

A Look Back at School Closure Issues in the ACT

Trevor Cobbold

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1. Background

In June 2006, a large school closure plan, called *Towards 2020*, was announced for consultation over 6 months. It proposed the closure of 39 schools and preschools, including nearly one-third of all primary schools in the ACT.

The plan also proposed a range of new school structures such P-3/4, P-10, 5-8, 6-10 and 7-12 schools. In effect, it proposed to substitute the loss of choice of small schools with a wider choice of other school structures.

A vigorous campaign against the plan was conducted by school parent groups and Save Our Schools. In the event, 9 pre-schools, 11 primary schools and one high school were closed, rather than the original 39 proposed. However, 4 other primary schools were partially closed. Nine of the 15 primary schools had enrolments of around 130 students or more, including one with enrolments of over 200.

Several pre-schools were amalgamated with primary schools. The four primary schools that were partially closed were turned into P-2 schools with a range of early childhood services. One high school was merged with a secondary college to form a Year 7-12 school on separate campuses; an existing primary school and high school were also merged into a twin campus school; and another high school was extended to Years 6-10.

The Government also announced that a super-school, or P-10 school, would be built to replace the closed high school and two primary schools in the area. This has meant the imminent closure of another primary school that was not included in the original plan.

2. The consultation process was flawed

The consultation process was designed to deliver what the Government wanted. It was totally under the control of the Minister and his Department. It wasn't an independent process.

As a result, it failed to adhere to legislative requirements about what should be considered in school closure proposals and how they should be considered. It failed to fully investigate and report on the full educational, financial and social impact of school closures which is required under ACT legislation. For example, key education factors were ignored in the decision to close schools and the research on small schools was crudely misrepresented as indicating they provide a lesser education.

The financial cost of small schools was the over-riding factor for the government. It was given almost exclusive priority over the statutory requirements. The Government made no attempt to systematically collect and analyse information on the financial and other impacts of school closures on families.

The whole process left many people completely dissatisfied and angry at the outcome. This partially contributed to the loss of majority government by the ALP at the 2008 election.

The Education Committee of the Legislative Assembly has been conducting an inquiry into *Towards 2020* and is about to publish its report.

3. Disadvantaged communities were targeted

An unfortunate aspect of *Towards 2020* was that the least well-off communities in Canberra were targeted to bear the brunt of the burden of school closures. Nearly half of all primary schools in Canberra with disadvantage factors of over 40% were proposed for full or part closure. Of the 21 primary schools listed for full or part closure, 11 had a relatively high proportion of their students from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

Indigenous students and their families also bore a disproportionate burden of the costs and disruption. Only 10 schools in Canberra had more than 5% of their total enrolments comprised of Indigenous students and 7 of these schools were on the list for full or partial closure.

In the event, not all these schools were closed. However, 7 of the 15 primary schools closed or partially closed had a relatively high proportion of their students from disadvantaged families and 6 out of the 10 schools with an Indigenous enrolment of over 5% were closed or partially closed.

4. Education in small schools is just as good as in large schools

The Government's case for closing schools was partly based on educational grounds. It argued that small schools limit the curriculum and educational opportunities available for students. The philosophy behind the plan was that small schools do not deliver a quality education and larger schools do.

There is very little research evidence to support the Government's claims and it largely ignored the findings of the major studies over the past 20 years.

Student outcomes

The Government failed to show that small schools deliver lower student results than larger schools. There is no robust research evidence to suggest that small schools deliver worse education outcomes than larger schools. Indeed, many studies conducted during the past 20 years have found that small school size, particularly at the primary school level, has a positive effect upon student achievement, extra-curricular participation, student satisfaction, student behaviour and attendance.

US studies over the past 20 years generally support the conclusion that students perform better in smaller elementary and middle schools while the findings for high schools are mixed. The most recent evidence comes from a review published earlier this year in the Review of Educational Research of some 57 studies conducted around the world since 1990.

Of the studies, 10 provided evidence about the relationship between school size and the academic achievement of elementary school students. None of these studies found evidence that achievement rises with increases in school size and only 3 found non-significant relationships. The 6 remaining studies reported a negative relationship between size and achievement. The review concluded that the smaller the school, the better the achievement.

The evidence at the secondary school level is mixed. Some studies show found achievement increased with size, others that achievement increased up to a certain size and

then begins to decline and yet others showed that student achievement declined as school size increased.

It has been suggested that studies finding a positive relationship between high school size and student achievement may not be adequately taking into account the higher drop-out rates typically associated with large secondary schools. Improved average school performance in large high schools may simply be a function of the increased drop-out rates found in such schools. Few of the studies reporting a positive school size–achievement relationship took this variable into account.

It also appears that student attendance and retention rates are significantly better in smaller than larger secondary schools.

Similar conclusions about small schools and student achievement have been arrived at in reviews of primary schools in the UK. For example, the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) has concluded that students in small schools are not disadvantaged in comparison with those in larger schools. It found that small schools are equally capable of providing an effective education and many are among the most effective in the country.

It is not clear whether a primary school can ever be too small. Despite the extensive literature on the relationship between school size and student achievement, there is little research evidence about the lower limits of school size and student achievement. One study stated that a school serving 50 students cannot be judged to be “too small” on the basis of any research known to the authors.

Some years ago, the International Encyclopedia of Education stated that the quality of education argument was rarely strong enough to justify closing small schools. The subsequent accumulation of evidence on school size has confirmed this judgement.

There is also evidence that school closures and amalgamations are more likely to result in lower student achievement in a majority of cases. For example, a study has shown that 55% of merged schools in the UK sustained decline in student performance in the three years after the merger compared to the average for the separate schools in the three years beforehand. It said that the number of merged schools that have lower student results ‘is worryingly high’.

The ACT Government also made much of its proposal to offer a range of different school structures, such as providing more P-10 schools. However, the available research shows that changing school structures has little effect on education outcomes. Schools of different grade or Year level spans and middle schools do not appear to significantly change education outcomes.

The Government received significant professional support for its four early childhood schools offering a range of early childhood services and education. However, they have received little support from parents and have few enrolments. One of the problems is that they require a transition to another school after Year 2 and it seems many Canberra parents do not want to change schools at this point. Until Towards 2020, there was only one early childhood school in Canberra, so there is no established tradition of sending children to an early childhood school and then to a primary school.

Interaction of school size and socio-economic background on student outcomes

Much of the research literature on school size and student achievement has overlooked the possibility that school size may be associated with different outcomes for students from different backgrounds. However, a new stream of studies conducted in the United States since the mid-1990s show that small schools mitigate the effects of low socio-economic status (SES) on education outcomes. These studies were ignored by the ACT Government.

All of these studies show that students from low SES backgrounds achieve better results in smaller schools. Small schools with high concentrations of students from low SES backgrounds have higher average results than large schools with similar concentrations. In general, the impact of poverty on student achievement in small schools is about half that in large schools.

These studies suggest that governments should be trying to support the role of small schools serving less well-off communities rather than closing them.

Curriculum

There is no evidence to show that curriculum is less comprehensive in small primary schools than in larger schools or that it is inadequate in the smaller high schools.

In fact, the ACT Government's claims were damned by evidence presented by a high level review of curriculum in 2003-2004. It showed that curriculum was broadly similar across schools and that there were no significant differences between small and larger schools. All small schools covered the key learning areas and provided a range of enrichment and extra-curricular activities.

The curriculum of small and larger high schools across schools is also similar. In 2005, Save Our Schools compared the curriculum of a small ACT high school with that of two larger schools nearby and found that the small high school had a similar curriculum to the others. Students at the small high school had access to a comprehensive curriculum that incorporated all Key Learning Areas, considerable choice in electives and a range of special programs designed to meet their particular needs.

The most significant difference between the curriculum program at small school and the other high schools surveyed was in streaming students by ability. The small school operated mixed ability classes in all areas except Mathematics while the other schools all stream students by ability in English, Maths and Science. However, this is not a difference in the quality of schooling. Modern research shows mixed findings on streaming and mixed ability classes.

Overseas studies show that many small high schools maintain programs that are comparable in quality to curricula of larger schools. However, there is also evidence that larger high schools are better able to offer more advanced courses and a greater range of elective courses.

On the other hand, there is also an issue of curriculum breadth versus curriculum depth to be considered. Depth of study is an important component of secondary school education. As long as small schools are engaging students in opportunities for in-depth learning, an absence of a wide range of curriculum options may not be a significant problem.

5. Financial savings from school closures are often over-stated

The need to make financial savings was a major influence in the Government's school closure plan. It made much of surplus capacity in schools to make its case. However, it clearly exaggerated the financial case for school closures. It greatly exaggerated the costs of small schools and over-estimated the savings to the Government as a whole from closing schools.

The ACT Government's estimates of ongoing savings from school closures were based on estimates of the gross savings to the Department of Education arising from savings in staff salaries and site-related School-Based Management (SBM) payments. These were over-estimated for several reasons.

The estimates of the enrolment-related component of SBM payments appeared to be unduly low as many of the items in school operating costs are enrolment-related and not purely site-related.

Several significant one-off costs were incurred that were not taken into account. These included the duplication of special education facilities in other schools; purchase of new demountable classrooms and/or the transfer and installation of existing demountables; and refurbishment works in schools to receive additional students.

The savings estimates from closing schools also failed to take account of several one-off and ongoing costs to other Government agencies. The large part of these additional costs was likely incurred by the Department of the Territory and Municipal Services. They included the provision of additional bus services for students travelling to more distant locations and increased building maintenance and security costs.

As a result of these costs, the net savings to the ACT Government from school closures were likely to be much less than the Government claimed.

It was clear from the start that the Government was looking to gain revenue from the sale of school sites. Soon after the plan was announced, the Education Minister re-assured community meetings that closed school sites would not be sold off. However, he was quickly over-ridden by the Chief Minister (and Treasurer) who said that school sites would be sold.

A community backlash led by Save Our Schools and a looming ACT election meant that the government had to back down. After two separate community consultations on what to do with the closed sites, the government announced in 2008 that only 2 of the 11 closed primary schools would be demolished and used for aged care and other uses, while the other 9 sites were to be retained as government facilities for community use.

The irony was that in its panic to quell community anger before the election, the government promised substantial investment in the sites as community facilities which will considerably offset the minor operational savings from closing the schools.

6. Costs are transferred to families and communities

The Government virtually ignored the costs to individuals and the broader community of school closures. These include:

- Increased financial costs to families for transport to and from school;

- Increased traffic safety risks in travelling to and from school;
- Increased environmental costs;
- Reduced property values;
- Loss of community facilities and services; and
- The break-up of support and friendship networks for students and families based around schools.

In effect, by closing schools governments are passing on additional costs to families and communities.

Families may face significant increased financial and time costs to send their children to schools further away from home. Additional costs will be incurred by parents for bus fares and private car transport for children attending more distant schools. These additional financial costs will constitute a major burden for the least well-off families.

Another potential cost to individuals and the community is increased traffic accidents involving school children and adults travelling longer distances to and from school. In particular, children walking or cycling to and from schools outside their suburb are more likely to have to cross major roads.

School closures are likely to reduce property values in the affected suburb. A fall in value may occur for residential properties because there is no longer a nearby school.

Many of the effects on local communities can be considered from a social capital perspective. Closing off ways to develop social capital can be considered as a loss to the community. As a Productivity Commission paper commented several years ago:

School amalgamation policies are often intended to save public funds and/or enhance educational opportunities for children. However, the closure of a local school can diminish the sense of community that develops around such schools, which is not so easily replicated in larger schools where parents and children are drawn from a larger 'catchment'.

There are several aspects to this loss of social capital caused by school closures.

Many parents want their children to grow up with other children in the local neighbourhood. They value the sense of community that is developed through friendships and parent interaction. This sense of community is undermined by the loss of the local school.

Neighbourhood pre-schools and primary schools also play a critical role in developing and sustaining social support networks between families in local communities. Very often friendship groups for children and for parents are formed in the local pre-school and primary school and are developed into broader social networks that form essential social capital in these communities.

The neighbourhood school is often the only public facility in a local neighbourhood. It provides public space for recreational and leisure activities in the community. It can also serve as a meeting place for the local community. This resource is lost by the sale of school buildings and grounds. It leads to a reduction of green space and recreation areas in local communities. It means that school buildings are not available to meet future needs when the demographic cycle turns and a new generation of families moves into older suburbs.

The significance of neighbourhood schools for local communities is exemplified in the role played by local primary schools as community support and activity centres when bushfires ravaged several Canberra suburbs in 2003. Several primary schools became key centres for distraught residents. If these schools had not existed, there would not have been any public facility available in these suburbs for the community to gather in to support each other, organize activities and rebuild their local community.

Other aspects of social capital loss could include the impact of any loss of local shops and other services arising from the closure of schools. Many of these in Canberra depend on the trade created by a primary school located near the local shops/services. For example, the loss of local shops and services can have a particular impact on quality of life of the elderly in the area.

7. School closures undermine public education

The neighbourhood school is central to the purpose of public education, which is to enable all children to attend school without discrimination and without regard to family financial circumstances. Achievement of this goal is aided by ready physical access to schools in each neighbourhood within a reasonable and safe walking distance for all young children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The network of neighbourhood schools makes regular attendance at school less dependent on family capacity to provide or pay for transport and on safety considerations. If this network is broken up, attendance at school becomes more subject to financial and safety considerations. It is the children of families who can least afford to bear the increased costs whose attendance is most likely to suffer.

Full implementation of Towards 2020 would have severely diminished the neighbourhood school as a feature of the public education system. As it was, it weakened a key aspect that distinguishes public education from private education.

A further effect is that the loss of a neighbourhood school may mean that some parents transfer to a local private school or, if they have to travel further, they may be just as likely to choose a private school as a government school. Many parents want a small school for their children and if it is not available in the government sector they will choose the private sector. Many families have done this in the ACT as a result of the school closures.

School closures also undermine parent and community participation in schools. The harder or more costly it is for families to get to a school, the more likely it is that participation will decline. This means that parent participation will tend to become the preserve of families of more privileged backgrounds.

8. There is an alternative to school closures

Declining and expanding enrolments in schools are part of the cycle of population renewal in urban areas. School enrolments typically exhibit a rapid expansion in new suburban areas, stabilise after a period and, for some, decline to much lower levels for extended periods as the population profile changes. Urban renewal in older urban areas can bring a boost to schools in these areas in terms of stable enrolment patterns.

Future planning for schools needs to take into account changes in the population profile of different parts of cities. School planning is inevitably linked to proper urban planning to cope with changing demography and enhancing community facilities.

Responding to declining enrolments by closing schools is a simplistic solution which denies the need to maintain and provide different community facilities as urban populations change. It denies the need to ensure continuing and reasonable access to schools for all. It ignores the possibility of further population changes in the future and urban renewal programs. Resort to school closure reflects failure of the planning process.

Governments can better plan for the changing demographic cycle by using excess space in schools to support educational and other community uses and developing community schools.

Excess space in schools is seen by governments as a cost. However, it should be seen as an opportunity for other educational and community uses, and even complementary private uses, which will strengthen the role of the neighbourhood school and public education.

In assessing options for use of space designated as excess capacity, the first option should be to determine its educational value for the existing school or for other educational purposes. Improving and diversifying educational provision is a legitimate way of reducing surplus and implementing innovative educational ideas.

Surplus school accommodation may also be adaptable to social needs of the local community in a variety of ways.

In many countries, local government authorities have viewed excess capacity as an education opportunity, either for children of the neighbourhood or for older members of those neighbourhoods and other communities which do not have access to such facilities and programs. Many U.S. school communities, for example, now require public schools to fulfil the vision of the "lighted school house", open over long hours to provide a range of educational programs for the entire community and including prenatal and parenting courses, preschool programs, day-care programs, after-school programs, evening and weekend classes and special programs for senior citizens.

Schools can also serve as a 'hub' for the delivery of a range of services by community and government agencies. These include family services, health services, youth programs and other social services.

The community school model has much to offer for student development and learning, learning in the community and the development of the local community and its support networks for families and children. More extensive school/community links would serve to complement core government programs in the areas of education, community services and social welfare and better adapt them to meet the different needs of local communities.

Unfortunately, the ACT Government failed to understand the role of the neighbourhood school in public education and was too short-sighted to see the potential of community schools. Hopefully, this will not happen as well in South Australia.