

## **In the zone** Dr Lea Campbell\*

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Australians are familiar with the idea of having a school zone. It is a culturally engrained idea in our education system and legislation enshrines [the right of children to have a designated neighbourhood school](#). However, both the idea and the right are more contested than is often realised.

Real estate groups have tapped into the increasing collective concern about school zones in many ways for many decades, for example by developing [customer friendly ways to ascertain the school zone](#). After all, a house can easily be sold when it is in a school's zone, the 'right school's zone', of course.

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Under the mantra of choice [schools are increasingly taking an interpretative approach to the school zone](#). In fairness, schools can only do this because the Department of Education and Training (DET) has failed to enforce local access as a matter of priority. When zoned families, and especially out of school zone families apply, schools' decision making is not transparent. [DET stated recently](#), however, that select entry programs' enrolments are no longer meant to interfere with local enrolment obligations. It is also important to really understand the extent to which [schools proactively manage desirable and less desirable enrolments](#) so that the public understands that the right to access isn't always resulting in a warm welcome at the neighbourhood school.

Beyond this, some [schools lobby directly for new](#), broader or narrower zones depending on whether they want to increase or reduce new enrolments. The frequent changes to school zones have made planning notoriously difficult for parents and schools.

But the problem is much bigger than this. Put simply, the choice paradigm has become so fundamental to the school planning process that DET no longer proactively plans for new state schools. Demand is routinely either denied, underestimated or misconstrued on the basis that parents are 'choosing' to go elsewhere. This has become a self-fulfilling prophecy in some suburbs because one obviously cannot send a child to the nearest state school when there isn't one, [as parents in the Docklands can attest to](#).

Some previous DET planning decisions for new schools have been ill-informed or had too little parent consultation, overlooking, for example, the fact that students in the city are more likely to travel towards the city than outwards. Furthermore, it seems that some land was sold too quickly or via council interactions with questionable processes. For example, Banyule has lost more than 9 public schools in over 20 years and it is not clear what value the tax payer gained from DET selling land to council and council selling it to developers for profit.

Parents are experiencing a rude awakening to this new reality of the shortage and [overcrowding of government schools](#) across suburban, regional and rural Victoria. The situation has galvanised parents into a political quest for a bipartisan policy supporting high quality and high equity provision of government schools and a call on political parties to stop using schools in pork-barreling exercises. There were so many campaigns being run in Victoria, that one cold winter evening in 2014, a few groups met and decided to form an alliance which they later called '[Our Children, Our Schools](#) (OCOS)'

OCOS' vision is that 'Every child in Victoria should have access to high quality state primary and secondary education in their local community'. The alliance provides a forum to exchange campaign experiences, whether it is about saving an old school site from being sold, stemming the loss of enrolments from a local school or campaigning for new schools to be built, in old or new suburbs. Two years on, more than twenty five local groups have joined the alliance.

Considerable successes have been achieved by some campaigns, such as High School for Coburg and the [recent investment in building Richmond High School](#), to the tune of \$42

million. More broadly, the Andrews Government's 2016 budget included an historical [re-investment in schools](#). It is badly needed because the Kennett government's school closures remain a legacy issue and were compounded by the [under investment by subsequent Liberal Governments](#). In particular, the [drip fed funding of the school regeneration projects](#) has left a number of the regeneration project sites closed, boarded up and empty, some since 2011.

Many campaigns are still underway, and learning the most effective approach is an ongoing process. The best campaigns start with identifying the local need for school provision and organising to make sure DET works with accurate figures in its planning process. Most groups have a social media presence and use submissions, media statements and meetings with local representatives to get noticed by busy political staff. Careful advocacy with local council and state authorities is required to form good relationships with key decision makers. Ideally this prepares campaigns for cool-headed negotiations. Planning issues are a business transaction where claims about provision studies will be challenged on both sides. The goal for OCOS is the inclusion of the necessary funds in the budget cycle and then making sure they are spent in a timely and appropriate manner.

Experience developed in local campaigns has led OCOS to call on the Department to stipulate and then adhere to a planning process which is transparent, consistent and accountable. The latest IBAC revelations around banker schools and the lack of proper procurement and probity in [the case of the Ultranet](#) are all the more reason to embrace such an approach. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect is that public education finally has an active parent voice again which can mobilise large numbers of parents for the common good.

OCOS was born because the state has ceased to adequately plan for the provision of public schools. With DET now an adherent to the mantra of 'choice' [we have one more reason to require an independent authority to lead public schools](#). An outbreak of local campaigns led naturally to forming a coalition to share campaign expertise. OCOS relies on volunteering parents to run grassroots campaigns. Some campaigns have run for 6-9 years to get tangible results. A sobering lesson for the community. However, the dedication and commitment of parents and the results they are achieving are an inspiring sign of the democratic process in public education. Let us all stay in the zone.