

VACPSP POSITION PAPER

MELBOURNE SCHOOL CLOSURES

September 2023

Intention

The purpose of this VACPSP correspondence is to articulate the position of Victorian Catholic Primary Principals as conveyed through the Principal Council and other individual Principals consulted for the purposes of this paper. Through this paper the VACPSP hopes to continue an open dialogue with MACS and work together in addressing this feedback.

The VACPSP seeks:

- To advocate for the Principal voice and perspective;
- To share the Principal experience and feedback on particular concerns;
- To show members they are heard and that their feedback is being listened to;
- To promote transparency;
- To keep members proactively informed of the rationale behind governance decisions;
- To have a positive, mutually beneficial relationship with all stakeholders;
- To be the voice of calm and reason.

In this particular paper, the VACPSP articulates both the feeling amongst Principals as well as shares the lived experiences of Principals 'at the coalface'.

Overview: School Closures

The VACPSP and the Principal members it represents understand that robust and regular school viability testing is necessary for a productive functioning system. The VACPSP supports the due process conducted by MACS and its representatives in decision making and thank MACS for articulating and understanding that *'the decision to close, amalgamate or relocate a school requires an in-depth understanding of the complex relationships and the overall impact on the community, to ensure no long-term negative community impact.'* (MACS School Viability 2023, Page 1).

On that basis, there is no debate about the outcomes of these viability assessments or the commercial realities of school closures more broadly. The purpose of this paper is to share the lived experience of Principals, to strengthen the Principal/MACS relationship, and to work together to continually evolve and improve operations that relate to schools and affect Principals. The concerns noted by the VACPSP in this paper centre around the reported experience of relevant Principals that instead of the process uniting *'the heart of the MACS system'* (MACS 2030), it has left some Principals feeling displaced.



Identified Concern

The VACPSP believes the underlying concern and emotional reaction to school closures, both of Principals directly and indirectly affected, is a symptom of a broader issue; a feeling of not belonging to MACS, a feeling of being disenfranchised by the system, and a feeling of being alone. By bringing this to MACS attention, VACPSP hopes to work together in support of the common goals in accordance with '*MACS 2030: Forming Lives to Enrich the World*'.

Proposed solution

Principals want a joint partnership with MACS. In this case, VACPSP welcomes a codesigned, evidenced-based approach to the closure process to enable Principals to share the vision of the system and to feel their knowledge and experience is a valued part of the decision-making process.

Practical Implementation: Communication

The VACPSP respectfully suggests that there was significant uncertainty felt by the affected Principals and school communities during the investigation process. The VACPSP appreciates this is the natural effect of undertaking due process during the investigation to ensure a thorough and impartial assessment is taken based on tangible metrics, but considers that stronger and more proactive communication would have served to ameliorate unnecessary or unproductive angst throughout the process.

Feedback: Principals felt they were unsure about what would happen.

Proposed solution

The promotion of the key criteria about the process, the weighting of each element to the eventual decision and sharing the lengthy considerations that go into a decision would be helpful. The VACPSP understand that it may be a situation where each school is assessed uniquely in which case promotion of this wholistic assessment would be valuable in supporting Principal understanding of the process. Clearly articulated process steps would also be helpful for Principals to have an understanding of what would happen and equip them to guide their community. Going forward, this type of communication would help Principals feel part of the system and that they are working with MACS in joint pursuit of the overall vision and a common goal of supporting the system.

Practical Implementation: Support for wellbeing

Understandably, school closures have a big impact on Principal health and wellbeing, with one Principal sharing it became such a stressful situation to come to school, they started using the back door to avoid being bombarded with questions from families. Principals have shared sentiment that proactive support for their wellbeing was not properly considered and they were not afforded ample training, necessary resources or support to manage the process or the fallout from the closure decisions.

The feedback: There is a feeling that post closures, Principals wellbeing was a 'tick the box' exercise.



Proposed solution

Communication as discussed above would go a long way to support Principals as it would proactively assist them in managing the process. If Principals felt they were in partnership with MACS, they could better support themselves and their community. Exit surveys amongst the community could also be helpful to enable Principals to share feedback on the process. Principals would also benefit from terms in their employment contract, articulating the process, should they be involved in a school closure in the future.

Practical Implementation: Transitioning affected families and students

It has been reported to the VACPSP that neighbouring school Principals of the affected schools were invited to present by video-link to parents of students affected by school closures. It is the understanding of the VACPSP that the Principals were given eight minutes to present and 'pitch' their school to the families.

The feedback: Principals felt uncomfortable pitching their school in this way, especially in front of their peers. The process did not feel collegial for the Principals' or professional in front of the families.

Proposed solution

Principals to be invited only for their allocated presentation time and not the entire session to allow for privacy of presentations and avoid the feeling of competition with their neighbours, friends and peers.

Practical Implementation: Redeployment

VACPSP has been advised that MACS required all neighbouring schools to share their staff vacancies for system coordination of redeployment.

The feedback: This process means Principals have little or no involvement in the hiring process and no autonomy in finding the suitable staff match for their community. This situation puts a Principal in a potentially powerless position - not fully cognisant of the strengths, challenges, skills and disposition of future employees.

Proposed solution

Principals want to be seen and acknowledged for their commitment to caring for their community. Whilst it is understood that autonomous recruitment may not be possible as it would be in other hiring situations, some consultation would be appreciated to ensure a smooth transition and support Principals to be part of the process and their professional discretion taken into consideration.

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Wider Principal Concern

There is a reported feeling amongst Melbourne Principals that their schools could be closed at any time, especially in the context of financial pressures faced by families resulting in lowering enrolments. This is causing a sense of panic and for some a perceived urgency to leave the school or the profession.

Feedback: As one of the schools recently had significant funds put toward its development, Principals are concerned the closures did not form part of a long-term strategic thinking.

Proposed solution

- It would be helpful to have further information about the process and to have greater communication to smaller schools in particular.
- Michael Gray, VACPSP President would welcome an invitation to attend any meetings as an impartial support person.

Conclusion

Catholic primary Principalship is a wonderfully unique profession; vocation driven, mission focused and at the coalface of community and parish life. Whilst Principals recognise the importance of the directional and employment relationship with MACS, they primarily feel that they belong to their school and their school community. For the most part this is a strength. This belonging kindles a passionate love and loyalty for a school and community. VACPSP believes, however, this is also the key issue. Whilst we would never want to take away the relationship between Principal and school, Principals need to feel that they ultimately belong to the system and that the system belongs to them. That the system supports them and trusts them and that their professional discretion is of value to the system more broadly.

Thoughts and Observations

The governance changes may have had unintended consequences, namely a disenfranchised emotional feeling amongst Principals, undervalued for the very unique perspective they bring to system and school direction, strategy, policy and procedures.

Possibilities

The VACPSP welcomes a codesigned, evidence-based approach to the process going forward and would gladly utilise its Principal Council as consultants to continue this conversation. One future option could include establishing a Consultative Committee supporting major policy development and MACS 2030 Strategy.

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