

## ***Towards 2020 – JOINT SUBMISSION FROM THE BOARD AND P&C ASSOCIATION OF ARAWANG PRIMARY SCHOOL***

### **Introduction**

Arawang Primary School Board supports the development of a long term vision for the ACT government school system. The Board is, however, concerned, that *Towards 2020* may be imposed upon the community as the “right” vision, without adequate opportunity for consultation and exchange of views on alternative ‘visions’. The following comments reinforce this concern by identifying particular issues about the process of consultation and decision making and consistency with an existing raft of ACT Government policies.

We broadly support the P&C Council’s approach to the proposal, and its attempt to elicit answers to a range of important questions concerning the mooted school closures. Some of the issues raised in this submission draw on the Council’s questions and suggested remedies but it does not revisit general issues under discussion between the government and the P&C Council or those canvassed in open public forums. All issues contained in this submission have particular relevance to the Arawang Primary School community.

Overall, issues raised in this submission point to absence of sufficient information to provide the basis for an informed debate, and an inadequate period of consultation to ensure community confidence in the processes leading to the decisions the Government will finally make.

### **Description of Arawang Primary School**

Arawang Primary School is located on Namarang Crescent, Waramanga and is a member of the Weston Creek cluster of schools. The school has 4 executive level staff and 18.5 teaching staff, and a student population of 361. It was created following amalgamation of the former Waramanga and Fisher Primary Schools and closure of the Fisher Primary School campus. Arawang has not been identified for possible closure in the *Towards 2020* proposal.

### **1. THE CONSULTATION PROCESS ON *TOWARDS 2020***

Although Arawang is not one of the schools suggested for closure, specific and general aspects of the *Towards 2020* proposal have nevertheless caused some consternation. Community members have pointed out that *Towards 2020*, promises more radical and potentially far-reaching change than any in their memory, and express some concern that our children may be subject to educational outcomes that appear to be somewhat unpredictable. The extent of the changes proposed in the *Towards 2020* proposal and the proposed speed of their implementation was surprising to many of us.

On the consultation process itself, the school community remains confused about the sequence of events following the end of the consultation process and what is to happen on or after 6 December 2006. The Board and P&C presumes the Government will make its final decisions in the very short period between 6 December and the end of the fourth term on Thursday 21 December. This will allow very little time for affected families to make very important decisions about the future

of their children's education. While the impact on our school should not be as disruptive as for those that might close, depending on the Government's decision, we do nevertheless continue in a climate of significant uncertainty, a situation that could persist throughout the long summer holiday period.

Our school community generally shares the view of the P&C Council that the media driven character of the initial announcement and the subsequent consultation process does not reflect the spirit and intention of clause 20 of the ACT Education Act 2004 (as amended). The many unanswerable questions put to the Board and P&C by members of our school community continues to aggravate a climate of confusion and uncertainty as the end of the year approaches.

At present, the school has no idea how many students it may gain as a result of closures, how many it may lose in view of the government's proposal for an optional year six at secondary school, and what if any capital works and infrastructure needs might arise. In this context, the Board and the school community is wary of any attempt to include space currently used for music education, other curriculum activities and after school care as space potentially available for new classes necessitated by an increased student intake resulting from future *Towards 2020* decisions.

### **Transitional Arrangements**

We have been pleased with and grateful for the Department's assistance with "transitional arrangements" for those students and families entering the school from others that might close, as we are for early and sympathetic consideration of provision of new or renovated infrastructure that might be required to accommodate newcomers (however, see also below in relation to special needs students).

However, Board and P&C understands that available space in the school has been incorrectly reported by the Government. In relation to available space in Arawang's portable unit two spaces have been counted as p[potentially available classrooms. This is space already fully utilised and we would request a further audit once decisions have been made and a policy direction set and school enrolment numbers have been settled.

### **Extending the period of consultation**

The process to date exemplifies the undue haste with which the government appears to be pushing the *Towards 2020* proposal, and its apparent determination to begin closing schools at the end of this term. As our community sees it, the process is without adequate preparation and there is a consequential community perception that *Towards 2020* is being presented as a '*fait accompli*'. Moreover, it is not clear to us that the proposed timeframes leave enough time for the government to develop key infrastructure, for example, additional classrooms, extra buses and bus routes, traffic safety measures etc (see below).

We would, therefore endorse the P&C Council's suggestion that the consultation phase for the *Towards 2020* proposals be extended to at least March 2007, with transparent decision making to proceed as soon as possible thereafter.

## 2. A BROAD APPROACH TO REFORM

We see that *Towards 2020* has been developed from a largely financial perspective but believe that renewing our schools should be approached from a number of different perspectives.

There does not yet appear to have been a thorough assessment of the educational, social and other impacts of *Towards 2020*, which we believe needs to be done before an informed conversation between the government and the community can take place. For example, the many new educational options canvassed in the document currently appear as a confusing menu of choices, which most parents, at some stage, will have to pick through in the hope they and their children ultimately make the choice that is best for them.

We would agree with the P&C Council that part of the process should involve looking at the overall goals of the ACT public education system and then developing a plan or vision for 2020 to achieve these goals. Each Government portfolio should be asked to prepare an impact statement on *Towards 2020* for public consideration. We have discussed this in more detail below (2.1 to 2.6).

### 2.1 Demographic issues

The government claims the closures will reflect the changing demographics of Canberra's suburbs. It is stated by the Government that the nature of communities in the ACT has changed, with neighbourhood schools no longer the first choice for families, and that 37% of primary school students no longer attend their neighbourhood school. This still leaves 73% of students attending neighbourhood schools, presumably because their families favour this option.

Anecdotal evidence from the Arawang school community would suggest the neighbourhood school is still the strongly preferred choice for families, partly because of the health and socialisation benefit children obtain from walking to school and creating neighbourhood social networks based on the school. The Arawang experience confirms the theory that local schools are integral to building local communities. Children grow up in their neighbourhood, go to their local school, play with the local children, and go to their local shops. Primary age children in particular, develop a sense of place and a connection with their community and enjoy the simple pleasures associated with out of hours accessible school playgrounds, a fact which families from interstate cities find unique and consider enormously beneficial.

The demographic make-up of our suburban cluster appears to fluctuate inter-generationally as families mature and move on, to be replaced by younger families looking for affordable housing and nearby facilities, including schools, public transport and good sports and recreation opportunities. However, the 2020 school closures potentially portend a more permanent demographic change as suburbs without a neighbourhood primary school become less attractive for families with young children and increasingly home to an ageing population.

The Arawang community is not confident that all issues impacting on demographic trends have been properly taken into account, particularly the cycles of urban renewal alluded to above. Historically, urban development in the ACT was designed around the neighbourhood school and associated shops and services. Schools are often the community heart and focus of a suburb. The *Towards 2020* proposal should be assessed in terms of the Government's Social Plan and efforts to build communities.

## **2.2 Equity issues**

The Arawang school community would urge the government to thoroughly assess the socio-economic impacts of any closures, including any in our cluster, to ensure “reasonable access” for all, especially families from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the families of indigenous children.

## **2.3 Consistency between the 2020 Proposal and existing planning policies**

According to the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA), the purpose of the Territory Plan is to manage land use change and development in a manner consistent with strategic directions set by the ACT Government and the community, and the National Capital Plan”. It has been brought to the attention of the School Board that the National Capital Plan emphasizes the Griffin Legacy<sup>1</sup>. A reading of the Griffin Legacy indicates the adoption of Urban Village principles for the city, of which the neighbourhood school is a central tenet.

The Canberra Spatial Plan outlines a strategic direction to achieve the social, environmental and economic sustainability of Canberra as part of the Canberra Plan. Minister for Planning, Simon Corbell has described the Spatial Plan as a key part of a more accessible Canberra, with an economically competitive and culturally vibrant city centre and much greater opportunities for people to walk, ride or use public transport.

On election the government claimed that a three-pronged vision for the Territory would guide its policies – its Economic White Paper, the Spatial Plan and the Social Plan.

It is not evident to us that the *Towards 2020* proposal has been made consistent with the Territory Plan, the National Capital Plan and the Griffin Legacy, the Spatial Plan, the Economic White Paper or the Social Plan – (particularly pages 12, 13, 40, 52).

## **2.4 Consistency with health policies and priorities**

The Government believes fewer children are walking to school. Arawang has recently formed a school health committee to support the ACT Government’s policies on health promoting schools, including physical activity, canteens and so on. Arawang has an active walking school bus program and encourages as much incidental exercise amongst its student cohort as possible.

Some Arawang parents recognise that increasing enrolments in schools closer to parental workplaces is an inescapable trend. However, this premise suggests the ACT Government accepts declining numbers of particularly primary level students walking to school as an inevitable trend. Acceptance of this situation would not, however, appear to be consistent with ACT health policy, the Ottawa Charter on health promotion<sup>2</sup> and the Federal Government’s concern about, and development of, policies to combat childhood obesity.

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<sup>1</sup> The recent emphasis of the National Capital Plan has been the Griffin Legacy. In the Griffin documents is a “*Report Explanatory*, which, under the heading “Domestic Communities”, states that plans should “*furnish not only suitable home sites, but comprise social units for that larger family – the neighbourhood group, with one handy school; or more for the children, and with local playground, game fields, church, club, and social amenities without crossing traffic tracks, or encountering the disturbing elements or temptations of business streets.*”

<sup>2</sup> The Ottawa Charter of the 1986 World Health Organisation first conference on Health Promotion, under “**Create Supportive Environments**” states, *inter alia*: “Our societies are complex and interrelated. Health cannot be separated from other goals. The inextricable links between people and their environment constitutes the basis for a socio-ecological approach to health. ....Systematic assessment of the health

It would seem appropriate for the *Towards 2020* proposal to be subjected to a health impact assessment<sup>3</sup> to ensure that, if implemented, it does not exacerbate an existing negative childhood health trend.

### **2.5 Transport issues**

Arawang is already experiencing motor traffic management problems and the Board is currently considering options for improvement. The closure of schools within the cluster is likely to exacerbate current traffic problems. The ACTPLA website currently promotes the "Travel Smart Program", which appears to be at odds with the *Towards 2020* proposal, to the extent that school closures will require parents to make extra and longer vehicular trips. This also appears to be at odds with attempts to promote programs like the "Walking School Bus".

Promotion of walking school buses or cycling groups for primary age students travelling longer distances together with an assurance of more convenient configuration and scheduling of school bus routes does not appear to be a current priority in the *Towards 2020* proposal.

Moreover, the likelihood that school closures will force more parents to use cars to transport children to school appears not to be consistent with the environmental sustainability component of the Territory Plan and related greenhouse gas reduction policies.

If Arawang is to become one of this cluster's hub schools the issue of safety for children travelling longer distances unaccompanied becomes a serious issue, particularly for students having to travel from Weston, should Weston Primary School close. Access to Arawang Primary School involves crossing the major thoroughfare of Hindmarsh Drive, which has only one long, dark underpass. Most parents already are reluctant to let primary aged children use this facility unaccompanied as it has a reputation as a location for anti-social behaviour. Other major roads that may need to be traversed above ground include Namatjira Drive, Streeton Drive and McInnes Street.

We would expect the government to ensure that all walking or cycling routes to the school are made safe before closures become final.

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impact of a rapidly changing environment - particularly in areas of technology, work, energy production and urbanisation - is essential and must be followed by action to ensure positive benefit to the health of the public. The protection of the natural and built environments and the conservation of natural resources must be addressed in any health promotion strategy".

<sup>3</sup> "Health impact assessment (HIA) may be defined as a combination of procedures or methods by which a policy, program or project may be judged as to the effects it may have on the health of a population (WHO 'Gothenburg Consensus Paper'). HIA may thus include assessment of high level policy and programs as well as individual developments.....HIA seeks to predict the health impact of a policy, program or project (including a development) usually before implementation, and ideally early in the planning stage.

Healthlink, Autumn 2004

## **2.6 Drift to private schools**

The government claims the *Towards 2020* proposal will not encourage families to turn away from government schools. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that once families have taken this decision it is infrequently reversed. The benefits of a sound of public education are clear to many on the Board and in the school community. The social and economic inequities implicit if this trend continues have been emphasised by experts in the field.

We would hope that the Government's assumptions are correct but would be interested in seeing evidence supporting its premise. On current evidence, there would appear to be a risk, both in the short and long term, that school closures could encourage the drift to private education. Non-motorised neighbourhood community access to a neighbourhood school may be an important difference between the government and non-government school systems in the eyes of parents. Promotion of the positive advantages of sound public education still seems to be largely ad hoc and driven by the education unions as opposed to the governments that fund and provide the system. Implementation of *Towards 2020*, or whatever forward vision is finally accepted, might provide the catalyst for a concerted government promotional campaign.

## **3. TRANSITIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

It is likely that closures in the Weston Creek cluster will see Arawang accepting some students with special needs. We have some concern that the *Towards 2020* proposal was conceived without due consideration from the outset of the needs of these students, their families and their support networks. While transitional arrangements are uppermost in the minds of school staff and many parents and carers, students with special needs will need special consideration to ensure;

- minimal impact on the students and their families in terms of disruption to learning, family care and work arrangements (including outside school hours care) and other family support networks;
- understanding and compassion for children with special needs that have lost continuity in a small school environment;
- minimal impact on the Arawang school community if staff and learning support centres and special units from other schools are relocated or reconfigured;
- continuity of access to specialist programs and facilities at new schools.
- adequate school counsellors and other supports to help students and families with the transition process for students with special needs.

We understand the government has asked Arawang to take on the Learning Support Centre, which is currently at Weston. We also understand that the Arawang principal will accept the Centre conditional upon the current funding coming with it. The Board and P&C strongly endorse this position.

It is hoped that the government has a clear cross-portfolio and cross disciplinary vision for managing special needs.

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Submitted 31 October 2006  
c/o Doug Laing  
Arawang Primary School Board Chair