

## Executive summary

The inquiry into the closure of public schools in New South Wales was established on 25 June 2015, following the advocacy of families from two schools named in the inquiry terms of reference: Martins Creek Public School, currently set for closure in December 2015; and Wollombi Public School, which closed in December 2014. Both schools are in small communities in the Hunter Valley.

While the inquiry focused on the experience of a small number of families, it was not the committee's role to conduct a detailed examination of what occurred, nor to investigate and adjudicate on the parents' formal complaints. The committee acknowledges the energy and sincerity with which the parents took part in our inquiry. In light of our role, our representation of the families' experiences and views is necessarily brief and our recommendations are focused on systemic improvements.

The committee finds that there is evidence that small schools, particularly at the primary level and particularly for rural and regional communities, can contribute to positive outcomes for students and local communities. In light of the educational and social significance of small schools, the NSW Department of Education carries a weighty responsibility to ensure that the decision about the future of any school is well informed, carefully judged and managed effectively.

At the heart of the inquiry lies numerous parents' strong dissatisfaction with the closure of their small school, not just the decision that was made but also the process surrounding it. The committee agrees with stakeholders that the system for school closures must fundamentally be based on principles of respect, objectivity, thoroughness and transparency. As partners with government in the education system, parents must be treated with dignity and respect.

It is very clear to the committee that while the Department's regime improved significantly with the development and adoption of the December 2014 *Protocols for schools where recess, closure, amalgamation or other educational provision models are to be considered*, there is still work to be done to improve the Protocols themselves and their implementation.

The committee accepts that the decision to close a school may well be justified, and may not ultimately be supported by parents. Nevertheless, we consider it critically important that the Department be honest with families and other stakeholders about whether a decision to close has already been made. Without a genuine commitment to consultation, nor the alternative of honesty that the Department has already formed its position, the Department would be understandably viewed by parents as not acting in good faith. Recommendations 2 and 4 are intended to address this. Recommendation 3 is focused on strategies to boost enrolments before taking any further steps in the Protocols.

The committee is concerned by the heavy handed way in which the Protocols themselves, and the broader process of school closures, have been implemented in some cases. There is a strong pattern in the evidence before us – from Wollombi, Martins Creek, Crowdy Bay, Grong Grong, Gosford and beyond – that this is a very significant issue. It appears that the Executive Director and Directors have not fully appreciated the enormous personal investment that parents make in the education and life of their child, nor the immense value that families and community members place on their school as a pillar of their community. Nor do some officers appear to appreciate the shock and grief that parents in particular understandably feel when their school is threatened, then taken away.

The committee is convinced that were the Department's officers to approach a school closure from a more compassionate and understanding frame of reference, which also honours parents as partners in the education system, the process would be much less fraught for all concerned. This, in turn, would lead to a much more successful transition by parents, children and the community as a whole. Our recommendation 5 is thus aimed at improving the organisational culture surrounding school closures.

To further improve consultation and transparency we consider that the Protocols should be refined to include a requirement to consult with local government, local community members and for formal record keeping of consultative groups. In addition, more support, information and resources to facilitate the consultation process are required.

The committee recognises that the best educational interests of the students is the primary principle upon which to base a decision to close a school. However, this criterion can be problematic in several ways, including that it allows the Department's view to be elevated above that of parents. A key theme in this inquiry is that the Department should pay significant respect to parents as partners in the education of children.

In addition, a more holistic view of the role that a school plays in a small town is desirable. In light of the impact that the decision to close a school will have on a community, we believe that the Department should formally review its processes for considering demographic trends at the local level.

The committee shares participants' view that once the decision to close a school has been made, there needs to be adequate provision for reversal. In light of information provided by the Department setting out its intentions for the sites of the 20 schools that closed in 2015, it appears that some parents are understandably concerned about disposal of school sites. The committee believes that when a school is closed, an adequate period of time should be allowed before the assets of the site are disposed of, to ensure that the option to reopen remains. In addition, we are disappointed that the Department was not more forthcoming about its plans for the Wollombi and Martins Creek school sites.

The committee considered the complex needs of one particular student at Martins Creek Public School and the potential bearing of those needs on the closure of the school. Informed by his psychologist's written opinion, the committee is convinced by the uniqueness and complexity of this student's needs. We are also convinced that there are extraordinarily high stakes at play should the student's needs not be well understood and catered to by the Department. We believe that the Department should respect the expertise of the student's parent and psychologist about those needs, along with the risk that the student would not cope with a transition to a larger school, and the concomitant risk of further substantial harm.

The committee considers that the risks to this student's psychological wellbeing and development are sufficiently substantial as to warrant an exceptional approach being taken to the closure of Martins Creek Public School. The committee thus recommends that the Minister reverse his decision to close Martins Creek Public School at the end of 2015 to facilitate the student with complex needs completing his primary schooling there. Instead, the school should potentially close at the end of 2019.

Several parents of Martins Creek and Wollombi made formal complaints to the Department of Education and the NSW Ombudsman about the process of closing their respective schools. The handling of one particular matter sits in the context of a perceived pattern of less than impartial handling of the other complaints. The committee considers that a government agency other than the NSW Department of Education should commission an independent audit of the Department's handling of the Wollombi and Martins Creek parents' complaints.