



**MAJURA PRIMARY SCHOOL
PARENTS AND CITIZENS
ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED**

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Towards 2020 Submissions
PO Box 1584
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ACT Legislative Assembly
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SUBMISSION ON TOWARDS 2020 PROPOSAL

The Majura Primary School P&C Association would like to raise its profound concerns about the *Towards 2020* proposal to close Dickson College, and the implications this has for the future of many of our families. We are also concerned at the proposed closure of a number of schools that serve vulnerable communities, such as Narrabundah, Tharwa and Hall Primary Schools.

The Majura Primary School P&C Association passed a motion at our last meeting on 3 September 2006. The Minutes of this meeting are at Attachment 1.

We accept that the permanent closure of schools and the process to identify schools for closure is challenging for Governments. With declining enrolments in some schools and increasing costs for infrastructure maintenance we understand that there is a need to review the infrastructure that is required to provide an effective public school. We do not consider, however, that the process the Minister has chosen to use is meeting the needs of students, communities or the public education

system. We consider it to be a divisive, adversarial process rather than one that has fostered meaningful community engagement.

Further to this, the Majura P&C asserts our view that:

1. Dickson College remain open as a stand-alone year 11-12 college.
2. Lyneham and Campbell High Schools remain Year 7-10 high schools
3. Dickson College remains as a pathway for Lyneham and Campbell High School students.
4. the recommendations by the College Review tabled in February 2006 to further develop the excellent transition initiatives from Lyneham and Campbell High Schools to Dickson College be implemented.

We believe that our position is consistent with those of the Lyneham and Campbell P&C Associations.

Community Engagement in the process

Effective community consultation is built on trust, goodwill and respect. There needs to be a clear statement about how participants can influence the decisions that may be made and, equally important, what cannot be influenced. We are concerned that the consultation process that has been used with *Towards 2020* consultation does not achieve this.

International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed Core Values for Public Participation¹ for use in the development and implementation of public participation processes. IAP2 is a not-for-profit organisation established to advance the practice of public participation. The purpose of these core values is to help make better decisions which reflect the interests and concerns of potentially affected people and entities.

The IAP2 has developed a spectrum of engagement ranging from informing the public on decisions that are taken, to collaborating with and empowering the public,

¹ International Association for Public Participation <http://www.iap2.org.au/usefulresources.htm>

where the community has a high level of influence in the decision making process about actions that could affect their lives. A copy of the spectrum is attached.

The community consultation process that the Government has employed is at the lower level of the community engagement spectrum. Consultation means giving people a restricted choice and role in solutions. You may consult on the problems, offer some options and information, allow comment or feedback, take account and then proceed after negotiation. We consider, given the critical nature of our education system, that the community needed to be involved earlier to develop the options that were then discussed.

It is imperative that community engagements be conducted in a clear, transparent manner that provides the public and all participants with a realistic understanding of the policy and decision making process and the range of possible outcomes².

One of the core values of the IAP2 is that *public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision*. In the current process regarding school closures we do not consider that there has been clear communication of the limits of the community's influence in the decision making process. This has generated a sense of distrust about the engagement process with many groups and a perception that the consultation in these circumstances is not designed to facilitate genuine participation in decision making, but rather a manipulative public relations exercise.

The main objective of consultation is not merely to let the public be heard, but rather, to engage and involve the public in the decision making process that will ultimately result in sustainable decisions.

The *ACT Community Engagement Strategy*³ says that:

“Both the community and the government decision-makers need to fully understand the problem or opportunity and the available options if an acceptable solution is to be found ... Engaging the community in government decision-making allows the decision-makers to incorporate the community's fears, concerns, needs and desires into the decision process.”

² IAP2 <http://203.147.162.100/pia/engagement/essentials/importance.htm>

³ <http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au/engagement/default.htm>

The *Strategy* also says that effective community engagement “garners public support for the final decision, and decisions that are widely supported by the community tend to be sustainable”.

How could the process have been improved? A clear list of the criteria used to identify the schools to be closed is needed. Going to the community with the proposal that 39 schools across Canberra will close immediately put those school communities in a defensive position, rather than enabling creative discussions and collaboration to solve problems. While the Government has identified factors for consideration, including social, demographic, financial and educational factors, more detailed criteria would have improved the process.

Dickson College

Majura P&C has a deep interest in the affect of the school closures and changes on our children. We feel particularly strongly about the proposed closure of Dickson College as our children move on from Majura Primary to either Lyneham or Campbell High Schools, then to Dickson College.

The Report of the Review of Government Secondary Colleges found that the essential integrity of the current model of separated provision for Years 11 and 12 should be maintained. The College Review found that colleges offer high quality, targeted education services for the final two years of school. The ACT system of stand-alone colleges promotes high retention rates and above national average outcomes for students. We are deeply concerned that students of the Inner North will not have access to a stand-alone college in their area.

Towards 2020 states that “some schools will be closed or amalgamated to better meet the demographic, social and educational needs of the ACT community”⁴. Members of our community, however, have not been able to find clear statements about how the proposed closure of Dickson College will achieve this. Indeed we have strong concerns that the removal of the only stand-alone college in the Inner North in no way meets our demographic, social and educational needs.

⁴ <http://www.decs.act.gov.au/2020/index.htm>

The population projections for Canberra suburbs and districts 2004 to 2014 reveal a new period of population growth for North Canberra, with an annual growth of 1.3% and 1% respectively.⁵ In particular there will be an increase in the number of young adults, people aged between 15 and 24. By 2014, North Canberra is forecast to contain the largest number (8,250) number of young adults in Canberra. North Canberra will have the highest proportion of young adults, as a proportion of their total district population, with 18.6% of the population. This will lead to an increased requirement for schools in North Canberra.

This increase is reflected in the *ACT Government Schools Projected Enrolments 2006 – 2010* for Dickson College⁶. The projected enrolments demonstrate a steady increase over the coming five years. Dickson College is the second highest increase in enrolments of all the colleges, behind Lake Ginninderra College⁷

Dickson College has been identified as a “high cost delivery site”. We have considered the *Financial Costs by School 2004-05*⁸ and see that with the increase in students the flow-on effect will be a reduction in costs per student. We feel that a longer term view needs to be taken on this issue.

The *Report of the Review of Government Secondary Colleges* released by the Government in January 2006 examined the Year 7 - 12 Secondary schools model. Evidence gathered indicates that the major perceived strengths of the traditional Year 7 to Year 12 high school model include - greater continuity of curriculum through the secondary years, greater breadth of curriculum and facilities within the school, stronger pastoral care and community support, enabling a very positive culture within the school. One of the principal perceived strengths of the current model is that colleges provide an ‘adult’ environment that is appropriate to the age range of the students⁹. A Year 7 – 12 High School will not foster the same environment.

⁵ <http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/demography/2004to2014/04subpub1.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.det.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/ProjectedEnrolments2006-2010.pdf>

⁷ (College Enrolment Table, p.11)..

⁸ http://www.det.act.gov.au/2020/pdf/Financial_costs_school_2004_05.pdf

⁹ http://www.decs.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/27-01-06_Colleges_Report.pdf p.9

Closing Dickson College will force students to travel longer distances to out-of-area colleges, such as Lake Ginninderra and Narrabundah Colleges. Public transport timetables make this very hard for students. We are also concerned about the affect of this on families with lower income, as they may have less capacity to use private transport.

The facilities at Dickson College have been recently upgraded, largely through capital works grants. There is significant investment in school infrastructure planned in the next 12 months. We understand the proposed alternative for College education the Inner North is to build additional facilities at the Campbell High School. We have not been able to find a full cost-benefit analysis costing of building facilities for College students on the Campbell High School grounds. We consider it critical that any costing include opportunity costs. If there is no cost-benefit analysis, could you please advise as to when this analysis will occur and when it will be made available for public scrutiny?

The proposal to close Dickson College is completely at odds with the *Report of the Review of Government Secondary Colleges*. The Review found across many stakeholders a strong sense of commitment to the current stand-alone college model. This Review found that “the essential integrity of the current model of separated provision for Years 11 and 12 should be maintained”. The Review considered alternative models but found there was no compelling evidence that effectiveness would be increased to an extent that would justify a new structure or the effort and costs associated with it¹⁰. The Review noted that “investment in any other model would constitute a significant distraction from current and emerging imperatives”.

We are also concerned about the future of the three special needs programs at Dickson College as they serve a critical need across North Canberra and cannot easily be relocated.

- The Foundations for Independence for Year 11 and 12 students with a disability.

¹⁰ http://www.decs.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/27-01-06_Colleges_Report.pdf p.10

- Secondary Introductory English Centre for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. There is a strong relationship with the Introductory English Centre for primary schools students at North Ainslie Primary School.
- SITE program cannot be relocated to a mainstream high school as these students have needs that are not supported in the mainstream learning environments offered in high schools.

Schools as communities foster learning

Educational commentators have researched why it is that students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds are less likely to experience success, and attribute this to the fact that Australian schools predominantly operate through Anglo-Western instructional frameworks. Put simply, this means that children who not have the same background, or do not share the cultural responses of the school, are at risk of failure.

Children from middle class environments possess the 'cultural capital' that enables them to appreciate the curriculum and to adapt to school life. Parents feel comfortable relating to school staff and being involved in school activities and have strategies for achieving what they perceive to be best for their child

Local neighbourhood schools reflect the community they serve. The more parental and community involvement, the greater opportunity children have to experience success at school in their social, emotional and educational growth.

For this reason Majura Primary School P&C is concerned about the amalgamation of Narrabundah Primary School and Red Hill Primary School. These schools serve different communities and have a different focus. Rather than creating opportunities for children we fear that this amalgamation will lose the sense of community that has been developed at Narrabundah through excellent community-building activities.

It is also for this reason that Majura Primary School P&C is concerned about the proposed closure of Dickson College. Just as it is difficult for the Year 11 and 12 students to get to Lake Ginninderra and Narrabundah Colleges from North

Canberra, so too is it more difficult for parents and siblings to feel part of the school community. One of the great strengths of local schools is seeing the same faces at school events from pre-school right through to the end of Year 12. If the children have to attend out-of-area colleges, then that connection with “our school” is made tenuous. The whole notion of “our-of-area” is not a welcoming, inclusive one. Students are forced to compete for places in a college, where once they would have been accepted automatically. If they don’t get their first choice of college, they may have to do courses or follow an academic path that does not really suit their chosen direction. Parents will be unfamiliar with the school and its environs, many will find it harder to attend school functions, and will lose that bond with other families that is so important in a school.

Local schools build local communities. Children grow up in their neighbourhood, go to their local school, play with the local children, and go to their local shops. They develop a sense of place, a connection with their community. We consider the neighbourhood school to be central to the purpose of public education, which is to enable all children to attend school without discrimination and without regard to family financial circumstances.¹¹

Majura Primary School is a superb example of what a community school is all about. There is a high level of community involvement in the school and a high degree of community 'ownership' of the school. We have clear values and priorities and together, as a learning community, we work to achieve our goals.

Home-classroom links

Ongoing communication with parents and carers is critical in developing inclusive classrooms. Regular and effective communication between home and school can support students to make the most of their opportunities at school. Parents and carers also add significant value to educational discussions about meeting the needs of our children.

The neighbourhood school also supports parent participation in schooling, a significant factor in student learning, especially in the early years of schooling.

¹¹ Trevor Cobbold, Save Our Schools, <http://soscanberra.com/issues/the-neighbourhood-school-is-critical-for-public-education-and-the-community>

Ready access to a local school ensures that parent participation is not dependent on parent financial capacity to pay for private or public transport.

Schools are about the whole child, not just academic success

Towards 2020 is predicated on the assumption that early childhood schools, comprehensive primary schools and schools providing preschool through to Year 10 provide the social and education outcomes we desire. There are a range of educational papers relating to the relationship between the proposed changes and improvements in academic standards. We value the many elements of education and learning that our children gain from attending their local public school. Our primary concern around this is that schools develop the whole child.

At Majura Primary we certainly adhere to the African proverb: “It takes a village to raise a child”. We believe that it takes all of the people involved in the life of a child to give their best in doing their part in the raising of a child. The local school is an important part of this. Local schools such as Majura create a community focal point, providing a meeting place for families and their children and contribute to building enduring friendships between children and their families. We consider neighbourhood pre-schools and primary schools play a critical role in developing and sustaining social support networks between families in local communities. Very often friendship groups for children and for parents are formed in the local pre-school and primary school and are developed into broader social networks that form essential social capital in these communities.¹²

At a recent whole school assembly at Majura Primary School to officially acknowledge a recent upgrade of the building, one family shared their experience of having been involved with our school over three generations. One of the key aspects of the speech was the friendships that formed more than thirty years ago and still play a vital part of the lives of these people.

The same can be said for many of the other neighbourhood schools slated for closure such as Tharwa and Hall Schools. We are profoundly concerned about the

¹² <http://soscanberra.com/issues/the-neighbourhood-school-is-critical-for-public-education-and-the-community>

long terms consequences of closure and the splintering of communities. We call upon the Government to take a long term view to building communities and recognise that eroding our public education through school closures undermines the cohesiveness of our communities.

In summary, would like the Government to consider the broader issues that we have raised on our submission. In particular, we stress our strong opposition to the closure of Dickson College. We also advocate a more inclusive and transparent consultation process and would like to see the community having a higher level of influence in the decision making process about actions that will profoundly affect our community.

Yours sincerely

Darlene Cox

Convenor

Majura Primary School P&C Association

Attachments:

1. Majura Primary School P&C Association Minutes from 3 September
2. IAP2 Spectrum of Engagement