

Canberra Preschool Society Inc.

Position Statement on Closure & Amalgamation of Preschools

(to be) Approved: October, 2008
Review due: October, 2010

Understanding the Process:

There is unlikely to be a more difficult decision for a preschool community than to close the site.

Sometimes the decision is part of a process to co-locate a service with another or to amalgamate a service with another, in which case there is a degree of continuity for the closed site.

Sometimes there is no option with a service which is declining in size and viability than to close.

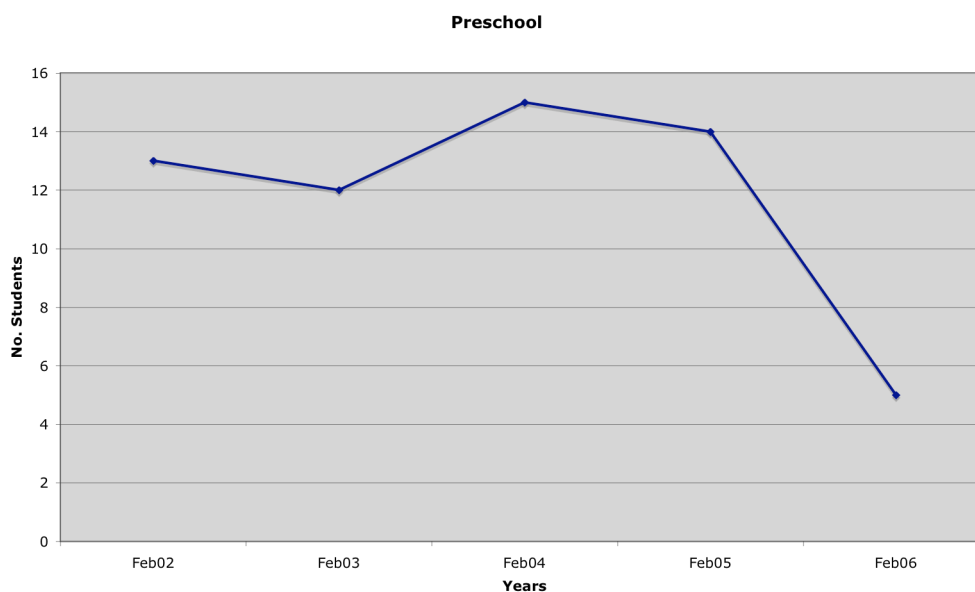
Determining viability

What are the tell tale signs for a school community which point to a decline in viability (or sustainability)? What are the processes through which the Preschool Parent Association should go through in reaching a point at which a closure decision is to be accepted?

The most obvious telltale sign for any community is a steady decline in enrolments for which there is no discernable reversal. All sites should have data on enrolments, and the Parent Association should begin to ask questions as to the viability of the preschool as a decline impacts on Parent Association volunteer staffing and the follow-on resource issues.

As seen in the example, below, where there has been a steady decline in enrolment numbers. In some cases this decline has reached a point where the preschool experiences a sustained low enrolment number – in a metropolitan area. However, in a rural area, it may well be that a low level of enrolment for preschool is quite sustainable.

In each case the same data may result in different information for preschool school communities and their governing bodies; which, under present Government policy, leads then to make the decision for closure.



The ACT Department of Education has stated that they require a minimum of 17 children enrolled in a preschool in order to adequately cover the financial obligations of a Teacher-in-charge, a Teaching Assistant and the provision of the building with it's necessary maintenance.¹

¹ ACT Auditor General (1998) *Auditor General Report : Management of Preschool Education*. p71

If this number was to be considered to be the “magic-number” of viability – then any preschool that has a sustained level of enrolment that is below that number would be considered “unviable”.

The Canberra Preschool Society.

The Canberra Preschool Society (CPS) is the governing body for all of the individual Preschool Parent Associations. After considerable deliberation the Society released a “Best Practice” statement (dated: 1st August 2006) to assist in the determination of the viability of a preschool.

While respecting the CPS member Preschool Parent Associations’ rights to adopt different positions to that of the Society, on the viability of a specific preschool, the CPS believes that to be viable at any point in time, an individual preschool should have:

1) **sufficient preschoolers enrolled to allow for the delivery of a meaningful and quality preschool experience to those enrolled.**

The CPS believes that there is no definitive number of what constitutes sufficient preschoolers and that it should be examined on a case by case basis taking into account factors such as the specific needs of the children enrolled and whether there are the necessary opportunities available for preschoolers’ social interaction with their cohorts.

The Government also takes this position in that it states that “there is no optimal size for a school” – it is defined as “a viable school is one that is able to offer a broad curriculum and broad educational opportunities.”²

2) **a preschool parent body that is adequately resourced to fulfil their role in the partnership with the Government that delivers preschool education in the ACT.**

Broadly speaking, there is an administrative function that is provided by the Parent Association that requires a minimum number of participants – a 4 member executive committee consisting of: a president, secretary, treasurer, and a public officer (who also is the CPS Representative).

Each of these positions hold a great deal of responsibility and often there is a need for assistance in terms of a Vice-President, Assistant Secretary and an Assistant Treasurer.

Preschool Parent Associations are responsible for the financial management of the preschool: the provision of education materials and resources down to the provision of cleaning materials and arranging for the premises to be cleaned and maintained. Often, when shared amongst all members (the parents of each enrolled preschool child) these responsibilities are not too onerous. In fact, this resourcing role has a great way of boosting the high level of satisfaction experienced by everyone at the preschool:

- a) The children – as they use and benefit immediately from the resources
- b) The teachers – as they are supported in their role as early childhood educators
- c) The parents as they play a significant role in obtaining up-to-date and educationally appropriate resources.

In conclusion, a viable preschool is one that has a Preschool Parent Association that has sufficient financial and human resources to meet its legal obligations as a Preschool Parent Association, as well as it being suitably positioned to make a meaningful contribution to the provision of a quality educational experience for their children. Invariably this leads to a definition of “viability” that is based upon the number of enrolments. Leading to a number of

² As seen on the Toward 2020 website: available on-line from:
<http://www.decs.act.gov.au/2020/faq.htm>

potential Parent Association members. This “number” can be elastic from one year to the next – based upon the willingness of the Parent Association members to participate in the provision of the preschool education.

The CPS Position ...

Is that **the viability of a preschool must be determined through a process of negotiation and collaboration with the individual sites and the stakeholders involved.**

The Canberra Preschool Society holds the position that any examination of a preschool’s longer term viability should take into account past and projected enrolments, as well as any other factors that may lead to changes in demand. For example, changes in session offerings, peaks during the year arising from transfers of families into Canberra and urban infill.

Should the Preschool Parent Association, the Canberra Preschool Society, the ACT Department of Education and Training or the ACT Government consider that a preschool has reached the point where it is deemed to be no longer “viable”. Then steps should be undertaken to ensure appropriate inclusive consultation opportunities being provided to directly and indirectly affected parties, as well as local residents. The Canberra Preschool Society believes that any preschool closure or amalgamation should be handled in a sensitive and considerate manner.

The Government’s position ...

Part 3.2, Section 20 of the ACT Education Act (2004) requires the Government to:

- 5) Before closing or amalgamating a government school, the Minister must—
 - a) have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students’ families and the general school community; and
 - b) ensure that school communities affected by the closure or amalgamation have been adequately consulted during a period of at least 6 months.
- 6) To ensure that school communities affected by closing or amalgamating a government school are adequately consulted, the Minister must, before a decision is made on the proposal—
 - a) tell the school communities about the proposal; and
 - b) Listen to, and consider, their views.
- 7) The consultation must be done in a way that gives effect to the following principles:
 - a) consultation should focus on access to, and the provision of, quality educational opportunities;
 - b) consultation should be open and transparent;
 - c) consultation should lead to sustainable decisions by involving effective community engagement;
 - d) without limiting paragraph (c), consultation should ensure that—
 - i) relevant information is provided in a timely and accessible way to enable maximum community participation in debate about the proposal; and
 - ii) opportunities are provided for feedback about the proposal, especially from families and other people with significant interest in the proposal;
 - e) consultation should include seeking the views of school boards that are likely to be affected by the proposal.

In summary ...

The consultation process, prior to any closure decision is critical and will, no doubt, be highly charged with emotion and politics. However, the CPS stressed that it is important that Parent Association consider the following:

- The community has the opportunity to participate constructively within the consultation process.
- This participation must engage the consultation in a manner that focuses upon the access to, and the provision of, quality educational opportunities in the ACT
- The participation should encourage openness and transparency.
- To remember that the objective, for the process, is to lead to “sustainable decisions” with regard to the provision of education in the ACT.

Consultation requires active, responsible and considerate participation.