

Honourable Hekia Parata
Minister of Education

Staff Submission from Our Lady of Fatima School

The staff of Our Lady of Fatima School are very grateful to the Minister for providing us with an opportunity to consult with the Ministry regarding the closure of our school. We do not believe we had a fair and genuine consultation with the Bishop. We are strongly opposed to the closure of our school and we hope you will take our views into consideration when you make your final decision.

The staff would like to share with you the very stressful journey we have undergone in this consultation period over the last twenty two months.

Our Journey

Our journey begins when an earthquake destroys St Paul's school and church on September 4th, 2010 and the site is red -zoned in the middle of 2012.

The Bishop merges Our Lady of Fatima, Burwood and St Paul's into a new Mairehau parish. This is announced in late 2011 and formally commences in January 2012. This occurs at the instigation of St Paul's parish priest. The Bishop's original proposal was that only Our Lady of Fatima and Burwood, as parishes that had a common past and shared a parish priest would merge. St Paul's had been intended by the Bishop to merge with Aranui and New Brighton to form a larger eastern parish.

This is an important development as it paves the way for the Bishop's often repeated mantra, "one school, one parish."

Unknown to any of the parishes, at the time the Bishop is considering the finalisation of parish boundaries, the Bishop writes to the Minister in December 2011 and asks for the closure of both Our Lady of Fatima and St Paul's Schools so that he can create a joint parish school on the Our Lady of Fatima site.

The Minister advises the Bishop that she is concerned because of the large redundancy cost and asks the bishop to consider an alternative outcome.

At some stage during 2012, NZEI informs the Minister of Education it agrees to the process for a merger between St Paul's and Our Lady of Fatima schools. This agreement is given without consulting the NZEI members of either staff, who believe the Bishop will build St Paul's a new school. The briefing paper to the Minister from the Ministry that resulted in her agreeing that the Bishop could consult on the possible merger of the two schools is based on misinformation from the Catholic Office that both schools would be happy about a merger and would go along with the Bishop's wishes. NZEI also based their decision on this information.

The announcement of the proposed merger is made at a public meeting in September 2012, when both Principals are at a Catholic Conference, despite the fact both Principals had asked if any important announcements would be made before they left for the conference. The news is announced by the handing out of a letter to those at the meeting, distributed from the front of the room to the back. Other schools are aware of the proposal before the representatives of either school affected are informed. No discussion or support is provided to the staff and Board representative from either school.

Round 1 of consultation begins in September, 2012. The Bishop appoints his facilitator. Members of our staff are not consulted on this appointment and we would prefer an independent facilitator of our own choice.

At the meetings that follow, both communities show strong opposition to the Bishop's proposal. St Paul's wants a new school. Our Lady of Fatima want to remain as they are and also want to support Saint Paul's to have a new school. The Bishop does not attend any of the public meetings, despite repeated requests from both communities that he does so.

The Bishop begins Round 2 of the consultation in June 2013. It is implicit in the options presented that St Paul's will definitely not be rebuilt. The Bishop presents the consultation as a decision that a new school to be known as St Francis of Assisi has been made and signed off on by the Minister, although it is clear from her letter dated 8th May, 2013 that she has not done so. The Bishop limits his consultation to how this proposed "new school" would be staffed. He establishes three options for staff to vote on.

- Option 1 – both schools close with loss of all jobs.
- Option 2 – St Paul's closes and Our Lady of Fatima stays open and is enlarged with a new name. This option receives the most votes but the Bishop removes it. It is also a legal option.
- Option 3 – the schools merge but it must be unanimous.

NZEI asks the Bishop to remove Option 3 as it is illegal for integrated schools to merge and a decision to merge can be overturned by a complaint from any person.

Round 2 ends and the facilitator submits her report. Despite the efforts of the Our Lady of Fatima Staff and Board and letters from NZEI, the report does not accurately represent the enhancements to option 2 which would have provided job protection to St Paul's staff. As a result, the Bishop does not consider option 2 as a workable solution.

Round 3 of consultation begins in late 2013, this time with two options.

- Option 1 – to close both schools with loss of all jobs.
- Option 2 – to merge both schools which must be unanimous.

The Bishop sacks the two Our Lady of Fatima proprietors' representatives from the board in October 2013 and replaces them with three proprietors' representatives from St Paul's.

The Bishop meets Our Lady of Fatima staff and Board in November 2013 and states his strong and predetermined belief that the two schools should merge on one site. He states that he appointed the St Paul's proprietors' representatives to push for the merger option.

The facilitator introduces a survey monkey for the staff to use as part of the consultation. It provides the two options put forward by the Bishop and two options allowing staff to indicate they partially support either option. There is no place where staff can indicate they support neither option.

The consultation closes on December 18th, 2013. Most staff do not vote but their reasons are explained in their staff submission. Some staff email the facilitator to explain their reasons for choosing not to vote.

In June 2014 the facilitator's report is released to Our Lady of Fatima School via an Official Information Act request. It is a very unprofessional, unbalanced report, omitting information and including at great length one comment made by one person in favour of the merger. Some of the comments included in the report are defamatory.

The Board of Our Lady of Fatima writes immediately to the Minister and objects to the report being used in the consideration of our school's future.

The CEO of the Catholic Office releases the report to St Paul's School who indicate an intention to publish it on their website. At the instigation of the Our Lady of Fatima Board, the parish priest asks them not to.

NZEI expresses concern about the report.

On 11 June, 2014 the Bishop's final recommendation is released.

He seeks to close both schools. The facilitator's report is formally released to both communities.

NZEI immediately requests the Catholic Education Office not to publish the report on their website. The CEO agrees but St Paul's publish it on their website. NZEI also write and complain to the Ministry about inaccuracies and defamatory comments included in the report.

The Bishop's recommendation to the Minister to close both schools is announced to staff and later to parents. This sets off a fourth and final consultation by the Ministry which will last for four weeks. The Minister will then make her final decision.

The staff meet with NZEI, who explain about staff options should the school close. NZEI says it cannot assist the staff with a legal analysis of the situation as it must represent both schools, but suggests a judicial review instigated by the Board is appropriate. Staff sign a request to the Board to investigate taking out a judicial review and other legal remedies. Some staff attend the Board meeting, where the obtaining of a legal opinion is agreed to. A proprietor's representative questions the suitability of the current principals and staff of both schools to teach in the proposed new entity. Four staff members send in a formal complaint to the Board chair about the remarks and forward their complaint to NZEI.

The Board employ a legal firm to investigate various aspects of the process and the school's legal options.

A parent information meeting is held. The parents are strong in their view that they don't want the school to close and the staff to lose their jobs. They are shocked when they hear from two teachers about the options members of staff were expected to vote on. They form a committee to take action.

On Friday 27 June, 2014, during the consultation period with the Minister, a sign is put up on the street front of the school announcing the building of "St Francis of Assisi School."

This causes great distress to parents and staff and some children begin to be concerned.

The erection of the sign in effect assumes the Bishop and the CEO are sanctioning the loss of all staff jobs, as they have pre-empted the outcome of our current consultation with the Minister and assumed she will give permission for Our Lady of Fatima and St Paul's schools to have their integration agreements cancelled, that she will grant permission for a new integrated school on the site and agree to a name change for the school.

The sign is removed the following Monday.

Ongoing action from the Board, staff and parents will continue till the consultation period closes on July 18th.

Our Position

The staff at Our Lady of Fatima's position has always been that St Paul's will join us and together we could create a wonderful school for the parish. We do not oppose the Bishop's vision.

However decisions about schools are more than just property matters and they need to focus on the children and their needs first and foremost.

It is of great concern to the Our Lady of Fatima staff that the children from both schools and their emotional and learning needs have not been considered at all by the Bishop. The Ministry's website says that mergers need to consider how children's learning and interests will be advanced by such a path.

There has been no benefit for our children. They are in a school without a hall, have a portacom for a library and no clear access way in and out of the school. From term 3 they will be expected to use portable toilets for the next eighteen months and endure the noise and disruption of two large classroom blocks being erected close to their current classrooms.

These are children who have been affected by one of the biggest natural disasters in New Zealand's history. They deserve continuity and support. Instead the Bishop proposes to close their school and remove all the staff that they know and trust.

Consensus

We do not believe the Bishop's consultation was genuine. He set up limitations on options so no other solutions could be found. When he spoke to us he told us that a merger was all he wanted and had always wanted. In fact, he even said he understood it to be one of the legal methods to bring the schools together, even though it had become clear by that time that any legality the option had was based on unanimity amongst those directly affected by it. He sacked the Our Lady of Fatima proprietors' representatives, selected his own facilitator, and didn't listen to the views of the staff and boards.

He insisted on his vision of one school, one parish when all over the city there are two schools, one parish, and he submitted to the Minister an unprofessional, biased and defamatory report.

The Bishop claims that he had no choice but to close both schools because of a lack of consensus about how to come together. Staff being asked to vote to lose their own and their colleagues' jobs, or to vote for an option that is illegal and could be overturned is not an acceptable request from a proprietor. Nor is it the foundation for any type of dialogue between the two schools. There was no consensus because the Bishop allowed no discussion and he did not create an environment where the schools could talk to each other. He did not listen to the concerns of his community and ask how they might be addressed. He did not create the environment where the Ministry's advice or the union's advice was able to help find an answer.

We find it deeply offensive for it to be suggested that our jobs should be lost because of a lack of consensus, when we are the only party who looked to create more options and who asked for talks, but no-one else was prepared to meet.

The discussion over the "merger" option was hampered by the lack of information about the intentions of St Paul's staff and students to attend any proposed "new parish" school. If there had been an evidenced-based approach to the discussion a solution may have emerged and still could.

The staff asked the CEO at the Catholic Office and the facilitator at every stage of the consultation to provide evidence that the proposed roll was likely to eventuate, to ensure the

issue of surplus staffing would not arise. All that was received were assurances that the roll would increase to the numbers predicted and our genuine enquiries were rejected. We voluntarily tried to make provision for St Paul's staff as part of our response to round two of the consultation. This solution was again promoted in round three. During the third round of consultation, we proposed both social and resolution meetings with St Paul's staff. Our invitations were declined.

It is very difficult to feel fairly treated when the Bishop suggests the proposed loss of our jobs is the result of a lack of consensus, yet no-one was prepared to give us the evidence we needed or to meet with us with a view to finding a solution.

Unnecessary and Costly

The closure of both schools would result in a large number of job losses, particularly from Our Lady of Fatima. A taxpayer redundancy of approximately one million dollars would need to be paid out by the Ministry.

The Bishop is intending to close a perfectly functioning school where no staff have left post quake and where the roll is stable.

If we were the staff the Bishop portrays us to be, only acting from self interest, individuals would have left the school already rather than continue to face this uncertainty about our jobs. We have stayed because we believe in what we do, we believe in our children and we hope for justice and good sense to prevail.

The stress, confusion, anger and sadness the communities have endured since the process began 22 months ago is unfair and shows a lack of empathy and compassion.

It is incomprehensible that the Bishop's final solution to replacing a school which was destroyed by the forces of nature is to close down a fully functioning and healthy school community instead of building on the strong rock foundation which the existing Our Lady of Fatima community would provide.

This is a unique situation. Never before have two integrated schools been closed down and a new one opened on the same site against their wishes and where both schools are successful and well supported. The Bishop has often repeated the statement that there can only be one school, one parish. If the Minister accepts the Bishop's recommendation, this could set a precedent for this Bishop or others to close two schools whenever there are two schools, one parish. Currently in Christchurch there are a large number of schools where this is the case. This precedent could result in future job losses and redundancies. This cost will be borne by the New Zealand taxpayer in direct pay outs and in the loss of qualified teaching staff.

Timing

Of particular concern to the staff and our whole community is the possibility that both schools could be closed by the end of term two next year. This would result in site sharing and would be hugely disruptive, particularly as the two sites are some distance apart.

It would be a strange situation for the children when they go on a two week holiday and come back to a new uniform, new classmates and a new teacher. How does this bring continuity to their learning? If closure is to come, there must be time to farewell the old, which fits with traditional end of year activities and then start afresh.

Conclusion

The Bishop's desire to have one school, one parish can still be achieved without closing the two schools causing the loss of 21 staff positions at Our Lady of Fatima and a much smaller number at St Paul's. If St Paul's is closed and Our Lady of Fatima remains open the small number of staff from St Paul's can come across to the new entity. This would provide a smooth transition for the children of both schools, as they would have familiar teachers.

All the Our Lady of Fatima staff has ever wanted is to retain the maximum number of jobs from both schools and to provide the least disruptive outcome for our children. At this late stage that can only be achieved by the retention of Our Lady of Fatima School.

We have stood together as a staff unwilling to sacrifice the jobs of our colleagues for our own personal security. We have stayed with this school to support our children and their families. This is what being a Catholic family should mean.

The staff of Our Lady of Fatima, strongly request that Minister Parata not sign off on the closure of our school. We again express our gratitude for the opportunity to consult in a genuine and sincere process.

The Staff of Our Lady of Fatima School