

Unlocking the Gates

A New Beginning for Government Schools

Canberra**liberals**

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The Canberra Liberals will bring an end to the Stanhope Government's destructive approach to government schools and local school communities. Our reinvestment in ACT Government Schools will begin the process of rebuilding confidence in government education and help to arrest the flight from the sector.

The Canberra Liberals will re-open four schools in the first term of 2009, including Flynn Primary, Cook Primary and Preschool the rural schools of Hall Primary and Tharwa Primary.

The school re-openings are an integral part of a broader Canberra Liberal vision of what makes for a quality school system. The best learning environment is one where the teachers have small and manageable classes; where parents and the local community are actively involved in supporting the school; where the school has a strong family feeling with most teachers and students recognizing each other; and most importantly the best schools are ones in which the students do not feel lost.

The Canberra Liberals aim to make the ACT public school system into a world class system. This is why we have committed \$24.5 million to reducing class sizes across the board in all ACT Government primary schools. It is a commitment we have backed up with \$2.9 million for extra classrooms and \$2.6 million to recruit the best teachers in the country – graduates and mature aged. Our new investment in quality teaching will represent an increase of up to 3.9% in spending on public education above what Labor would spend once fully implemented.

The Stanhope Government's Legacy of School Closures

Before the 2004 election the Stanhope Government misled the people of Canberra about their intentions to close schools. Education Minister Katy Gallagher ruled this out on the cusp of the last election repeatedly.

"There's no plan in closing any school." (*Canberra Times*, 11 August 2004)

"The Government will not be closing schools." (*Canberra Times*, 12 August 2004)

And Katy Gallagher said in the Legislative Assembly on the eve of the election:

"The Government has no plans to close any schools." (*Hansard*, 26 August 2006, page 4334)

But this year Katy Gallagher confessed in the Legislative Assembly that she had in fact decided to break that promise just six weeks after the election.

“Really, it started not long after the election. On 30 November, as part of my visits to schools as minister for education, I visited the Ginninderra District High School, I think for the first time. ... I discussed the issue of Ginninderra District High with the Chief Minister. ... I will tell you when that planning started. The planning started on 30 November 2004, when I went and visited the terrible facilities at west Belconnen, at Ginninderra District High School. ... In years to come, the government will be thanked by the community itself; you wait and see.” (*Hansard* 2 April 2008, pages 839-841)

The Stanhope Government’s main legacy on education has been to deliver the biggest ever program of school closures. By the end of 2008 Stanhope Labor will have closed 24 schools – starting with Ginninderra District High School.

The Stanhope Government’s cynically titled policy “*Towards 2020*” has caused chaos and uncertainty in the government school system. Whole communities have been disrupted.

Schools and local communities have suffered in many ways as 39 schools were threatened with closure and then 23 schools were padlocked and stripped for equipment and funding. The human impact has been wide reaching.

- Children have been separated from their closest friends.
- Teachers have been involuntarily reassigned to new schools, and some positions have been lost altogether.
- Some families have even had to sell their houses or buy a second car to get their children to school. In effect, these families have had to make large long-term sacrifices to their financial position, to pay for short-term government savings.
- Many of the closed schools are in lower income areas, where the cost of moving school and daily transport to a new location is a real burden for many parents who are not well off.
- Most of the schools which were closed were primary schools. These children are plainly too young to travel alone on the bus or to be able to safely cross major roads to walk to distant suburbs to get to a new school. There are real safety issues for young children who have to walk distances to get to school.
- The token voucher given by the government to each child from a closed school will not compensate for the loss of a local and accessible school.

After Labor inflicted the double-whammy of closing schools and cuts to ACTION bus services, Education Minister Andrew Barr famously declared on 8 June 2006 that Canberra’s school children should start driving themselves to school!

One parent responded by saying:

"If Andrew Barr thinks I'm going to buy my teenage children a car to drive to school he's got another think coming." (*Canberra Times*, 9 June 2006)

It has been said that this was a Marie Antoinette moment for Andrew Barr – a telling sign of an Education Minister profoundly out of touch with the day-to-day realities for thousands of students and their families.

The Liberal Response to School Closures

The Canberra Liberals opposed the Stanhope Government's plans for far-reaching school closures from the outset. It represented a huge breach of faith with the people of Canberra. Moreover, it failed even as an austerity measure: the projected meagre savings did not go close to justifying the disruption to our children and our community - even if they are ever realised.

But more fundamentally, the Canberra Liberals believe the "factory farming" approach of *Towards 2020* is short-sighted and counterproductive. Schools are not matriculation mills, geared toward maximum output for minimum cost. Our children are not widgets rolling off an assembly-line: they are individuals, each with their own unique needs and personal potential. This is why the Canberra Liberals have committed to reducing class sizes across the board in primary schools.

Ever since the announcement of the Stanhope Government's school closure program, the Canberra Liberals have been working with communities to plan how we can best undo its worst excesses.

In late 2006 the Canberra Liberals made a commitment to reopen schools where it was viable and we found widespread local community support. We committed then to spend at least \$10 million to help communities to re-open schools, and to consult with the community to determine which schools to re-open.

In some cases, the Stanhope Government has limited the options to return to the school structure that the community wants, for example by constructing the West Belconnen "super school". So much money is locked up in this that it's impossible to go back.

In other cases, schools have already closed – and in some cases have been scheduled for demolition - and some parents would be understandably reluctant to disrupt their children's lives further by changing schools yet again if their old schools were re-opened.

However we have received strong approaches from a number of communities who were convinced, and convinced us, that their schools were viable, and they were prepared to support re-establishing them.

Through our extensive consultation, the Canberra Liberals have found that the closure of schools has had an adverse effect on the wider community. This is especially true of the rural communities of Hall and Tharwa, where the closure of the

schools has disrupted the whole local economy, and where sending children considerable distances to alternative schools has proved enormously disruptive. The idea of closing ACT schools because some students are NSW residents is petty and not in the best interests of the ACT students attending those schools.

In Flynn, there were no other community facilities apart from the school. Its closure has gutted the whole community. Flynn Primary had strong enrolments and near-average costs.

The same is true of Cook. The school had good resources, and was praised by the Minister for Education as a "great school".

It remains a mystery why Flynn and Cook were arbitrarily singled out for closure. The Canberra Liberals sought government documents on these decisions, we fought for the documents in parliament and in the courts, but the Stanhope Government has to this day suppressed the key documents that provided the basis on which it targeted schools for closure.

A Brand New Day for Four School Communities

The Canberra Liberals commit that if elected to form government we will re-open, in Term One of 2009:

- Flynn Primary,
- Cook Pre-school and Primary,
- Tharwa Primary, and
- Hall Primary.

This is a tight timetable and will require considerable effort on the part of Government and the communities, but we feel students should not be asked to face yet another disrupted school year. It may take some time for schools to return to their previous enrolment levels, but we owe it to these communities to bear the additional costs in the short term. They have been messed around too much already. The Canberra Liberals will work with the individual communities to allow the return of as many children as possible in February 2009.

Costings

The Treasury estimates of the cost of the Canberra Liberal commitment to reopen these schools are as follows. We have made provision for the following spending commitments as part of our detailed budget plans for the next four years.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Capital – School Reopenings	3,336			
Recurrent – School Reopenings	3,421	2,848	2,652	2,714

Guarantees to Other School Communities

The Canberra Liberals also reaffirm our December 2006 commitments to:

- guarantee that there will be no school closures initiated in the first term of a Liberal Government (2008 to 2012); and
- establish a Community Committee on the Future Direction of ACT Schools to monitor the ongoing health of Canberra's government schools in terms of:
 - current enrolments
 - future enrolments and demographics;
 - the conditions of buildings and plant; and
 - other issues relevant to the future planning of schools.

A Canberra Liberal Government will move immediately to establish the Community Committee.

Listening to the Community

The Canberra Liberal approach to government schools has been based upon student needs, not economies of scale. We said we would consult communities about the future of their schools, and we did.

We have identified the communities that put the forward the most compelling case for re-opening their closed schools and we have been prepared to back them with a commitment to unlock the gates of their schools. For hundreds of children, teachers and parents, these school re-openings will represent a welcome end to a most unfortunate saga.