

Do Numbers Count?

Educational and Financial Impacts of School Enrolment

Report 7 – August 1998

Background...

The Education Department provides education to over 250 000 students in primary schools ranging in size from nine to 900 students and in secondary schools from 150 to almost 1 900 students.

School size impacts on both the efficiency of education delivery and the educational opportunities available to students. This has led to considerable pressure to restructure schools.

Since the early 1990s, the Department has implemented a number of restructuring strategies, including its 'Local Area Education Planning' (LAEP) policy launched in September 1997.

This report describes the effect that enrolment can have on educational opportunities and operating costs and of the issues and outcomes of recent school restructuring strategies.

What the examination found...

Approximately 68 000 students attend one of 182 low enrolment primary or 68 low enrolment secondary schools.

Low enrolment schools were found to:

- be generally more expensive - up to \$10 000 per student more in primary and \$4 750 in secondary schools.
- sometimes make less than half the use of facilities of higher enrolment schools. About a quarter of all schools have 21 per cent or more surplus capacity.
- often require students be taught in multi-aged classes.
- disadvantage students by providing less access to specialist programs in primary schools and much less curriculum offerings in secondary schools.
- usually have lower student-teacher ratios and are able to provide better pastoral care.

The Department has used a number of restructuring strategies with varying success:

- School Rationalisation between 1994 and 1996 resulted in 11 closures and 16 amalgamations, saving \$28.5 million.
- LAEP has led to five announced closures and four secondary conversions to middle schools. Over 2 400 students will move to another school.
- Further major restructuring under LAEP is probable. Scope for closure remains though this option appears unlikely to be much used.
- LAEP is an important step forward from School Rationalisation. Nevertheless, some concerns with LAEP were identified, in particular the need for greater rigour in identifying and weighing up restructuring options.

What the examination recommended...

The Department should continue to pursue options to minimise structurally based educational and financial inequities.

The Government and Department should review those aspects of LAEP identified as a concern, and in particular the need for more detailed cost benefit analysis of restructuring options.