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ACT Legislative Assembly
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CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Minister

Submission on the proposed closure of Village Creek Primary School

Purpose

The purpose of this submission is to show why Village Creek Primary School is viable.

Village Creek Primary School

2. Village Creek Primary School has been part of the Kambah community since the mid seventies and celebrated it's 30th birthday in 2005. It will be a shame if this was the last major milestone for such a wonderful and successful school. The school has evolved over the years to meet the changing class sizes, changing curriculums, technological advances and greater expectations from parents.

3. The parents of students at Village Creek Primary School are disillusioned at the ACT Governments total lack of consultation in respect of the proposal to close this wonderful school. The towards 2020 policy document clearly shows a lack of respect or knowledge of the Kambah community, the excellent staff and the students that benefit from the public education system in Canberra.

4. The towards 2020 proposal (if implemented as is) will in effect close public education in Kambah. We concede the demographic of Kambah has changed over the years however as we are in a 'Census' year, commonsense must dictate that the Government may have been better off waiting for that data to be available before handing down such a monumental decision. Recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in many ways contradict some of the recommendations in the towards 2020 proposal, particularly for Kambah.

5. The school and the community would like you and your department to acknowledge that for almost two years the school operated without a permanent principal or executive. During this period it was difficult for the staff in acting positions to lobby for infrastructure improvements. Since Wendy Wurfel (current Principal) assumed the principal position her drive and enthusiasm has

seen a remarkable turnaround in the entire feel of the school. Many parents have commented on the improvements and enrolments have increased, and despite the threat of closure, continue to increase for 2007.

Kambah

6. Kambah is without question the largest 'suburb' in Canberra and as a result of its size (1130ha) must be treated differently than all others. It is more than twice the size of Wanniasa for example, a suburb which will be permitted to keep one P-10 campus down the road from another P-6 campus. The socio-economic mix in Kambah is clearly not understood (or considered) by the drafters of the 2020 document. Kambah has single income pensioners through to the more affluent in Gleneagles Estate. Recent figures from the ABS stated there were over 16,000 residents in Kambah

7. I trust you will all consider this document without a pre-conceived bias and more importantly with a willingness to be 'swayed' by constructive arguments against what you have proposed for Kambah, but in particular for Village Creek Primary School.

Capacity Figures

8. Village Creek Primary School recently had its capacity figure reassessed. We concede that if the school only taught mainstream students and the demountable classroom was refurbished to meet required standards the school could hold 500 students. It was advised however that in its current setting, including the special Needs units and the Introduction to English Centre the real capacity is more like 400 students. In simple terms, the school is running at 60% capacity, not the 43% quoted in the towards 2020 document.

Special Needs and Learning Support

9. Village Creek is NOT a special school, nor is it a Learning Support school. Village Creek is a fully integrated school that caters to all students superbly. To close this school and force many of these students to start all over again would not just be wrong; it would be morally reprehensible. Any child who is forced to change schools takes some months to settle, for these kids that 'settling in' period is increased exponentially.

10. The parents of these students have grave concerns about any transition for these students. It is rumoured that the current settings will not fit in another school in Kambah. In theory this could mean that siblings could be at different schools in different special needs settings, some distance apart. In fact, where children progress through these programs they may be forced to change schools, potentially negating any progress they have achieved.

11. Village Creek does not use 'integration' simply as a word; it is a reality and the reason the school is so treasured by the parents that support it. We, the parents and staff, doubt very much that many of the mainstream kids at the school have any idea that some of their peers or 'school yard' mates have any

learning difficulties at all. Further, parents have told us that their children are unaware their sibling/s are in a learning support class. It is the simple fact of completely including all students in the day to day operation of the school that makes it work.

12. Village Creek should be seen as a model of how these settings work. These children MUST be carefully managed irrespective of the outcomes of the 'consultation period'. We strongly encourage you to consider that:

- These children are difficult to relocate without major disruption to their continued education;
- This unit is managed extremely well in a friendly school environment with some children progressing to mainstream classes;
- Parents have expressed dismay over any change in their current educational environments;
- Have neighbouring schools been questioned on their ability to cater for these students?
- Many of the children in this program have siblings in mainstream classes (at VCPS) and parents may find their children at different schools;
- These programs are well established at VCPS and are now part of the wider school community:
- All children at VCPS, including special needs and IEC are provided the same opportunities. All children are able to attend school camps, sporting activities (both at the school and regional competitions) and take part in special events at the school including school performances.

Introductory English Centre

13. The Introduction to English Centre (or IEC) is a specific intensive program. VCPS is one of only two schools in the ACT that cater to these children. Parents of children in this program have praised the efforts of the school community in making sure all of these children are treated equitably. Again, as with learning support all of these children are integrated in a vast range of activities conducted throughout the school on a daily basis.

The School Culture

14. A consequence of the school's long running Introduction to English Centre, Special Needs and Learning Support classes has been the evolution of a unique and rich school culture.

15. The physical layout of Village Creek is hugely significant to the way in which the school is able to function. It provides staff with an opportunity to better manage the twin tasks of providing quality education and integrating the diverse range of students. This is at the core of what Village Creek does so well.

16. The educational objective of integrating these students into the mainstream classes requires a lot of mobility between the different activities and classrooms throughout the school. Whether by accident or design the layout of

Village Creek revolves around the central library space. The physical relationship of the classrooms to each other engenders a certain intimacy and informality. Students from all classes pass each other and mingle throughout the day. This contributes to the inclusiveness and integration. This setting is a huge asset and its value in helping the teaching staff do their special work should not be underestimated.

17. It is fair to say that many students experienced or endured higher than average levels of anxiety and stress in their school life. The parents of some of these students have talked of how well their children settled into the school family at Village Creek. The design of the school, in tandem with the unique relationship between the staff and students has created a wonderful, positive and productive school culture.

18. The culture is characterised by such attributes as:

- the celebration of a great diversity of nationalities and ethnicities in all day to day school activities;
- the complete integration of the programs between the units and mainstream students;
- the seamless integration of learning support students with the mainstream school population and all school activities;
- all students benefit from the fact that most students have been integrated with each other from the beginning of their school lives and are, as a direct result of this environment completely accepting and even unaware of issues of difference;
- many parents have commented on the atmosphere of the school when they first arrive and value the sense of intimacy or 'family' that the school achieves.

IT Infrastructure

19. Excellent IT Infrastructure. All Village Creek students are competent in the use of Digital technology and Smartboards.

- Recently (December 2005) received a grant of \$25,000 and has new data cabling.
- A \$50,000 Federal grant that provided a new server to completely network all staff and students at the school.
- Village Creek has a Smartboard (interactive white boards) in every teaching area in the school.
- Two self-contained computer labs catering for up to 40 students.
- Village Creek community raised \$2,000 in June 2006 to purchase an 'E-Mac' for movie making.

Location

20. The location of Village Creek Primary School is ideal. The main entrance is not on a major suburban street and therefore removes any real 'traffic' concerns when dropping off and collecting children from school. The school has made several submissions (to the Department) to reconfigure the carpark at the school to accommodate the traffic. There was little support so as a matter

of necessity (to ensure student safety) the P&C constructed a parent carpark and have developed sound practices that all parents have adopted.

21. One of the options if Village Creek closes is Wanniasa School. The main entrance is on Wheeler Crescent, a major arterial road through Wanniasa. The school is also close to Wanniasa shopping Centre. The additional traffic (both motor vehicle and ACTION Buses) will be bedlam.

Transport Issues

22. Has the Government thought about the increased ACTION services that are going to be needed because of the large numbers (nearly 700 students in Kambah alone), that will now have no other 'choice' but to catch a bus to a school. That school (whichever is chosen) at the moment is outside of their current priority enrolment area.

23. It was with dismay that the parent groups trying to keep schools from closing heard that there are to be cuts to ACTION. Information to hand shows that 76% of the year six students were going to attend Kambah High. Most of these children will need to travel to school by bus (or be driven by parents or carers). ACTION services need to be improved and funding increased to attract people to the service, not cut.

Childhood Obesity

24. It is interesting that the ACT Government is proposing to close neighbourhood school that will force children to onto transport to get to school. Initiatives such as the walking school bus in a suburb as large as Kambah will be impractical given the distances involved and the major roads children (and parents) would need to negotiate.

Infrastructure

25. Very well maintained infrastructure – In the last two years Village Creek has had a new canteen built and both the chiller and boilers were completely rebuilt. The front office was refurbished in 2001. Village Creek is simply the best building in the suburb.

- There are no traces of Asbestos. Areas of a neighbouring school have been deemed unsafe for both staff and students and have been closed off. The staff room of another neighbouring school was recently rebuilt (early 2006) due to the sealed asbestos in the building being compromised.
- There are no structural concerns, such as white ants at Village Creek.
- Village Creek has undergone a regular recarpeting regime over the last few years. A large amount of carpet was laid as recently as December 2005.
- The front of the school was repainted at the end of 2005 (the rest of the school has been put on hold pending the outcome of towards 2020.

Preschool

26. Village Creek preschool provides a supportive and flexible learning environment for many children in the Kambah area. The teaching staff and assistants spend a great deal of time getting to know the students and tailoring programs to the child's individual needs, whilst providing the necessary skills the children need to progress to primary school.

27. The co-location of the preschool building to the primary school is advantageous for many preschoolers. With a separate 'school' they are able to observe the students interacting from a safe distance, allowing their confidence to grow throughout the year, providing a smooth transition into primary school.

28. Strong ties already exist between the preschool and primary school. This provides the students an opportunity to gain familiarity with the primary school through regular sessions in the computer labs and gymnasium. Additionally parents also benefit because of the cohesive relationship where information can be freely sought on what is available regarding transition requirements and the special needs programs running at the school.

29. Preschool staff benefited greatly from the recent inclusion into the primary school 'staffing'. This enabled them the opportunity to tailor the educational needs of the children into a deliverable package in-line with that offered at the primary school.

30. Should Village Creek Preschool be closed (from its current setting) the community needs for schooling at this level will be jeopardised as their will potentially only be two preschool settings at Urambi and Taylor. This shortfall would force some families to choose a preschool that is 'out-of-area' that could ultimately lead them to a primary school out-of-area'.

31. For Kambah the current Preschool setting are as follows:

- **Village Creek.** Current Operation, 1 room, 50 children
Capacity, 2 rooms, 100 children

- **Taylor.** Current Operation, 1 room, 50 children
Capacity, 1 room, 50 children

Note, there is one other 'preschool' room at Taylor that is currently being used as a day care centre. Taylor was a part time preschool (ie. 25 children) up to 2006

- **Mt Neighbour.** Current Operation, 1 room, 50 children
Capacity, 1 room, 50 children

Note, there is one other 'preschool' room at Mt Neighbour currently being utilised as a resource centre (Office for preschool resource teachers)

- **Urambi.** Current Operation, 1 room, 25 children
Capacity, 1 room, 50 children

Note, there is one other 'preschool' room at Urambi that currently operates as an Early Intervention Playgroup operating in the space on Monday and Tuesday. Capacity could be two rooms if they moved the playgroup to another location.

Summary

32. We are confident that we have highlighted the unique school setting Village Creek offers. Quite simply, it works because it works. All students are treated equally and the students the school produces will have experienced a setting that is conducive to fairness, acceptance and tolerance.

33. If anything positive has come out of the towards 2020 proposal is that fact that the Kambah community can see clearly what wonderful schools we have for so long taken for granted.

34. The Village Creek community welcomes the challenge facing all schools in the coming years and is confident that we can continue to improve and promote this wonderful environment.

Note:

Attached please find suggested inclusions from a very concerned parent. I decided to include their paper in full without alteration. [C. Parker].

Special Needs Education .

The 'Learning Support Centre' within Village Creek has been running successfully for over 14 years. It provides a greatly valued educational program to families of children with a range of behavioural and learning difficulties.

Many of these children are at Village Creek after having previously been encouraged by the educational system to attempt to integrate with mainstream classes. This has not worked and the Village Creek model of partial integration has been much more successful for them. It is a model that succeeds without diluting the core learning components of literacy and numeracy. Indeed literacy is a major component of the Learning Support Centre curriculum. It is the strongly held view of the schools parent body that the Learning support centre must be preserved as an integrated whole and not fragmented. That is the junior middle and senior learning support units must stay together.

Village Creek School benefits from a number of stand alone and isolated learning spaces that enable the specific class room needs of these children to be catered for without the dilution that would inevitably result from shared core learning facilities. At the same time these discreet spaces are co-located enabling all the junior students to be close together. Movement between classes to take advantage of opportunities for appropriate integration is very smooth and efficient to manage. The ability of students to progress from junior, middle to senior at the one school is also a huge advantage.

It is clear then that despite the trends towards integration , for a significant minority of children an alternative partially integrated model of learning support is necessary. The public educational system must be able to offer our communities this choice and there is clearly a demand for it.

We the parents of these children would argue that the proposal to close Village Creek puts this valuable education model and its students at great risk. Across the school and the suburb of Kambah in general there are a high proportion of socially and academically at risk children. The recently published ABS statistical analysis of Kambah's demographic profile identified 16 % of families being on income support.

Many socially and economically disadvantaged families have significantly less capacity for mobility. A drastic change in the location and nature of the educational services they have positioned themselves to access could severely impact on the attendance rates of these families and their children.

The danger in the closing, fragmentation or relocation of the special needs component of Village Creek is that families and students who have to move between different schools over greater distances will drop out of the programs that are most beneficial to them. They will become integrated by default and fail in their academic progress. The whole Learning Support Centre model could disappear as a result of intermittent and falling enrolments.

It has been a frequently made observation that in times of societal change and disruption it is the disadvantaged and vulnerable members of our society that experience the greatest impact of any changes.

There are no more vulnerable members of our society than the kids of Village Creeks Learning Support Centre. They are arguably the least appropriate subjects for the proposed school closures in Canberra.

The Village Creek Learning Support Centre is a vital component of the social infrastructure of the suburb of Kambah. The special educational programs it provides play a vital part in the ongoing development of the social capacity of the suburb. This capacity at its existing location should be strengthened and supported not broken up or relocated.

If the government insist on the schools closure despite the arguments of this school community they should at the very least adhere to the following guiding principles :

- Relocate the Learning support centre as one integrated unit do not break up the unit into separate junior middle and senior learning centres.

- Relocate the Learning support centre into a school setting that is of an appropriate scale and classroom layout.
- If no suitable infrastructure exists do not relocate these children into a temporary or substandard setting. Delay the move until construction of purpose built classrooms is completed.
- Do not relocate the Learning Support Centre too far from Village Creek. Taylor primary would be ideal. Any greater distance could seriously jeopardise the capacity of families to access the centre.

The Pre-School Links Program

The proposed closure of Village Creek Pre-School has several crucial implications for the educational capacity of Kambah.

Currently Village Creek has 1 full pre-school class. Yorrambi has 1 full class and 1 empty class. Mnt Neighbour has 2 full classes. Taylor Primary has capacity for only 1 class because 1 space is currently leased to a private day care centre. If both Mount Neighbour and Village Creek close this will mean that accomadation for 3 classes will have to be found. At current capacity there is only space for 1 class at Yorrambi Pre-School.

Village Creek Pre-School is a pilot participant in the Pre-School Links Program. This program has the capacity to grow the student population of Village Creek Primary. The program could also address the drift of students to the private sector and in the case of Village Creek enrolments are already on the increase.

We feel that this situation is further evidence of the capacity for Village Creek school to grow and prosper in the future.