

**Mount Neighbour Primary School  
P&C**

**Submission to**

**Department of Education and  
Training**

**October 2006**

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## Executive Summary

1. This document represents the views of the Parents and Citizens of Mount Neighbour Primary School (MNPS).
2. Our position:
  - We are opposed to the proposed closures of both Mount Neighbour Primary School and Mount Neighbour Preschool. Closure of the two schools would constitute a social injustice as it shifts the burden of cost – socially, financially and educationally - onto those who can least afford it.
  - There is an educational and socio-economic imperative for our disadvantaged students and their families to have equitable access (including being within easy walking distance), to Mt Neighbour Primary School and the Preschool, for the foreseeable future.
  - Expenditure on smaller schools is of concern to the Government; however, this has to be balanced against the social, financial and educational needs of our low socio-economic community. A comprehensive cost-benefit analysis is warranted prior to any decision being made on the fate of our schools.
  - The proposed closure of MNPS shows a failure to acknowledge and meet the needs of our community. The move to close MNPS and our preschool is in direct contradiction to the Canberra Social Plan, the Canberra Plan, the Territory Plan, the Children’s Plan, the Every Chance to Learn document, international research on what is best for a community like ours, and even the Towards 2020 plan itself. It also shows a failure to apply the principles underpinning the ACT public education system as set out in the *Education Act 2004*.
  - The cost of education per student at our school is the lowest of all the Kambah primary schools; our student outcomes are excellent; the socio-economics of our area indicate a genuine need for a smaller neighbourhood school; and enrolments would be significantly higher if Mt Neighbour Preschool were incorporated into the primary school, as proposed for many other ACT primary schools under Towards 2020.
  - MNPS provides a comprehensive and varied curriculum that covers all key learning areas and provides additional enrichment and extra-curricular activities. The school currently serves our particular set of local needs very effectively. It does not make sense to remove a needed service, which has worked so successfully to date providing equity for disadvantaged students.
  - Rather than proceeding to closure, the Government should work with our school community to explore ways to meet the Government’s need for financial savings and our community’s needs for a local school that remains appropriately smaller.
  - We urge the Government to seriously consider the details of this submission prior to any decision being made.

3. Impacts:

- MNPS has a high proportion of Indigenous and low socio-economic background students whose disadvantaged circumstances would be substantially exacerbated if the school closed.
- Closure would perpetuate existing socio-economic disadvantage in our community.
- Families already suffering financial hardship and other stresses cannot afford the additional costs involved in transporting their child(ren) to a more distant school.
- There would be a loss of health and social benefits to the many students who currently walk or ride to school (further exacerbating health costs to the government).
- The need to travel further would also increase the risks of traffic accidents, create inefficient travel patterns and increase commuting time.
- Broader social and support networks that have developed from student/parent friendship groups would be fractured and social isolation would be exacerbated.
- Educational impacts of closure would include the loss or suppression of significant advances that have been made into academic outcomes for our students, particularly those from low socio-economic or Indigenous backgrounds.
- The loss of much needed social infrastructure provided by MNPS would result in the general lowering of community well-being.
- The loss of several Kambah schools would make Kambah less attractive to potential residents and would adversely affect the urban profile of our suburb. Consequently property values would also decrease.
- Closure would also threaten the livelihood of local family day care providers, who depend upon being within easy walking distance of our schools. They may be unable to care for displaced children who need to travel to a more distant school. In turn this would result in impacts on the parents of these children, who would need to find alternative childcare, at unreasonably short notice.
- Closure of MNPS would increase the drift towards private education amongst those members of the community who are not disadvantaged. Keeping MNPS open offers a real opportunity to reverse this in our neighbourhood. This would be consistent with the Government's commitment to stemming the drift.

4. Disadvantage:

- Kambah has the highest number of people living in poverty.
- The MNPS area within Kambah has a concentration of low income households.
- It also has a concentration of young children. Approximately one-third of children in Kambah aged 0-14 years reside in the MNPS area.

- MNPS serves a community with significant socio-economic disadvantage. Between 37 and 54% of students at MNPS are from disadvantaged backgrounds.
  - 9.2% of current students are Indigenous (third highest proportion in primary schools in the ACT).
5. Community:
- Approximately 80% of current MNPS students reside within 2 km of the school.
  - The vast majority of parents chose the school because it is local.
  - The majority of our students walk or ride to school.
  - MNPS also has strong ties with the community. It provides a parent-run, free adult literacy program.
  - There are high levels of parent involvement in the school.
  - The school also has strong ties with the Indigenous community.
  - The school is also an election voting site.
6. Alternatives to closing MNPS include amalgamating with the preschool to form a school based on the P-6 model, P-8 model and/or exploring other ways to achieve cost savings, including resource sharing and community partnerships. Alternatives to closure should be fully explored before any decision is made to close MNPS or our preschool.

## Introduction

In June 2006 the Stanhope Government announced its proposal to close MNPS and Mount Neighbour Preschool as part of the “Towards 2020, Renewing Our Schools” proposal. Submissions were invited by 3 November 2006.

This document represents the views of the Parents and Citizens of MNPS. We strongly oppose the proposed closure. We are also opposed to the proposed closure of Mount Neighbour Preschool, given that both schools serve the same community. Many of the impacts described within this document are equally applicable to the Preschool.

The first part of this document sets out important factual information about the demographic profile of Kambah, the Mount Neighbour area and some background about our school community. The second part sets out the negative impacts that closure would have upon our families and our communities including our Indigenous students and their families. It also examines the educational impact that closure would have upon our students. The third part sets out matters such as cost benefit issues, alternatives to closure, transitional arrangements in the event of closure and proposed modifications to the priority enrolment areas.

We have not been able to determine any sound reasons for closing our schools. However, we have identified a wealth of negative impacts that closure would incur. This document will illustrate these matters in more detail, while offering some alternatives for the school to remain open after 2006. This submission provides you with localised information that must be taken into consideration before a final decision is made as to the fate of MNPS and our preschool.

Before closing or amalgamating a government school, the Minister must have regard to the educational, financial and social impacts on students at the school, the students’ families, and the general school community. The ultimate decision must also be made having regard to many principles underlying the ACT government school system as set out in the *Education Act 2004*. **Attachment 1** sets out a number of those principles. These principles would not be properly applied if the Government were to proceed to close our local public schools. There are references to those principles throughout this submission.

The authors of this document conducted a study of MNPS and its families, in order to determine the viability of the school and the effect on the community if MNPS were to close. Educational, financial, environmental and socio-economic aspects were researched. **Attachment 2** sets out parents’ responses regarding their perceptions of the school’s current services. Other references to our research are included throughout the document. We report that MNPS is a thriving community school, already filling a recognised need in the area, with many positive features offered to students who attend. It is an exemplary model of a smaller local school achieving exceptionally well.

In developing this submission, we formally sought a statement of reasons from the Minister for Education and Training to enlighten us as to why our schools were selected for closure. There was no reply, nor acknowledgement, from the Minister or his Department. We also sought documents under Freedom of Information with a view to engaging in informed debate about the proposal. The Department withheld

many documents. None of the information provided explained why our schools were selected for closure, nor indicated the criteria that the Government considers to be most or least important in order for us to engage in debate about closure. Under these circumstances, we are significantly disadvantaged in preparing our submissions.

The Towards 2020 consultation process has been inadequate in many respects. **Attachment 3** details our concerns in this regard.

The transitional arrangements have created inordinate stress for our community. While the school staff have supportively implemented the transitional directives, we do not believe that these have been adequate to support the community throughout the transition. The transition should have followed the decision, not the other way around. Our additional comments regarding the transition are in **Attachment 4**.

We urge the Government to engage with our community and consider viable alternatives to closing our neighbourhood school. Based on the information before us, we cannot see that any real consideration has been given to such alternatives. We would welcome the opportunity to explore such alternatives including those suggested in this submission.

## Our Community Profile

Kambah is by far the largest suburb in Canberra, covering more than 11 square kilometres. It was originally intended to be four suburbs. Its population of 16,100 persons as at 30 June 2005 is almost double that of Ngunnawal, the second most-populated suburb in Canberra.<sup>1</sup>

Kambah residents are socio-economically diverse. Importantly for Towards 2020, Kambah has the highest number of people living in poverty of all ACT suburbs.<sup>2</sup> This very important characteristic of Kambah must not be ignored. The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) found that Kambah has the highest number of people in poor households – an estimated 1,511 people comprising 823 adults and 688 children (based on data collected in 1999). This was almost double the number of people in poverty in the second ranked suburb of Narrabundah.

The NATSEM document states that “Three-quarters of poor households in Kambah are either couples with children, or sole parent households.” As the report also states, “in terms of service delivery, an important consideration for the ACT Government is the *number* of people who may require assistance, rather than the poverty rates.”<sup>3</sup>

The MNPS community within Kambah has a concentration of low income households. The Department of Education and Training is already aware that a high proportion of students at MNPS are from disadvantaged backgrounds, reflected in the fact that our school receives additional funding from the Schools Equity Fund. Based on the Department’s rankings, MNPS ranks second of the four Kambah primary schools in terms of socio-economic disadvantage<sup>4</sup>.

The MNPS area also has a high concentration of children with over one-third of Kambah children aged 0-14 living in the area. The following table sets out the numbers of children aged 0-14 residing in our area of Kambah based on 2001 Census data and provides a very good indication of the distribution of children in our area.<sup>5</sup>

Census Collection District	Children 0-4	% of all Kambah*	Children 5-14	% of all Kambah**
8022301+ 8022302+ 8022303+ 8022304	203	19.7	463	18.9
8022305+ 8022311 (partly within MNPS PEA)	96	9.4	199	8.1
8022313+ 8022314 (Gleneagles – PEA for Urambi or MNPS)	69	6.8	249	10.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>35.9%</b>	<b>911</b>	<b>37.2%</b>

\*Total of 1025 children aged 0-4, \*\* Total of 2453 children aged 5-14.

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<sup>1</sup> ACT and Region – A Statistical Atlas 2006 (ABS cat no. 1381.8)

<sup>2</sup> NATSEM report 2002 entitled “Addressing disadvantage in the ACT” which, among other things, estimated the number of people living in poverty in the ACT.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, page 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ranking of ACT Government Schools under ABS SEIFA Indexes, November 2003 report prepared by the Data Analysis and Planning Section of the Department of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services

<sup>5</sup> These figures identified using the ABS tool for “2001 Census by location”, [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au).

## **Our School Community**

### ***Diversity***

Our students come from diverse settings. We have a high proportion of Indigenous students (the third highest proportion of all primary schools in the ACT), some students from affluent families that believe in supporting their local public primary school, and a large number of students from families with low socio-economic backgrounds. We also have a number of students from single parent households.

### ***Disadvantage***

In a 2003 report the Department ranked MNPS among the most disadvantaged primary schools in the ACT for the purposes of the allocation of the Schools Equity Fund,<sup>6</sup> which MNPS receives. That report sets out different indexes of socio-economic aspects of school regions, with each index using a different set of underlying variables. MNPS has 37%-54% students from disadvantaged backgrounds depending on the weightings applied. MNPS is among the top 13 most disadvantaged primary schools in the ACT.

The irrefutable conclusion to be drawn from the report is that the Department knows that MNPS serves a community that has a significant socio-economic disadvantage.

Our school is a thriving smaller community school. As such, it has all the benefits of smaller schools as formally recognised through a large body of research on school size, summarised in Professor Brian Caldwell's briefing paper (some of which are mentioned elsewhere in this submission eg. exacerbation of existing social disadvantage).<sup>7</sup> The research also recognises that smaller schools provide much better student outcomes for all students but particularly for students from disadvantaged or ethnic backgrounds.

Consistent with that research, our school boasts a strong and successful focus on social skills, positive student-teacher relations, positive academic outcomes, positive attitudes across the school community, and high levels of parent involvement. The school caters appropriately for students with special needs, and maintains a student community with a strong sense of belonging.

Given our school and community profiles, there is a socio-economic need for school-aged children in the MNPS area to have access to a local school that is within walking distance for young children. A local school enables all children in our neighbourhood to attend school without discrimination and without regard to family financial circumstances. Physical access within a reasonable and safe walking distance is particularly important for our students, future students, and their families.

### ***Community Partnerships***

Links with the community and social cohesion are very strong and have been established over the 31 years that the school has been operating. MNPS was the first primary school to open in the Tuggeranong Valley, in 1975. Internal surveys showed that 57% of students at the school have parents who either attended the school

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<sup>6</sup> Ranking of ACT Government Schools under ABS SEIFA Indexes, November 2003 report prepared by the Data Analysis and Planning Section of the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services.

<sup>7</sup> Caldwell, B. (2005). Research on school size: An educational transformations briefing paper. Educational Transformations. Melbourne.

themselves or know adult ex-students. Some of our staff have worked at the school for over 20 years. The community has consistently over many years, been involved in programs such as our Journey of Enrichment Together (JET). The JET program involves community members teaching students about special interests such as electronics, photography, music etc.

Ties with the Indigenous community are just as strong. Three examples: one of our Indigenous families has had a relationship with the school for approximately 25 years; one of our longer term teachers (over 10 years at MNPS) is Indigenous; and this year we have had an Indigenous parent representative heavily involved in the planning and decision making that the School Improvements Committee has undertaken for the future of MNPS.

A parent tutor program has been established to target and assist students in need as they progress through MNPS. In one case, an Indigenous parent has worked daily with an early childhood Indigenous student with learning difficulties for about 15 months.

Partnerships with the local community are strong. For example, a free adult literacy program is available at the school, for other interested members of the school community. This is volunteer-run by a school parent with support and direction from the Learning Assistance Coordinator at the school. The commencement of the program in April 2006 has only been possible because of the degree of trust between all parties concerned, the strength of the relationships already in existence, and the culture of this particular community. To date, this program has been a great success.

Communities@work operates a weekly playgroup utilising part of the school premises. Some of the local family day carers and the children under their care attend the playgroup, which provides valuable social contact for all parties concerned..

We also have a large undercover playground which was funded in part with money raised by the school community. This is an example of the personal and family capital that has been invested in the school over the previous 31 years.

### **Quality education**

The ongoing social skills program at the school, entitled “Neighbours,” has been a resounding success. Incidents of bullying and harassment have decreased over the years, with students’ critical thinking and problem solving skills apparent even in our youngest children.

The student body is exceptionally inclusive, with all Indigenous and special needs students being readily involved and accepted without question by others, into all school activities. Indigenous parents have stated to the authors that their children suffer no racism whatsoever in this school environment.

The curriculum is rich and varied, and academically our students are achieving very well. Early intervention strategies are successfully operating in the junior school to enhance learning outcomes. There have been marked improvements in learning outcomes over the last three to four years, as shown in the 2003-2005 ACTAP value added data. Our Indigenous students have been at or above benchmarks since at least 2003, evidenced by the fact that the school has not required the Year 4 support program to be implemented since its commencement in 2004. This is evidence of

excellent teaching through targeted literacy and numeracy programs based on the needs of the students in attendance.

MNPS provides high quality learning for all its students irrespective of their academic abilities or backgrounds. Individually targeted programming has led to excellent provision of support and extension where needed, showing that although our overall school population is not large and therefore our teaching resources are lowered, the capacity to provide customised education choices for each child has not been unduly restricted. Gifted children are provided with opportunities to extend their academic abilities and are not limited by less able students.

MNPS also offers a number of extra-curricular activities, some of which have already been mentioned. Generally the extra curricular programs are variable and targeted at the needs of the students in attendance. These include but are not limited to such things as the school's "Neighbours" program, the JET program, Chess Club, Sports Clinics and Anger Management Program.

The school community has for at least 18 years been involved with improving the local environment, initially with a planting of trees around the perimeter of the school, which are now tall and well established. The school has an "Environmental Area" outdoors, where the children can focus their efforts on planting and nurturing native plants. The school has also been recycling all of its paper waste for at least 15 years. This community welcomes opportunities to do more for the environment, with support from the Government.

### ***Proximity to school***

Our community supports MNPS and the preschool. When we surveyed our parents (over 55% of the 96 primary MNPS families responded), we ascertained the following:

1. 85% said they chose the school because it is local;
2. 49% said that they save money not having to drive their children to school; and
3. 57% said that they walk their child(ren) to school

In a separate poll, 39% of *all* children at the school said that they make their way to school without their parents.

### ***Priority Enrolment Area (PEA)***

According to the Towards 2020 website, 37% of students living in the MNPS PEA attend the school and 47% of students at the school come from out-of-area. This is not an accurate portrayal of what is really occurring. Most of our students are local, thus showing strong community support for MNPS.

Over 80% of students attending MNPS reside within a 2 km radius of the school. The Department would recognise some of them as "out-of-area" because they reside in other PEAs despite being closer to MNPS than their PEA school. Others have chosen MNPS over their PEA school. For example, we have 39 enrolments from the Urambi PEA, many of whom are within five minutes walking distance from MNPS – they choose MNPS for the shorter walking distance and clearly these people are supporting their local school.

This suggests that PEAs need review in order to be more useful as a statistical reference for government decision-making. We have prepared a map which indicates where current students' families reside in relation to our PEA and the school itself. We can make this available to the Department on a confidential basis due to the personal details that it discloses about students' addresses.

### **Capacity**

We dispute the Government's assertion that the capacity at MNPS is 400 students. With our current enrolment of 130 students, this leaves the school running at 32.5% capacity.

On a thorough review of the school buildings and available rooms, using today's educational standards (such as class size limits and appropriate personal space requirements), we believe that the school's actual capacity is 210. This would have the school running at 62% of capacity, with not many additional students needed to optimal enrolment figures.

In order to achieve the Department's capacity figures, we would have to cram approximately 80 students into classrooms which by today's standards should only be able to have a maximum of two early childhood classes co-habiting.

Room available which would have inflated the Government's capacity figures are as follows:

- The before/after school care room (40 students) and is not accessible to the school as a resource<sup>8</sup>.
- The ICT room (houses 20 computers) is not available as a classroom.
- The staff room is not available for use as a classroom.
- The Multi-Aged Class (MAC) Unit and is particularly designed for the special needs of its students and thus special toilet facilities, security gates etc. It is not available or suitable for mainstream students.
- The largest area inside the school building accommodates the library and hall/gym facilities and should not be considered for use as a classroom.

If capacity has been a factor in the reasoning behind the Government's proposal to close MNPS, we request that our capacity determination be taken into account.

The alternatives to closure outlined later in this document will illustrate how we might increase the school population.

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<sup>8</sup> It has recently come to our attention (17/10/06) that Communities@work have chosen to move this service to the non-government school adjacent to MNPS, whether or not MNPS stays open. We understand that this decision was made because of the difficulty presented by the timing of the Towards 2020 proposal, which is yet another negative impact of proposed closure. However we can still see that the availability of this room would be of benefit, as it would make an appropriate site for preschool classes.

## Impact on our Families

Our research leads us to conclude that many families will suffer undue hardship, both socially and financially, as a result of closure.

When MNPS parents were asked to complete a family impact survey, (over 55% of the 96 families responded), their responses were as follows:

- 49% said they save money not having to drive their children to school;
- 78% said the closure of MNPS will negatively affect their household budget;
- 64% maintain that it will be more difficult for them to get their children to school;
- 49% said that it will take longer to get their children to school;
- 53% assert that it will be less safe for the children to get to school;
- 78% said that it will negatively affect their children's friendships (36% of parents said it would affect their own friendships);
- 76% said that closure will affect their children's sense of stability (49% of parents said that it would affect their own sense of stability);
- 47% said that the closure will impact on their children's sense of community (33% of parents said that it will affect their own sense of community involvement);
- 56% expressed concern that the receiving school would not hold highly the same educational principles as those at MNPS; and
- 37% said that the closure would adversely affect the level of support that they currently receive through the school community.

### ***Impact: Transport issues***

For families who have an available motor vehicle, there would be additional financial hardship and stresses (including commuting time) associated with transporting their children to a more distant school. These hardships would have the most impact on families with preschool aged children who face many years of increased hardship by having to travel to a more distant school. The cost of living is already a major issue with increased petrol prices and mortgage/rental costs also at high levels.

Not all students' families have the means to transport their children to an alternative public school by private car. Additional bus services would be required to transport displaced children to a more distant public school. The costs and stresses would be even greater for parents and carers who would accompany their child(ren) on public transport because they do not want their child(ren) travelling without adult supervision. This would be particularly important for younger school children, and especially inconvenient for parents who need to travel with prams for younger siblings.

Where additional services are not provided, families may be forced to purchase a second vehicle and to bear the associated purchase, insurance, running and maintenance costs.

### ***Impact: Reduction in safety***

The need to travel to a more distant school by walking, riding or using public transport exposes students (especially younger students) to increased risks of traffic accidents. Parents may have to risk allowing their children to cross major roads including those without adequate traffic calming. Despite the existence of some underpasses, unaccompanied children may be tempted to cross major roads if that offers the most direct route from home to school. Also, the additional distance is often in exposed areas, so the level of discomfort in walking during very cold or very hot conditions will be substantially higher.

### ***Impact: Loss of childcare***

Parents who utilise the services of local family day carers may also be forced to cancel existing care arrangements because they are no longer suitable, and at short notice, make alternative care arrangements.

### ***Impact: Loss of health & wellbeing***

Health and social benefits from walking or riding to school will be lost for a large number of students and their parents/carers. Many of our students walk or ride to school either under their own steam or accompanied by a parent/carer, thus substantially reducing the prevalence of childhood obesity. In addition to the obvious health benefits from the physical exercise, it also offers valuable social contact for those who walk or ride with others. Walking or riding to a more distant school may not be an option for parents or young children who could not cope with the increased distance.

Displaced children and their families will also experience psychological stresses associated with the closures including fracturing of friendship groups and social networks. Our local schools also provide important social and support networks between students' families. Friendship groups have been formed and have developed into broader social networks that contribute to the well-being of our community by providing care, assistance and support. This reduces the need for costly early intervention services.

### ***Impact: Exacerbation of existing social disadvantage***

Of most concern is that closure would impose additional financial hardship and associated stresses on already disadvantaged families in our neighbourhood. Many families could not afford the additional costs involved in order to transport their children to a more distant school.

Closure of MNPS would reduce equity of access to public education (within easy walking distance), for members of our neighbourhood. In the longer term this would mean exacerbation and perpetuation of the existing cycles of disadvantage.

Given the socio-economic profile of the MNPS area, there is an educational need for our current and future students to have access to a smaller, local school within easy walking distance for young children. The research includes the following benefits for students of low socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minority groups, both of which are relevant to us:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cotton, K (1996) *School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance*. School Improvement Research Series (Close Up #20). NW Regional Educational Laboratory, available at [www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html](http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sirs/10/c020.html).

- Student achievement in smaller schools is at least equal, and often superior, to student achievements in large schools. The effects of smaller schools on the student outcomes of ethnic minority students and students of low socio-economic backgrounds are the most positive of all.
- Attitudes of minority students and low socio-economic background students are especially sensitive to school size and benefit greatly from attending small schools.
- Smaller schools have lower incidences of negative social behaviour. The impact is even more positive for ethnic minority and low SES students.
- Small schools are better for students from low income families and minority backgrounds – academically, attitudinally and behaviourally.

MNPS provides such a learning environment. Closure of MNPS would place all of these established benefits at risk. In the long term, closure would exacerbate rather than break cycles of disadvantage for our community.

Loss of easy walking access will almost certainly mean that some preschool aged children miss out on preschool education because their parents will not be able to afford the additional costs and stresses associated with travelling to a more distant preschool.

The Government's proposal for one-off transition funding would be insufficient to alleviate the ongoing and substantial costs associated with increased transport and other costs for the duration of a child's schooling at another school. Ongoing financial support would be required for low income families of displaced children eg. free public transport for both children and their parents; free school uniforms. Other costs to the Government are mentioned under "Cost Benefit Matters".

Towards 2020 overlooks the needs of disadvantaged families across Kambah demonstrated by the fact that the three Kambah schools proposed for closure all serve low socio-economic communities. The Government is expected to recognise and honour the needs of disadvantaged families as part of its commitment to the provision of reasonable access to public education for all children in the ACT<sup>10</sup>, to the provision of high quality education that recognises the social needs of students, and its aim to strive for learning outcomes that are free from disadvantage because of economic, social or other causes.<sup>11</sup>

Closure would be contrary to the Government's aim of Towards 2020 to "... direct resources where there is an educational and socio-economic need, rather than simply to a school because they have a small enrolment".<sup>12</sup> Closure would also be inconsistent with the Government's Social Plan, a goal of which is to "reduce poverty and exclusion for vulnerable people".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Section 18(i) and (iv) of the *Education Act 2004*.

<sup>11</sup> Section 7(2)(v) of the *Education Act 2004*. High quality education is supposed to be based on a number of principles including the recognition of social needs of all students. Another principle is to aim, over time, to improve the learning outcomes of students so that they are free from disadvantage because of economic, social cultural or other causes: s.7(2)(vi).

<sup>12</sup> Media release 94/06 dated 27 September 2006 by the ACT Minister for Education and Training.

<sup>13</sup> Priority 1 of the Social Plan is Economic Opportunity for all Canberrans.

There is both an educational need and socio-economic need to have a local school in the Mt Neighbour area for the foreseeable future. We completely agree with the following statement recently made by the Minister for Education and Training:

“If we want to distribute our education resources fairly, we need to distribute them where there's educational need, where there is socio-economic disadvantage. That's where we should be targeting our resources.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***Socio-economic disadvantage: A Personal Story***

Ms X (name withheld) currently has a child in Year One at MNPS. She also has a two-year-old who will attend MNPS in the future if the school remains open. Ms X is not literate and struggles financially, often finding herself with just a few dollars until her next pension cheque. She is careful about where she buys milk to ensure that she pays the lowest prices, and walks most places that she needs to go.

She experiences difficulty using bus transport because timetables are confusing to her and reading the labels on the buses is sometimes impossible. She often allows herself 2 hours grace to get from Kambah to Woden by bus as a result of this difficulty. Under normal circumstances, this trip should take less than 15 minutes.

For the first time in her life, Ms X has found herself in a community that cares and assists her. Her life is improving as a result.

If Ms X has to move her family from MNPS, she will:

1. have to take her children twice as far by foot through what is very exposed territory during hot or cold conditions, to Taylor Primary;
2. lose a substantial support network, which includes:
  - relationships with parents at the school;
  - an adult literacy program run by a parent who will have to move to Urambi Primary;
  - relationships with a group of staff who know and understand her and care about her wellbeing;
  - a group of other parents who know and support her; and
  - her Centrelink advocate (the same parent who is teaching her to read and write).
3. experience greater financial hardship;
4. find the transition confusing and thus find it harder to support her daughter in moving;
5. have to develop brand new relationships from scratch with a whole new set of staff, which is more difficult than usual for her because of her lack of education;
6. find it much more difficult to support her daughter in her education without the same support networks.

Ultimately, this means that as a consequence, her child's education will also suffer setbacks at a minimum.

### ***Impact: Less choice in public schools***

Families will have reduced choice in public schooling under Towards 2020.

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<sup>14</sup>Interview between the Minister for Education and Training and Phillip Adam of Stateline Canberra, program aired 22 September 2006. Transcript available at <http://www.abc.net.au/stateline/act/content/2006/s1747715.htm>

The current ACT public education system offers choice between smaller and large schools, between specialist and generalist schools, and reasonable options for parents to choose out-of-area schools for whatever reason. Closure of 39 schools virtually eliminates the choices that parents have been able to exercise until now.

It will become significantly harder for parents to choose a suitable out-of-area school for their child(ren) under Towards 2020. Schools that remain open will have significantly fewer places available for families wishing to exercise their choice of an out-of-area school because it better suits the needs of their child(ren) and/or their family. Under Towards 2020 families may be forced to “choose” their nearest public school irrespective of whether or not it suits their needs. The unreasonable alternative is for them to move to their preferred school zone – for many this would not be feasible.

Towards 2020 effectively eliminates the existing choice of “small public schools” of less than 200 students. Parents who would prefer a small public school for their children are less likely to exercise that choice given that under the Stanhope Government, any ACT public school with less than 200 enrolments is at risk of being closed at 6 months notice irrespective of the school’s circumstances.

The need for Governments to subsidise educational facilities in low socio-economic areas, in order to avoid social exclusion and exacerbation of existing disadvantages, has strong ethical merit and is broadly acknowledged. We expect the Government to manage its financial affairs to a high standard, so that it is able to subsidise smaller yet effective schools where there is an educational and socio-economic need. MNPS is such a school.

Towards 2020 is inconsistent with statutory commitments of the ACT public education system to recognise parents’ rights to choose a suitable educational environment for their child(ren).<sup>15</sup> Towards 2020 offers less educational choices. . The Minister’s suggestion that it offers more or better choices is an unsubstantiated assertion.

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<sup>15</sup> Section 18(d)(v) of the *Education Act 2004* provides that the government school system is committed to innovation, diversity and choice (our emphasis).

## Impact on Our Community

Closure of MNPS and the preschool would have significant adverse impacts upon our community, the ways in which we live, work, play, relate to one another, and organise to meet our needs and our cultural norms and beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Our community will suffer substantially as a result of closure of MNPS.

For the last 31 years and spanning two generations of families, our local public school has been a focus of our community. It is well documented that the presence of local schools:

- improves social cohesion;
- reduces crime rates;
- increases real estate values;
- increases parent involvement which is imperative to better student outcomes;
- instils a sense of belonging and well being;
- improves social experiences of children who are educated closer to home;
- improves the health of the children as they can travel to school on foot;
- improves the options for sustainable neighbourhood design;
- reduces financial pressures for families;
- reduces environmental impacts such as pockets of high traffic and pollution;
- allows local shopping areas to grow and prosper;
- makes it easier for parents to work normal hours in their employment;
- creates opportunities to build a sense of history in the area;
- improves relationships between teachers and students, and between teachers and students' families;
- provides central facilities for other community events such as elections;
- provides support networks for families who most need them; and
- creates a family oriented neighbourhood.

These benefits reflect our community's needs and are apparent within our local neighbourhood. They would be lost and our community fractured if our local public schools were to close.

The Government is expected to respond to community needs and provide funding to schools in recognition of those needs.<sup>17</sup> It should therefore give very serious consideration to the needs of our community before a decision is made to close our two schools.

### **General impacts**

- *Loss of much needed social infrastructure thus negatively impacting upon our community's wellbeing.* Access to social infrastructure is associated with economic prosperity, social inclusion and wellbeing, and contributes to positive health outcomes. Our neighbourhood's social infrastructure needs include socialising opportunities, family support and local educational

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<sup>16</sup>The concept of social impact assessment is well summed up by Burdge and Vanclay (see Vanclay, F. & Bronstein, D. (eds) 1995 Environmental and Social Impact Assessment, Chichester (UK): Wiley) who note that "Social impacts include all social and cultural consequences to human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play relate to one another, organise to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society. Cultural impacts involve changes to the norms, values, and beliefs of individuals that guide and rationalise their cognition of themselves and their society".

<sup>17</sup> Section 18(d)(iv) and (e) of the *Education Act 2004*.

facilities (including childcare) particularly for younger children. Our local schools and school community currently provide this social infrastructure.

For example:

- (i) The Communities@work playgroup that meets in the school building every Friday is attended by parents and carers, many of whom depend upon the facility being within walking distance of their residences. Attempts to find an alternative local premises have been unsuccessful and the playgroup is now relocating to Erindale. This means that some parents and carers who relied upon the playgroup being within walking distance will no longer be able to participate. They and their children will be deprived of valuable social interaction within their neighbourhood; and.
  - (ii) The school is also used as a polling site for local and federal elections. Closure will force the entire local community to travel to a more distant polling site. .
- *Loss of social capital.* Commuting distance is a one of many determinants of capacity to develop social capital. If students and their families are forced to travel to more distant public schools, then the social capital already developed within our community will be lost.
  - *Less trust, lowering community wellbeing.* High levels of perceived trustworthiness have a direct and positive effect on a community's health and wellbeing. Good health outcomes are also associated with higher levels of a sense of personal control and higher levels of perceived ability for collective community action. The Towards 2020 process has negatively affected our community's wellbeing in these respects, and a decision to close our school will lower our levels of community wellbeing even further.
  - *Loss of social diversity, lowering community wellbeing.* The cumulative effect of eliminating MNPS, the preschool and several other Kambah schools will make Kambah less attractive to families and thus has the potential to negatively affect the urban profile of Kambah considerably.
  - *Loss of school-aged care facility.* Communities@work currently provides before/after school care and school holiday care in the MNPS building. This valuable service is available to all students, not just MNPS students. Loss of this facility would result in further lowering of community well being. As a direct result of the "proposal" to close MNPS, this service will relocate to the adjacent non-public school in time for the Christmas holidays – this is not a surprising response given that community partners require certainty as well as reasonable notice.

The Canberra Social Plan discusses building and supporting community participation based on neighbourhoods and schools as well as reducing the risks of social exclusion.<sup>18</sup> Closure of our school would be inconsistent with this commitment.

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<sup>18</sup> Priority 3 of the Canberra Social Plan is "A safe, strong and cohesive community" and two of the 5-10 year goals are: "Build and support community participation based on ... neighbourhoods, schools..."; and "Reduce the risks of social exclusion by narrowing the gap between the information rich and the information poor."

Ignoring the community would be inconsistent with the following goals of the Territory Plan:<sup>19</sup>

**“2.1 Sustainable development**

Continued development and change to accommodate economic and population growth, but in a manner which upholds community values, conserves natural resources, safeguards ecological systems, achieves reductions in the level of Greenhouse gas emissions, and establishes the ACT as a model living environment for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.....

**2.4 Community Wellbeing**

A caring and harmonious society in which both individual and collective rights are respected; divisions are minimised; there is fair and reasonable access to adequate services and facilities; and proper concern for community health and safety.”

Contrary to these goals as well as the various strategic directions set out in the Foreword of the Territory Plan, the proposal to close MNPS:

- would mean that our community will not continue to enjoy the same social, economic and environmental advantages that we have today;
- would mean that our reasonable and equitable access to local public schools will not be maintained;.
- our community wellbeing and residents’ safety, health and wellbeing would not be maintained or enhanced,
- would not result in sustainable development in that it would not uphold our community’s values; and
- would not result in community wellbeing through a caring and harmonious society where individual and collective rights are respected, divisions minimised and there is fair and reasonable access to the essential services of local public schools.

***Financial Impact: Reduction in property values***

Property values across Kambah would decrease with the closure of MNPS, our preschool, Village Creek Primary School, Village Creek Preschool and Kambah High School. The closure of these schools would result in Kambah becoming a less desirable place to live – Canberra’s largest suburb would only have 2 public primary schools by 2008. This appears inequitable given that Wanniasa, a suburb with approximately half the number of primary school students compared with Kambah, would have the same number of public primary school facilities available.

A recent Canberra study into the relationship between housing prices and school quality concluded that parents place a premium on better public education and are willing to pay more to buy into an area associated with a public school that is performing well<sup>20</sup>.

It stands to reason that if there is no public school in an area, the value of properties in that area will be less than for an area with a public school, and significantly less than for an area with a public school that is performing well. MNPS is performing very

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<sup>19</sup>Available at [www.actpla.act.gov.au](http://www.actpla.act.gov.au)

<sup>20</sup> Davidoff, Ian and Leigh, Andrew, August 2006. How much do public schools really cost? Estimating the relationship between house prices and school quality. Available at <http://econrssh.anu/~aleigh/contact/htm>

well with student outcomes being very impressive, particularly given the number of disadvantaged children at the school.

The impact of decreasing property values would adversely impact upon all Kambah residents, especially upon families who paid premiums to buy into the Mount Neighbour area because of the proximity to our two public schools. They face the prospect of financial losses if they had to sell and move to another area to access a suitable local public school. For many of our low-income families, this is not feasible. It also represents an unreasonable cost burden for this community.

### ***Financial Impact: Local business***

There are a number of local family day carers whose livelihood would be threatened by the closure of our two schools. They derive income from providing family day care for our primary and/or preschool children. They depend upon being within walking distance of the schools because they do not have, nor do they need, large motor vehicles (such as mini-vans) capable of transporting several children. Under ACT licence conditions, family day carers are allowed four children under school age and three children of school age at any one time.

Closing our schools means that these family day carers would suffer financially in the following ways:

- inability to continue caring for Mt Neighbour children (ie. the primary or preschool) beyond 2006 because they do not have access to a suitable motor vehicle to transport children in their care to an alternative public school. Walking to another public school such as Urambi or Taylor would simply not be an option given that family day carers typically care for children under school age who could not cope with walking such long distances;
- inability to continue caring for Mt Neighbour children beyond 2006 if those children were to attend different schools eg. some went to Taylor Primary, others to Urambi Primary. It would be physically impossible for a carer to simultaneously be at different schools for a 9 am drop-off, 1pm collection (for preschoolers) or 3pm collection. A carer could not drop off some children early at their school, say Urambi, and leave them unsupervised in order to drive or walk to Taylor to drop off the remaining school children;
- imminent loss of income from parents who may find alternative carers now in case they cannot find alternative childcare during the period between the final decision on the fate of the Mt Neighbour schools and the commencement of the 2007 school year; and/or
- having to purchase a suitable motor vehicle (eg. mini-van) to transport children in their care to an alternative government school, and all of the associated costs.

Another negative impact is upon local family day carers who attend the Communities@work playgroup each Friday at the MNPS premises. They are only able to attend because the playgroup is within walking distance of the carers' residences. Closure of MNPS will result in the playgroup relocating to Erindale (there is no alternative premises available in the Mount Neighbour area) and thus deprives the carers and children of valuable social interaction.

The adverse impacts upon family day carers will in turn impact upon the parents of children who currently utilise family day care. If the closure proceeds, parents who

choose to wait for the final decisions would very quickly need to find alternative childcare given the proposed closure at the end of 2006. Anyone who has utilised family day care or childcare services in the ACT would know that finding suitable long-term childcare (let alone at short notice) is very difficult. For working parents, it could mean loss of income until they make new arrangements for the care of their children.

Aside from the financial impact here, there is an obvious loss of relationships to the parties concerned. In some cases these children have known their carers almost their entire lives, and see them as family. To suddenly have this regular contact relationship severed because of logistics seems unreasonable at best, and very destabilising for the children and their families.

### ***Impact: Drift from public to private education***

Closure of Mt Neighbour Primary School would increase the drift away from government schooling. The school is adjacent to St Thomas the Apostle Primary School, a catholic primary school. As a result of the proposed closure, some parents of children currently at MNPS are reluctantly enrolling their children at St Thomas because access to a local school is paramount. Closing the local public school leaves them with no alternative if they can afford private schooling for their children. For some MNPS parents, the cost of private education at St Thomas would be cheaper than the cost of purchasing and running an additional motor vehicle in order to access a more distant public school.

There are enough school age children in the vicinity of MNPS to fill several schools to capacity. According to the Towards 2020 publications there are 1456 primary school students across Kambah attending government or non-government schools,<sup>21</sup> which leaves much opportunity to bring children across to MNPS and other local public schools. As we have already indicated, more than one-third of these children are concentrated around the MNPS area (see Our Community Profile).

Rather than closing our public school that directly “competes” with the local non-government school, surely the Department work in conjunction with our school community to pro-actively promote the merits of our public school.

MNPS offers a quality educational alternative to the adjacent St Thomas thus presenting a perfect opportunity for the Government to reverse the trend towards non-government educational in our region of Kambah. A genuine effort between the Government and our school community to improve the public perception of our impressive educational institution would result in greater enrolments.

This approach would be consistent with Government’s statement that:

“The Government, and the community, cannot allow the drift away from public education to continue..... If this trend continues, the public school system will cater for less than half of the total school population in the Territory within the next decade.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Towards 2020 publication entitled “ACT Government and Non-Government Student Suburb Residency” based on the February 2006 Census: 883 students in government primary schools plus 573 students in non-government primary schools.

<sup>22</sup> Budget 2006-2007, Fact Sheet #14: Education.

## **Impact on Indigenous Students and Families**

Closure of our school will mean that our Indigenous students and their families will suffer significant negative financial, social and educational impacts.

There is a real need for Indigenous students to have easy access to a local school. The extra costs associated with accessing more distant schools will be a massive burden on our Indigenous families. Making access to public schooling more difficult through increased travel could also exacerbate student absenteeism, which has not been a problem at MNPS.

There is a real need for our Indigenous students to have access to a school community that embraces their culture. These students also need an environment that provides adequate support networks to improve educational outcomes, and in turn, provide opportunities to break existing cycles of disadvantage. MNPS provides an excellent learning environment for Indigenous students.

Indigenous students make up 9.2% of our student population. This is the highest proportion of Indigenous students enrolled across all primary schools in Kambah, and the third highest percentage of Indigenous enrolments across the Territory. This percentage is expected to increase over the next couple of years, with younger children expected to arrive from the families already enrolled.

Inroads into equity in academic outcomes for Indigenous students will be substantially set back as a result of closure. The educational achievements of our Indigenous students stand as a positive model for other smaller local schools across the nation. Due to targeted programming in literacy and numeracy, these students have, since at least 2003, been at or above ACTAP benchmarks, as evidenced by the fact that MNPS has not needed to use the Year 4 support program since its inception in 2004.

Closure would mean the loss of strong community relationships and partnerships that currently exist between our school and Indigenous families. Much time and effort has been invested into building trust between the parties, which enables these strong relationships to exist. It is these relationships across our school community that provide the foundation for the improved outcomes of our Indigenous students. Our strong links with the Indigenous community manifest themselves in many ways, including the following:

- At the school's weekly assemblies students acknowledge that we use the traditional land of the Ngunnawal people and are thankful for the privilege of doing so.
- Programs including Indigenous history and cultural input are run at the school and all students are taught to respect, accept and importantly, understand Indigenous culture.
- One of our teachers is Indigenous and has worked at MNPS for over 10 years. Her presence provides a powerful role model for the Indigenous students in the school and gives further insight into the particular needs of these children and their families.

- This year we had an Indigenous parent representative heavily involved in the planning and decision making that the School Improvements Committee has undertaken for the future of MNPS.

Displacing our Indigenous students would significantly increase the potential for social exclusion, which in turn would perpetuate cycles of disadvantage rather than break them.

Closure of our schools would also have significant cost implications for the Government. The Government would need to provide suitable support networks and services to ensure that the improved learning outcomes of our Indigenous students achieved at MNPS over many years are not diminished or lost. Failure to expend the necessary resources to ensure that this happens would be failure to comply with the principle that high quality education in the ACT aims to improve the learning outcomes of students over time. Then outcomes are free from disadvantage because of economic, social, cultural or other causes.<sup>23</sup> This has already been achieved by MNPS in respect of its Indigenous students.

Indigenous families were not involved in the development of Towards 2020. This contradicts the Government's policy relating to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP). The goals of the AEP policy<sup>24</sup> include "achieving involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making". Another AEP goal is to achieve quality of access to educational services, and in particular "to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have local access to primary and secondary schooling" (our emphasis). Clearly Towards 2020 ignores these AEP goals.

The Government is expected to recognise the needs of Indigenous students in its provision of high quality education.<sup>25</sup> It should therefore give very serious consideration to the needs of our Indigenous students and their families before taking the decision to close our school. Furthermore, displacement would be contrary to the Government's stated commitment to equity, inclusion and the promotion of equitable outcomes for Indigenous people.<sup>26</sup>

### ***A Personal Story***

One of our Indigenous families has had a relationship with MNPS for 25 years. The father attended the school, their oldest son has since moved on to high school, two children still attend MNPS and they have three more young ones yet to enrol. Attendance of the children in this family has been exemplary, and they are well entrenched in the community. They are comfortable in the school environment and attend assemblies as often as possible.

Literacy in this family has been of concern and through the strength of the relationships in place, MNPS has been able to maximise the opportunities for these children.

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<sup>23</sup> Section 7(2)(vi) of the *Education Act 2004*.

<sup>24</sup> Goals of the AEP available at:

[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous\\_education/programmes\\_funding/programme\\_categories/support\\_for\\_education\\_providers\\_staff/Supplementary\\_Recurrent\\_Assistance/a14\\_goals\\_of\\_the\\_aep.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/indigenous_education/programmes_funding/programme_categories/support_for_education_providers_staff/Supplementary_Recurrent_Assistance/a14_goals_of_the_aep.htm)

<sup>25</sup> Section 7(2)(ix) of the *Education Act 2004*.

<sup>26</sup> Within Reach of Us All: ACT Government Schools Plan 2002-2004

<http://www.decs.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/ACTSchoolPlan.pdf>

The youngest child currently attending from this family has been experiencing difficulty learning and is substantially behind her peers with literacy skills. As a consequence, one of our other Indigenous parents has been actively involved daily for 15 months in improving literacy for this child. Inroads have been made here but much is still to be achieved. This is a perfect example of the kind of partnership suggested by “Within Reach of Us All” with a view to ensuring that Indigenous young people achieve outcomes equitable with those of the wider population.<sup>27</sup>

This child will not attend the same school as her tutor if MNPS closes, and will hence lose the consistent daily assistance.

If this family is forced to move from MNPS, the children will attend Wanniasa Primary (about 7km from home) because of family connections there. The financial burden to this family will be substantially higher as the children will no longer be able to walk to and from school and the cost of new uniforms etc for a large family are a burden that they should not be asked to bear.

This already disadvantaged family will suffer substantially if forced to leave MNPS.

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<sup>27</sup> Available at <http://www.decs.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/ACTSchoolPlan.pdf>

## **Educational impacts**

Closure of our school would negatively impact upon the significant advances made in academic outcomes for our students, particularly for those of socio-economic disadvantage and Indigenous origins.

This school community has a very specific set of needs which will no longer be adequately met if MNPS closes.

### ***Academic Achievement***

Our school is a prime example of the positive benefits of a smaller school achieving good educational outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The majority of our primary school students are performing at or above the system average. From an analysis of the ACTAP Results for Year 3 (2003) to Year 5 (2005), the following stands out.

In the Year 3 (2003) results, it was identified that three areas needed to have a targeted curriculum designed to trigger improved learning outcomes for writing, reading and spelling. Teachers targeted these areas over the next two years and the Year 5 (2005) results show that:

- Spelling: moved from below average to above average;
- Writing: showed a significant narrowing of the gap between the school and system averages; and
- Reading: showed great improvement, with the majority of students gaining higher profiles, and some students gaining more than one profile for their efforts.

These improvements show that the targeted curriculum changes at MNPS have had a significant impact on the learning achieved by the students who were measured, despite the high degree of socio-economic disadvantage and high proportion of Indigenous enrolment. Overall learning achievements at MNPS have proven to be excellent as a result of concerted efforts by the teaching staff and our school community.<sup>28</sup> These would be undermined if the school closed, as discussed below.

### ***Impact: Educational Inroads undermined***

The learning outcomes of our students are an excellent example of how a smaller school environment can assist those of socio-economic disadvantage to achieve equitable outcomes. Forcing these students to move to a more distant, unfamiliar environment poses a significant risk to their learning outcomes. They are likely to suffer considerable transitional difficulty, which in turn will affect behaviour, concentration and consequential learning.

Relationships between students, parents and staff, and appropriate behaviour management strategies that are already in place, will also be lost. All of these environmental aspects will factor sizeably into the ability of these children to learn.

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<sup>28</sup> ACTAP Comparative Performance Data, Year 3, 2003 to Year 5, 2005

Energy in the short to middle term will be transferred into simply coping with the transition, instead of into continuing with established positive learning outcomes.

Many of our students will suffer academic setbacks as a result of school closure.

### ***Impact: Loss of Established Curriculum***

MNPS currently provides a wide and varied curriculum with integrated units based on best practice teaching models across the nation, with a strong emphasis on social skills. All of this is tailored to the particular needs of the students attending the school. The benefits of this established, specialised curriculum would be lost if MNPS were to close.

Teaching staff provide an inclusive, differentiated curriculum to cater for a range of needs, including mainstream, Indigenous, and special needs children. The school has established strong literacy and numeracy programs, as evidenced by the ACTAP results described earlier in this document. Year 5/6 maths groups provide support and extension where needed. K to 4 benefit greatly from the “Count Me In Too” program as well as a strong literacy focus which caters to individual needs. There is also a strong music and sport aspect to the curriculum.

At MNPS the teachers use various established educational models, sourced locally and from other states. These have been adapted to suit our students’ needs, and are producing positive results. Their efforts are as a result of refining our existing curriculum development system.<sup>29</sup> Closure of the school would undermine their past efforts to establish this goal.

### ***Impact: Loss of Social Skills Program***

MNPS has a strong social skills program. The school has for several years been running a planned social skills program entitled “Neighbours”. This program teaches the children how to “be good neighbours” by imparting such values as respect for others, zero tolerance of bullying or violence (eg: “Don’t be a bystander!”), negotiation techniques, assertive behaviours, critical thinking and problem solving skills. They are taught to be resilient, resourceful human beings with a number of positive strategies for human interaction. “Neighbours” is a well entrenched program, and a very valuable social asset that would be irretrievably lost upon closure of MNPS.

The recognised degree of disadvantage in this particular school community makes such a strong social skills focus imperative. Against the usual expectations of a student body with a high disadvantage factor, our students not only know what is expected of them, but they care about and respect one another. Bullying, violence, vandalism, and other negative behaviours are at an absolute minimum in this environment.

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<sup>29</sup> In the 2006-2007 ACT Budget speech at page 18 the Chief Minister stated that “...curriculum development can and must make appropriate use of nationally and internationally available models and materials. Teachers should not be in the business of reinventing their profession, just refining it. And that distinction will, over time, not only produce better results for ACT students, but reduce the considerable costs of our existing curriculum development system.... No longer will there be a single, standard template for schooling. Each region will have a plan tailored to its needs.”

The recent development of new Essential Learning Achievements (ELAs) represents an imperative to operate schools based on a strong social skills program. Listed below are the ELAs which support this view. They represent 58% of the 36 ELAs.

**Overview of Essential Learning Achievements<sup>30</sup>**

1. The student makes plans and carries them out
2. The student applies methods of inquiry
3. The student takes action to promote health and wellbeing
4. The student applies different types of thinking
5. The student makes considered decisions
6. The student manages self and relationships
7. The student uses problem-solving strategies
8. The student acts on values reflecting empathy and integrity
9. The student contributes to group effectiveness
10. The student listens, views and reads critically
11. The student demonstrates intercultural understanding
12. The student speaks coherently and confidently
13. The student demonstrates enterprise
14. The student understands about Australia and Australians
15. The student applies the principles of fairness and justice
16. The student appreciates what it means to be an Australian citizen
17. The student makes sense of world issues and events
18. The student appreciates diversity in human society
19. The student understands the effects of humans on the Earth
20. The student appreciates the artistic endeavours of others
21. The student understands change

MNPS already has a good foundation to meet these educational requirements, with a strong “good citizen” focus already established over the preceding years. Our school is very well placed to quickly embrace the ELAs and excel in applying them.

***Impact: Loss of benefits of small school environment***

MNPS is a smaller community school, with 131 enrolments at the time of the 2020 announcement. We view this positively, in the context of our community’s needs. All of the established benefits that our students reap from this smaller school environment will be lost as a result of closure of MNPS. The benefits of a small school have been formally recognised through a large body of research on school size.<sup>31</sup> A summary of those benefits is set out below<sup>32</sup>:

***“Ten Research-based Reasons Why Small Works***

1. There is greater participation in extra-curricular activities, and that is linked to academic success.
2. Small schools are safer.
3. Kids feel they belong.
4. Small class size allows more individualized instruction.
5. Good teaching methods are easier to implement.
6. Teachers feel better about their work.
7. Mixed-ability classes avoid condemning some students to low expectations.
8. Multi-age classes promote personalized learning and encourage positive social interactions.
9. Smaller districts mean less bureaucracy.
10. More grades in one school alleviate many problems of transitions to new schools.

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<sup>30</sup> “Every Chance to Learn” – Curriculum for ACT Schools P-10, Phase 1, 2005

<sup>31</sup> For example, Caldwell, B. (2005). Research on school size: An educational transformations briefing paper. Educational Transformations, Melbourne.

<sup>32</sup> “The Hobbit Effect,” Lorna Jimerson, Ed.D August 2006, available via <http://www.ruraledu.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=beJMIZOCiR&b=1842453&ct=2907931>

The research also shows that a smaller school provides the most effective learning environment at the primary and middle schooling years for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example:

**SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

“Smaller schools promote substantially improved equity in achievement among all students, and smaller schools may be especially important for disadvantaged students. Many US schools are too large to serve students well, while smaller schools, especially in impoverished communities, are widely needed.”<sup>33</sup>

Consistent with the research, our school boasts a strong and successful focus on social skills, positive student-teacher relations, positive academic outcomes, positive attitudes across the school community, a high level of parent involvement, appropriate catering for students with special needs and maintaining a student community with a strong sense of belonging. All of these benefits of being a smaller school would be lost if MNPS were to close.

It is well recognised that smaller schools that are locally accessible cater best for the educational needs of socio-economically disadvantaged communities such as ours. In other words, our community needs a locally accessible, smaller public school. The Government should not be looking to close our school. Rather, it is imperative that smaller schools such as ours remain open. This would be consistent with the Government’s own internal recommendation as follows:

“In general, the schools experiencing relatively low enrolment levels are also those schools that are located in areas with lower socio-economic profiles and are invariably the smaller schools in terms of enrolment. By implication, the smaller schools are those that are more acutely required to be locally accessible to serve the social and educational needs of the local residents.”<sup>34</sup>

We are concerned that the Minister is viewing 300-400 students as “small”<sup>35</sup>, when these numbers are generally considered to be a recommended maximum size for a primary school. Although there is no clear agreement on a definition of “small,” in generalised terms, we believe the following description to be most useful:

“In general, one can think of high schools enrolling 400 or fewer and K-8 or K-6 elementary schools enrolling 200 or fewer (on the basis of a 2:1 ratio with high schools) as small.”<sup>36</sup>

It has also been said that no school can be called too small.<sup>37</sup> Regard must be had to the community profile and the educational needs of students to determine the appropriate size for a school.

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<sup>33</sup> School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence, Howley 2003, available at <http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EPRU/documents/EPRU%202002-101/Chapter%2003-Howley-Final.htm>

<sup>34</sup> Changing Demography and Urban Structure in the ACT, by J Tarbotton & N Kece, Departmental Information Paper February 2004, obtained from the ACT Department of Education and Training under FOI.

<sup>35</sup> Stateline Interview with Minister Barr, 22 September 2006

<sup>36</sup> School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence, Howley 2003, available at <http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EPRU/documents/EPRU%202002-101/Chapter%2003-Howley-Final.htm>

<sup>37</sup> “A school serving 50 students cannot be judged to be “too small” on the basis of any research known to the authors.” [Size, Excellence, and Equity: A Report on Arkansas Schools and Districts [Johnson, et al, February 2002] available at: <http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~howleyc/ARfin.htm>

**Impact: Reduced parent involvement in school community**

Closure of MNPS would result in reduced parent involvement because of access difficulties, and this in turn will impact negatively upon our students – academically, attitudinally and behaviourally.

As the Department is aware, more than 30 years of research shows that family involvement is important to a child's academic success – it has a positive influence on student achievements and attitudes.<sup>38</sup> It is also known that small schools have a higher rate of parent involvement.<sup>39</sup>

Mt Neighbour primary school and preschool have a very high level of parent involvement. The volunteers are mainly parents who live in close proximity to the school and are able to assist because of easy access. Close physical access to our schools ensures that parent participation is high because it is not dependent on financial capacity to afford private or public transport. Closing our schools would reduce parent participation because of the financial burden and other stresses associated with having to travel to a more distant school.

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<sup>38</sup> As stated on the Department's website at: <http://www.det.act.gov.au/publicat/parentpartnerships.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Caldwell, B. (2005). Research on school size: An educational transformations briefing paper. *Educational Transformations*. Melbourne.  
<http://www.educationaltransformations.com.au/pdf/briefing%20paper%20school%20size.pdf>

## Cost benefit matters

Rather than closing MNPS, the Government should be working with our school community to find ways to meet the Government's need for financial savings as well as our community's needs for a locally accessible school that should appropriately remain small in order to reduce achievement gaps. We are certainly open to pursuing that and invite the Government to engage with us in that respect.

If expenditure on small schools is of concern to the Government, this has to be balanced against the social and educational needs of low socio-economic communities. This is consistent with the following Budget statement:

"While small schools do have some attractive qualities, such heightened expenditure is inequitable, particularly when it is based entirely on location rather than student need."<sup>40</sup>

Our primary school is operating cost effectively, particularly given the additional socio-economic and educational needs of its student population. These needs would not disappear with the closure of our schools and there would be significant costs to the Government to establish support networks and provide adequate subsidies to disadvantaged students and their families to ensure their equitable access to the high-quality education provided by MNPS. These costs would reduce the financial "savings" anticipated to be made by closing our schools.

The cost per student at MNPS was the least of all of the Kambah primary schools at \$11,174 per student in 2004-2005 and only \$1604 more per student than the ACT average. This is not significant enough to warrant closure of our school, particularly when balanced against our community's needs for a locally accessible school and the overall benefits to be gained by keeping our school operational.

If cost is measured based on student outcomes, then small schools are at least no more costly to operate than large ones. Our student outcomes are on par with most ACT schools.

### **Additional costs to Government**

Displacement of MNPS and preschool students will also have financial impacts for the Government as a result of having to provide additional services and infrastructure for our displaced children.

The Government's projected savings are flawed because they do not take into account a range of costs that would arise from the closure of MNPS. The figures for one-off costs are well below reality and artificially inflate the projected savings. Many costs to the Government have not even been identified.

We would expect displaced students and their families to receive the following benefits on an ongoing basis.

- One-off subsidy to enable low-income families to make the transition to an alternative public school – to cover the cost of new uniforms, for example.

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<sup>40</sup> For the Future: Economic and Financial Outlook for the ACT, June 2006, p11.

- Ongoing financial support to enable displaced students and future students from low income families to access a more distant public school;
- Provide additional services to enable the receiving school(s) to provide sufficient support services to ensure that the improvements in learning student outcomes achieved at MNPS are not lost for displaced students;
- Provide a learning environment similar to that currently available at MNPS in order to ensure that future students from low income families are not denied the opportunity to improve their learning outcomes in a way that is free from disadvantage because of economic or social cause;
- Additional early intervention services to deal with the stresses that our local families are currently coping with through social support networks that would be fractured if our two schools were to close.
- Free public transport to more distant schools that provides safe and suitable transport for students as well as parents who choose to accompany their young children to and from school.
- Road repairs and/or upgrades to allow for increased traffic congestion around the receiving schools.
- Introduction of traffic calming measures to ensure the safety of displaced children who have to ride/walk to a more distant school.
- The cost of refurbishing receiving schools to create additional classrooms including duplicating infrastructure for children with special needs.
- Loss of school-aged childcare facility (the loss of rent from Communities@work would be an additional cost to the Government).

Clearly, these would all have cost implications for the Government, which do not appear to have been factored into Towards 2020.

We support the P&C Council's call for the Government to undertake a comprehensive cost benefit analysis before making any decisions under Towards 2020.

## **PEA modifications**

We note that the Government has made certain proposals regarding the placement of displaced students in the short term. However there is much confusion about what options are available due to contradictory information made available since June 2006.

The following submissions are made in respect of any local PEA modifications for the longer term – they should not be taken to mean that we wish to restrict access to other schools for our displaced students.

In short, current MNPS PEA students and their families should be offered priority access to Taylor Primary, Urambi Primary and Stromlo High School.

### ***Preschool***

With the closure of Mount Neighbour preschool and Village Creek preschool, there would simply not be enough preschool places available in Taylor and Urambi primary schools to cater for current and future preschool children. This poses a very serious problem for parents of local preschool aged children. Clearly more preschool places would need to be created across Kambah to cater for the demand. Children from the MNPS PEA should be given priority at either Taylor or Urambi. If places were not available, then those children should be given priority at any other preschool in Canberra.

### ***Primary school***

Students from within the MNPS PEA should be given priority at Urambi and Taylor primary schools. Taylor would be geographically closer to the households for some (but not all) students from the MNPS PEA.

### ***High school***

Students from within the MNPS PEA should have priority at a High School within the North Tuggeranong region and Stromlo High School given our physical proximity to Stromlo.

## Alternatives to closure

We invite the Government to give serious consideration to viable alternatives to closure. The following models are genuine alternatives which would result in savings to the Government and increased enrolments, whilst catering for the educational needs of young children in our community. We would welcome the opportunity to explore these options with the Minister or his Department.

### ***P-6 model***

We propose the amalgamation of Mt Neighbour Preschool and MNPS, consistent with the P-6 model, Towards 2020 paper and the development band, Preschool to Year 2 of the draft Curriculum Framework - 2006<sup>41</sup>. The result is a sustainable school embracing modern best practice.

The Preschool currently has 50 students, being the permitted capacity. The preschool is unable to accept more than 50 preschoolers because the remainder of the premises is occupied by a preschool learning support unit. It is likely that future preschool enrolments would be consistently higher than 50. Past demand for our preschool has been high with many families having been turned away when the preschool was unable to offer them a place.<sup>42</sup> This “problem” would be overcome with MNPS offering more space for increased preschool enrolments. The preschool learning support unit, which currently occupies an entire preschool room, could also be incorporated in the MNPS building.

Amalgamating the two schools would immediately increase the projected enrolments to nearly 200 (discussed later). With some effort by the community and Department to market the virtues of our school, we are of the view that this figure will readily increase to above 200.

Our preschool is well equipped. These resources would benefit the delivery of the ‘Early Childhood’ curriculum at MNPS.

The vacant preschool premises could be successfully adapted to provide childcare facilities. No such facilities exist in the North East segment of Kambah. A member of the childcare industry was informally approached and confirmed that this would be a highly attractive site and would be happy to discuss further. Our community would support this additional service in the area given our population characteristics.

Our community is extremely supportive of the draft Curriculum Framework where the development bands, *Early Childhood* and *Late Childhood* are defined:

- Early Childhood: Preschool to Year 2; and
- Late Childhood: Year 3 – Year 5<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Curriculum Framework for ACT Schools – Preschool to Year 10 – Phase 2 Trial Draft 2006; ACT Department of Education & Training.

<sup>42</sup> It is important that the demand for places at Mt Neighbour Preschool has been higher than actual enrolments. Many families have been turned away from our preschool following an unsuccessful application to enroll their child(ren) in their preferred preschool program because of limited spaces. Consequently the preschool and ultimately the primary school have “lost” potential students.

<sup>43</sup> Curriculum Framework for ACT Schools – Preschool to Year 10 – Phase 2 Trial Draft 2006; ACT Department of Education & Training.

MNPS has two separate outside areas to support the needs of younger and older students at the school. An additional area to meet the needs of the preschoolers would be easy to arrange.

The internal design and layout of MNPS would readily allow for the two development bands (Early Childhood and Late Childhood) to be separated during structured learning activities and come together at other times eg. hall assembly, use of the library, gym and canteen.

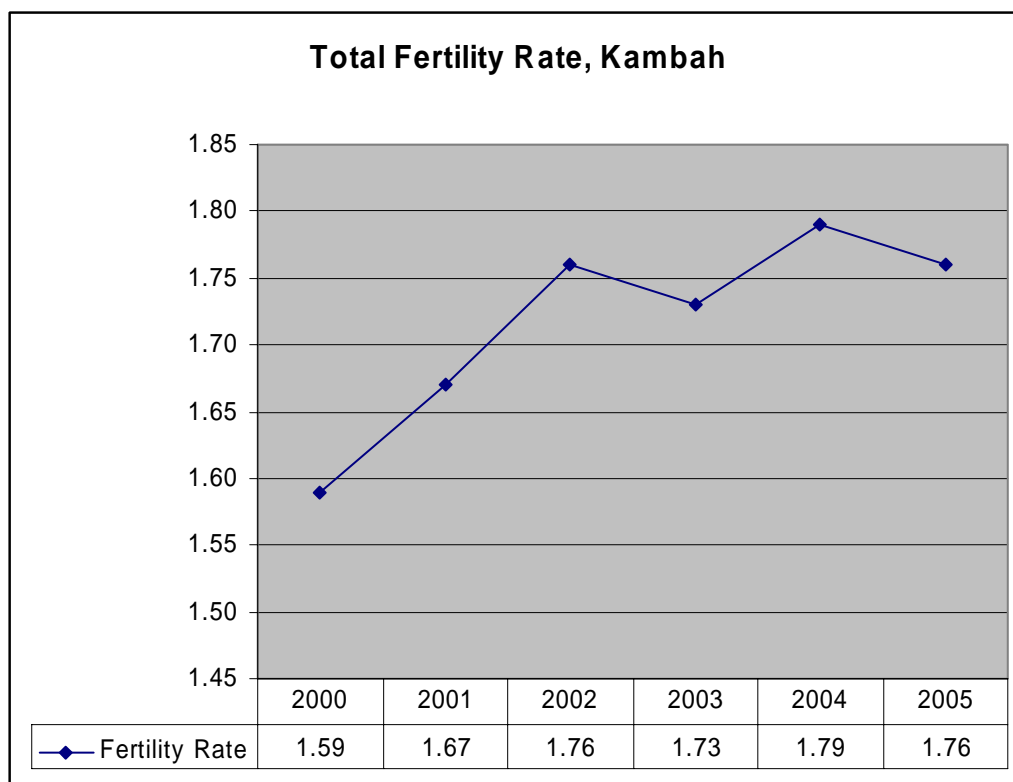
### **P-8 model**

If Kambah High School were to remain open but not cover the middle schooling years, then it would be logical to extend MNPS to cover middle school education in support of this idea. The MNPS building has a flexible layout and, with some capital works, could be modified to cater for middle schooling requirements eg. a laboratory.

We are certainly open to engaging with the Government to explore this as an alternative to closure.

### **Increasing enrolments**

We know that our part of Kambah has sufficient children to fill several primary schools to capacity. Despite the fact that Kambah's overall population has declined by about 2000 people since 2000, Kambah has experienced a consistently high birth rate of approximately 200 births per year. The chart below also illustrates that Kambah has enjoyed an overall increase in fertility rate over the past 6 years.<sup>44</sup>



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<sup>44</sup> Data taken from Births, Australia 2005 (ABS Catalog number 3301.0). "Total fertility rate" represents the average number of babies that a woman could expect to bear during her reproductive lifetime.

This table coupled with the birth numbers indicates that the numbers of children in Kambah continue to be strong – there is nothing to suggest that the numbers of current and future school-aged children in Kambah will decline. We dispute the Government’s asserted projections of future student numbers declining below levels that warrant our local primary and preschool.

In order to increase future enrolments at MNPS to above 200, our challenge is to attract local students and their families to MNPS. There are few factors which contribute to a current shift towards private education. We are confident that the drift can be reversed in our neighbourhood, by employing various strategies with support from the Department. Some of these are discussed below.

Currently the preschool tends to hold a high number of students who “graduate” and whose parents then choose to enrol them in the local non-government school adjacent to MNPS. If the preschool were to merge with the primary school, the preschoolers would no longer “graduate” and their parents would have to actively choose to leave MNPS in order to attend a private school.

Having these preschool students as a part of the primary school community creates a valuable opportunity to inform their parents of the many virtues of MNPS that they otherwise might not have discovered. This increases the likelihood that they would continue their education at MNPS, resulting in higher student numbers for the longer term.

Pressures of increasing private education costs, higher petrol prices and increasing mortgage rates are also likely to make the high-quality public education available at MNPS increasingly more attractive.

Amalgamation would also remove the current limit of 50 preschool enrolments<sup>45</sup>. There is a clear demand for more than 50 places to be made available. This is evidenced by the fact that in 2006, 10 students were denied access because of the capacity limit. This correlates with a decrease in kindergarten enrolments at MNPS in 2006.

Regrettably those who have been unable to access our Preschool would have been forced to travel further. Ultimately they would have then continued on to Kindergarten at the associated primary school rather than leave their friends and familiar environment to return to MNPS. It makes more sense to give local students the option to choose their local school and stay until completion of Year 6.

If the schools merge, we are prepared to work with the Department to develop marketing strategies to attract students and their families to MNPS, particularly from within our PEA. We are in a position to discuss preliminary ideas about such strategies.

It is imperative that the drift toward private education be stemmed. There is a genuine opportunity to do so in our neighbourhood and we urge the Government to work with us to achieve this outcome.

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<sup>45</sup> In 2005 the capacity of the preschool was halved from 100 to 50 places – the second preschool room became a dedicated resource unit with the room unavailable for use by preschoolers.

***Other cost-saving alternatives:***

Opportunities to share resources with other Kambah schools could be exploited. There has been inadequate time to properly explore this, but it remains a genuine alternative to closure and could result in savings to the Government.

Our school buildings could be made available for use by the private and public sectors eg. sporting clubs, community policing facility.

Some parents have expressed a willingness to actively pursue partnerships with the community and/or commercial entities, with a view to reducing the operating costs of our schools. An example might be to acquire sponsorship for such capital costs as refreshing the paint around the school. It has been expressed that these could be further explored if the school were to remain open.

## **Conclusion**

Given the particular needs of our community, it is imperative that MNPS and the Preschool remain open. Closure of the schools would constitute a social injustice as it would remove equity of access and exacerbate existing disadvantage.

We urge the Government to seriously consider alternatives to closure prior to any decision being made, including those offered in this document. We emphasise that we are willing to work in positive partnership with the Government to retain MNPS and the Preschool in a viable manner.

## Attachment 1: Principles to consider

Before closing or amalgamating a government school, the Minister must have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students' families and the general school community<sup>46</sup>. The purpose of this submission is to provide you with information about those factors for genuine consideration before a final decision is made on the fate of Mount Neighbour Primary School and Mount Neighbour Preschool.

### Underlying principles

The ACT government school system is must be based on the principles of equity, universality and non-discrimination.<sup>47</sup> The Government school system is expected to be committed to:

- Providing reasonable access to public education for all children in the Act,
- Responding to community needs;
- Maximising student educational achievements and opportunities;
- Innovation, diversity and choice;
- Teacher, student and parent participation in all aspects of school education;
- and
- Making information about, and being accountable for, the operation of government schools.<sup>48</sup>

School funding is supposed to be provided to schools in recognition of the principles mentioned above (among others) and the diversity of children's needs.<sup>49</sup>

In making decisions, the Government is expected to apply a number of principles, including the following.<sup>50</sup>

- Every child has a right to receive a high quality education;
- School education and home education should recognise parents' rights to choose a suitable educational environment for their child(ren;)
- Provide access to a broad education;
- Aim for learning outcomes that are free from disadvantage because of economic, social, cultural or other causes;
- Recognise the needs of Indigenous students;
- Recognise the individual needs of children with disabilities – appropriate provision should be made for those needs;
- Encourage innovation, diversity and opportunity within and among schools;
- and
- School communities should be given information about the operation of their schools

The partnership between the home, community and educational providers should be recognised.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Section 20(5) of the *Education Act 2004*.

<sup>47</sup> Section 18 of the *Education Act 2004*.

<sup>48</sup> Section 18(d) of the *Education Act 2004*.

<sup>49</sup> Section 18(e) of the *Education Act 2004*.

<sup>50</sup> Section 7 of the *Education Act 2004*.

## Attachment 2: Parent Survey Responses

Our parents were surveyed and asked about how they perceive the delivery of service from the school. Over 55% of the 96 MNPS families responded.

The responses show that the school has been achieving at an exceptionally high standard, with the majority of parents clearly feeling very satisfied.

### **What do you believe Mt Neighbour has been offering from the list below:**

o A nurturing environment	82.5%
o Safety for my child(ren)	87.5%
o Community values	77.5%
o Ability to communicate with staff	90.0%
o Quality education	82.5%
o Good community relationships	75.0%
o Possibility for my child(ren) to have life long friends	77.5%
o Strong anti-bullying practises	72.5%
o Positive attitude to my child(ren)	85.0%
o My child(ren) is/are happy at the school	90.5%
o Good sporting and extra-curricular opportunities	70.0%
o Encouragement and support to my child(ren)	80.0%
o Encouragement and support to parents	70.0%
o Inclusive attitude	72.5%
o Guidance to help ensure my child(ren) is/are interacting in a positive way with others (eg: teaching them how to be “good neighbours”)	95.0%

Other survey responses are mentioned throughout this document as relevant.

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<sup>51</sup> Section 7(2)(f) of the *Education Act 2004*.

## Attachment 3: The Consultation Process

We express our deep disappointment in the way the Government has “consulted” our community. We perceive the Government to have been disingenuous in inviting us to participate in the decision to close our two schools. There is every indication that a decision has already been taken prior to consultation with the community and without due consideration of all relevant factors. This is despite rhetoric to the contrary. Furthermore, the Government has withheld important information from us, therefore denying us a real understanding as to why our schools were selected for closure. The consultation has been far from transparent. We are significantly disadvantaged in preparing our submissions opposing closure.

The strong focus of the invitation to engage with the community has been to comment upon the proposed models for the schools that are to remain open, or to discuss transitional issues for the schools that are earmarked for closure. This misses the point of consultation required by the *Education Act 2004*, which is to undertake genuine and adequate consultation with the affected community before a decision to close or amalgamate a school is taken.

The Department has offered no justification for selecting our two schools for closure. We resorted to seeking information through Freedom of Information legislation to get an idea as to factors that the Government might consider important or persuasive. We have been denied access to any information that might disclose the reasoning process. Consequently we have no real understanding as to why our primary school was selected for closure given that the cost of education per student at our school is the lowest of all the Kambah primary schools<sup>52</sup>, our student outcomes are excellent, the socio-economics of our area indicate a genuine need for a smaller neighbourhood school, and enrolments would be significantly higher if Mt Neighbour Preschool were incorporated into the school as proposed for many other ACT primary schools under *Towards 2020*.

The consultation process is completely at odds with the Government’s flagship commitment to “build a stronger, more cohesive relationship between the ACT Government and the Canberra community” as stated in *The Canberra Social Plan*.

Much of the information published under the *Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools* program uses language indicating that the decision to close our school (and others) has already been taken ie. the decision is a *fait accompli*. For example:

“Tharwa and Mt Neighbour preschools and primary schools, and Macarthur Preschool, will close from the end of 2006”;<sup>53</sup>

“Transitional arrangements will be put in place for students and families from schools that will close at the end of 2006 to assist in their move to another government school.”<sup>54</sup>

The Government’s actions of repeatedly referring to our schools as those that “will close” has done much damage to our school community. Parents are reluctantly

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<sup>52</sup> Based on the Department’s costings posted on the *Towards 2020* website.

<sup>53</sup> Taken from the *Tuggeranong: Towards 2020* brochure.

<sup>54</sup> Taken from the 2020 website *Frequently Asked Questions*.

enrolling their children in various schools for next year because of the uncertainty of the situation.

The *Education Act 2004*<sup>55</sup> formally recognises the partnership between the home, community and educational providers. This extends well beyond the formal Parent and Community Partnership (PCP) programs run by the Department. It extends to actively engaging with the community before decisions are made on the fate of a school. It also extends to actively and genuinely engaging with the community to explore viable alternatives to closure, as the social impact assessment envisaged by s.20(5) of the *Education Act* envisages. We feel betrayed by the Minister for Education, the Department of Education and the Stanhope Government generally because of the insensitive way it has ignored our community and mishandled the very important issue of our childrens' education.

The exclusion of our community in the development of the Towards 2020 proposal, the inadequate time allowed for consideration and assessment of our submissions, the poor timing of the entire process, the lack of genuine consultation and the secrecy of the entire process is indicative of poor democratic decision-making by the Stanhope Government. We are expected to conduct our own social, financial and educational impact analysis when the Government should be undertaking a comprehensive assessment. The government's "proposed" actions have already impacted negatively upon our confidence in, and trust in, the Stanhope Government.

These stresses might have been reduced if the Government had handled the proposed closures in a sensible way that respects the needs of the community. To the detriment of our families and our community, it has not done so.

A great deal of time, energy and research has gone into the production of this document. We are concerned that the Government will disregard and untruthfully dismiss the content of our submissions.

This concern stems from the Government's consistent choice of response to very important and valid data that has been released on our and other schools' behalf by the SOS Committee and the P&C Council. In particular we refer to the impact on the Indigenous students, the disadvantaged students, and the need for a full cost-benefit analysis before any decisions are made to close schools in the ACT.

To not answer the issues raised and simply comment in each case that the information provided was essentially not to be trusted, is not what we expect of a government that is trying to build cohesive relationships with the Canberra community. It is also not what we expect of a government that has a social plan that purportedly prioritises the very issues raised.

When the Government responds to these representative organisations in this way, it needs to understand that it is talking directly to the community. These responses have been unacceptable.

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<sup>55</sup>Section 7(2)(f) of the *Education Act 2004*.

## **Attachment 4: Transitional arrangements**

Although the Department has undertaken some transitional arrangements since the Towards 2020 announcements, it has been a particularly stressful time for students and their families, above all for students with special needs. If indeed the Towards 2020 closures are a “proposal”, then our school community should not have been forced to undertake stressful transitional arrangements until after a final decision is made.

The transition should follow the decision, not the other way around.

Instead of proposing to close our schools at the end of 2006, another year (at least) should have been allowed to give students and their families an adequate opportunity to adjust to the decision and undertake a transition process in a reasonable manner.