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Stephanie Grieve,
Partner, Duncan Cotterill,
PO Box 5
Christchurch, 8140
New Zealand.

Dear Ms Grieve,

I write in response to your request for an opinion regarding the possible implications of the closure of the Redcliffs School for the recovery of the Redcliffs community.

Background: I am a clinical psychologist, and have been working with natural disasters since I was part of the Royal Children's Hospital team working in the aftermath of the Ash Wednesday Bushfires in Victoria in 1983. I was appointed a consultant for disaster recovery to the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services in 1989 and have continued in that position to the present. I have also had a role as consultant for emergency recovery to Australian Red Cross for over 10 years. I have participated in the recovery of some 35 large and small natural disasters throughout Australia. I have also consulted to the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management for floods in New Zealand in Northland, Bay of Plenty, Manawatu, Horowhenua and Picton areas as well as having made 8 trips to Christchurch for New Zealand Red Cross and CERA since the earthquakes. I have published articles and conducted research into emergency recovery and regularly work with disaster affected and traumatised people in my clinical practice.

You are seeking my opinion on the value of schools as social networks and community assets, especially in the context of recovery from disasters.

Longstanding international experience and research show that recovery from disasters is best supported by networks and activities as close to affected people's normal life as possible (eg. Drabek, 1986, 2010; Kaniasty and Norris, 1999; van den Eynde and Veno, 1999; Phillips, 2009). Adaptation of pre-existing structures and networks is preferable to introduction of new ones, since they constitute an invisible *social capital* of existing relationships and history that have intangible but important assets for identity.

Disasters affect whole communities and disrupt the lives of community members well beyond the physical impact. Their effects have little relationship to pre-existing patterns of mental health problems since the major determinants of significant psychosocial problems during recovery are: (1) the severity of impact, (2) amount of resource loss, (3) the availability of social support during the recovery period, and (4) the presence of problems unrelated to the disaster. As a consequence, many people who are significantly affected, have no prior experience of using formal mental health or welfare services and often do not see their relevance to the current situation. They do not approach formal support services, and

consequently, their assistance has to come from their familiar informal systems and networks which supported their mental health before the disasters.

These include community agencies and services offering the whole range of services for normal life. Counselling or direct mental health services do not feature in their lives, so they make use of any source of information or comparison of their problems and situation with that of others in similar positions. They do this through formal meetings devoted to the purposes of support to some extent (although many people do not see it as part of their lifestyle to attend such meetings), but more importantly, they use informal contacts and information exchange. In this regard, any community opportunity for members to come together, exchange information and normalise their experience is an important mental health resource. It is often noted, that activities and networks that supply normal community functions which have a traditional non-disaster function, are well accepted by community members and become the basis for sourcing information, facilitating emotional support and promoting problem solving of disaster and recovery problems through networking.

Sporting, cultural, religious and social groups offer such assistance, but schools provide a unique opportunity for such exchanges since parents need to attend it regularly if not daily and form relationships with staff and other parents which can develop over the years. Schools also offer various opportunities for formal meetings as part of their normal functions which facilitate informal exchange of information. It is not only the parents, children and staff who attend the school who are important, but its effects include other family members who benefit from the process. Grandparents, other family members and friends involved with families with children also benefit from the school community as a resource hub.

These resources constitute an invisible fabric of communication and social support which functions informally with regular and often short, but frequent exchanges of information or emotional support. These are the basis for how people normally meet emotional needs and maintain constructive adaptation to their stresses outside the disaster situation. Any loss of community resources reduce this source of social capital and the resilience of people in finding their own solutions to their problems.

Schools, which are long standing features of communities, excite strong feelings among their members. They include not only those who may have attended them when they were young and have had successive generations of their families involved, but also other community members who have identified with it as a community feature. The sense of identity is multifaceted but is related to external, tangible community features which provide definition to the sense of self within a geographic locality and over time in history as belonging to a group of people. A secure sense of identity is an important component of personality and a vital resource for resilience. Disasters damage and destroy the environment and since the physical features of the environment relate to identity, minimising this loss helps preserve the continuity of identity and social structures and the social capital invested in them.

The repercussions in community support networks after disasters continue throughout the recovery period. A major effect of disasters beyond the trauma, loss and physical impact is the element of disruption. This includes not only the loss, but also the disturbance of the stable, pre-existing patterns of daily life which are important elements in providing security, confidence and predictability. Disruption to patterns of lifestyle translate into reduced access to various resilience resources such as emotional and material support networks, local routines and information networks.

Disruption is a significant stress factor in itself, which has been associated with long term health consequences such as increased blood pressure and the rise in age-specific death rates (Sperling and Eyer1988, quoted in Hammond, 2000). However as a social stressor, it also reduces people's energy, the quality of their decision making, planning and thinking processes (Hammond, 2000)which in turn may affect the quality of their recovery. Hence minimising disruption of social routines and activities is an important resilience strategy.

In the event of the closure of a school that is a long-standing feature of a community, it is likely to disrupt the routines and networks that revolve around it, of community members coming together regularly in the course of the school life. These networks, including those of the children, will be adapted and integrated into other school communities, but will of necessity become diluted and while most people adapt, it will add to the burden of adaptation and consequently stress for those involved. Such an event occurring at 5 years post disaster is likely to impose yet another task of adaptation when most people, it may hoped, are beginning to re-establish their lives. Stressors and disruptions occurring when people are making progress in recovery are often felt as particularly undermining of morale and often seem to have an exaggerated effect.

While people adapt to necessities, such as moving schools, the consequences are less likely to be felt in relation to education, but more likely to be felt in areas remote from education itself, such as the impact of low morale on the emotional climate of the home, consequences of extended travel in terms of reduction in social participation and generalised reduction in social engagement with the new school networks. For the children, while they continue to meet educational goals, the consequences may be felt in their social relationship and recreational activities. It is likely to be the social capital as a resilience resource which is affected rather than core educational functions. However it might be argued that the strength of community agencies is that their roles as part of the community life means their core function is supported and improved by their informal role as the nucleus for a wide range of informal community processes.

It is to be noted that following the destruction of the Dunalley Primary School in the Dunalley Bushfire in Tasmania, when asked their priority for recovery, the community responded they wanted their school to open for the new school year. The government facilitated this to occur with temporary building and landscaping. The effect of this was a great morale boost for the community and positive feeling for government. Such positive emotional attitudes have a strong effect on the community members. Many recovery activities were held in the school buildings.

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Yours sincerely,

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