macquarie Primary School Parents and Citizens (P&C) Committee

Submission subject/issues: Educational, Social and Financial

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The Macquarie Primary School Parents and Citizen's Association (MPS P&C) appreciates the opportunity to provide comment to the ACT Government on the directions set out in *Towards 2020*.

Executive Summary

The MPS P&C is concerned about the educational, social and financial impact on Macquarie Primary School of possible increased student enrolments resulting from the proposed closures of nearby primary schools.

The key concerns of the MPS P&C are:

1. the school's capacity to take on a large increase in students, including the potential loss of dedicated learning spaces, and the ability to cater for students with special learning needs;
2. a decrease in the level of service and educational outcomes for students;
3. a decrease in the sense of community and parent involvement in the school;
4. traffic congestion and student safety around the school; and
5. financial costs of upgrades and maintenance of facilities.

Each of these issues is expanded on below.

The MPS P&C recommends that the ACT Government reconsider the proposed closures of primary schools in the Belconnen South East area in light of information in this Submission.

Educational concerns

1. The capacity of Macquarie Primary School to take on a large increase in student enrolment

The MPS P&C does not believe that Macquarie Primary School has the capacity to take on a large potential increase in student enrolment.

The School currently has around 210 students. *Towards 2020* projects, based on planned school closures and changes, that enrolments would increase to 275 students by the year 2010 (page 5).

Macquarie Primary School has capacity for a modest increase in student numbers (50-60 students). This could be achieved through increased class sizes and restructuring of room usage. The MPS P&C is concerned about an increase in enrolments by more than the projection, given the current student population at Cook School and the likelihood that Macquarie Primary School would be the nearest primary school for many of these students to attend, if Cook School is closed. Any increase above 50-60 additional students for Macquarie Primary School would mean that existing space utilised for specific educational purposes would need to be sacrificed. For example, the school currently has:

- Dedicated spaces for Music and Japanese language. These are high quality, engaging programmes eg a SMART Board in the Japanese room with specific computer programs that cater for teaching the language in an interactive way.

- A well utilised before/after hours school care programme which is located in a dedicated space. The current space limits usage to 50 students - there may be pressure on the service if enrolments increase significantly.
- Eight students in a Learning Support Unit (LSU) and is one of only two primary schools in the Belconnen South East area to provide this special setting. For some aspects of their learning and development, LSU students are successfully integrated, with support, into mainstream classrooms and on the playground. The current and transition needs of LSU students should be important considerations for the ACT Government if the current dedicated teaching space is required for mainstream classes.

Towards 2020 indicates that the maximum capacity of Macquarie Primary School is 375 students (page 4). The figures quoted in *Towards 2020* in relation to spare capacity are not considered accurate as they include:

- the dedicated learning spaces referred to above, and
- non-learning space - for example, the calculations do not reflect the requirement for an adequately sized staff room to cater for the school's teachers and assistants and the need for a modest sized copy and print room.

Recommendation: That the ACT Government commit to a maximum of 275 students for Macquarie Primary School, if it proceeds with the closure of Cook School.

2. A decrease in the level of service and educational outcomes

The MPS P&C recognises the objective of *Towards 2020* – namely to give students access to a diverse range of high quality public schools, through diversity of school types/curricula, choice, and enhanced learning environments for students and teachers.

The MPS P&C does not agree that closing a number of primary schools in the Belconnen South East area will help achieve this objective. This is because:

- as indicated above, an increase in student enrolments at Macquarie Primary School is likely to result in decreased offerings of specialist educational/enrichment programmes due to lack of space and teacher input. At risk is the current high degree of student participation in enrichment activities ranging from academic to sports skills to the performing arts. Comments from students highlighting the value they place on opportunities to participate in extra-curricula activities are provided in Appendix A;
- class sizes for upper primary are likely to increase from the current average of 25 students per class at Macquarie Primary School, to the maximum of 30. This will result in a drop in the level of service as teachers will have less time to cater to the individual needs of students. This will mean that educational outcomes for students are at risk, such as:
 - the recent improvement between 2003 and 2005 ACTAP student results in literacy, which can be attributed to the support of small reading groups,
 - the 1st place achieved in Tournament of the Minds, and good results for students in Australasian Maths, English and Science competitions.

- research¹ indicates that small school size is unambiguously good for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. Students from low SES backgrounds achieve better results in smaller schools than in large schools. Macquarie Primary School receives government funding for students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background; and
- a policy of closing schools limits diversity and choice for students and families. For example Cook School currently offers a different suite of specialist educational/enrichment programmes to Macquarie. The ability for primary schools to provide targeted educational offerings based on particular strengths, and to work together in a cluster environment to feed into the local High School, is limited by school closures.

The MPS P&C believes it is essential for the ACT Government to continue to facilitate the enhanced learning environments that small schools offer.

Recommendation: That Cook School remain open so that students are able to maximize their learning and achievement in a small school environment.

Social concerns

3. A decrease in the sense of community and parent involvement;

The MPS P&C believes that an increase in the size of the school is likely to have a negative impact on Macquarie Primary School's very strong current sense of community and parent involvement.

- In the MPS 2004 Parent Survey, 84% of parents said they had the opportunity to be involved in school programmes. Comments from parents about the school's sense of community are provided in Appendix A.
- The school has well attended P&C Committee meetings, highlighting the proactive role that parents play in the decision making process.
- The school has an increasing number of children from non-English speaking backgrounds (currently around one quarter) and is seen as a multicultural community.
- The cohesive nature of the school community is evidenced through: support of a refugee family at risk of being deported; a fete to assist a school family who had lost its home in a fire, and a fundraiser for a student who required extensive medical treatment, including chemotherapy.

This supports the MPS P&C's view that parents are more involved in and supportive of their children's education in small schools relative to larger ones, particularly in primary schools. This is likely to have a positive effect on the operation of schools and consequently the quality of education.

Recommendation: That Cook School remain open so that strong parent and community relationships are achieved in a small school environment.

¹ The Interaction of School Size and Socio-Economic Status on Student Performance. A Review of the Research Evidence by Trevor Cobbold, SOS, Canberra. October 2006.

4. Traffic congestion and student safety around the school

The school closures proposed in *Towards 2020* will result in changes to how students travel to school. The MPS P&C is concerned about the consequential dangers to Macquarie Primary School students as the school is located adjacent to a main road. These dangers include:

- lack of safe routes and traffic management facilities for students who will have to travel further to school by walking or cycling, particularly those crossing busy main roads when coming from surrounding suburbs, and
- safety and traffic congestion (including nuisance, noise and pollution) at pick up and drop off locations at the school due to increases in the number of students travelling via car. The school currently only has 29 parking places and one disabled carpark. The nearby Macquarie Preschool has very limited traffic capability.

Recommendation: That, in the event of increased enrolments at the school, the ACT Government (i) provide funding for infrastructure improvements to the Macquarie Primary School carpark, and (ii) undertake further work on travel routes and traffic management in Macquarie and surrounds.

Financial concerns

5. Financial costs relating to upgrades and maintenance of facilities

The MPS P&C recognises that there will be economies of scale with respect to student numbers and that the average cost per student should decrease with an increase in the school's size.

However, the MPS P&C is concerned about the level of government funding for the upfront costs for the school to manage an increase in enrolments. There will be costs to upgrade existing facilities (ie refurbishment of classrooms, upgrade of toilets, expansion of the library, canteen, improvements to school oval and playgrounds). An expansion of the school's before/after hours school care programme might also be required.

These upgrades/expansions are likely to be disruptive to the school's learning environment.

Recommendation: That, in the event of enrolments at the school increasing above the current status-quo projection of 220 students, the ACT Government commit to additional funding for necessary upgrades and expansion of facilities at Macquarie Primary School.

Closing comments

The MPS P&C reiterates its concern that the changes outlined in *Towards 2020* will have a negative impact on the Belconnen South East area.

To minimise this impact, the MPS P&C recommend:

That the ACT Government keep Cook School open, to facilitate the benefits of a small school environment including:

- *students able to maximize their learning and achievement, and*
- *strong parent and community relationships.*

If the ACT Government proceeds with the closure of Cook School, the ACT Government commit to:

- *a maximum of 275 students for Macquarie Primary School,*
- *additional funding for necessary upgrades and expansion of facilities at Macquarie Primary School, and*
- *(i) provide funding for infrastructure improvements to the Macquarie Primary School carpark, and (ii) undertake further work on travel routes and traffic management in Macquarie and surrounds.*

The MPS P&C would be happy to elaborate further on the issues and recommendation contained in the Submission.

Thank you.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION IN A SMALL SCHOOL

Student Survey 2006 – Sample comments

“Macquarie gives students lots of opportunities and things that they can participate in.”

“All the enrichment activities this school has to offer.”

“Have great programs for after school and we have great music and Japanese programs.”

SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parent Survey 2006 – Sample comments

“Communication with parents and offering opportunities for parent participation.”

“Small school, so I feel everybody is closer.”

“Good parent and local community involvement.”

“Good emphasis on school community.”

“Integrating students with special needs and other diversities – good feeling of inclusion in the school.”

“Great attempts at maintaining and increasing community involvement.”