

The Canberra College Association submission on Towards 2020

General Implications for residents of Woden and Weston Creek

The Government has not provided us, or the general public, with the findings of the Costello review, which appears to have formed the basis of its discussion paper Towards 2020, so we are significantly disadvantaged in preparing this submission. Nor has the Government released the 2006 August Schools Census Report or the July 2006 Projected Enrolments 2007 to 2011 report. This failure also limits constructive community input regarding the future of public education in the ACT to 2010. While the Towards 2020 document infers that it is looking ahead to 2020, it does not provide comprehensive information for the next three years, let alone the next fourteen years.

From the perspective of The Canberra College Association (CCA), it appears that many assumptions in the Towards 2020 document are inconsistent with the spirit and the letter of the ***ACT Education Act 2004***. Some of the consequences of the Towards 2020 proposal also suggest that the Government has not considered the requirements of the Territory Plan and hence it has also overlooked its obligations under the ***Land (Planning & Environment) Act 1991***.

The Canberra College has campuses in both Woden and Weston Creek, yet the Towards 2020 document does not include Canberra College in the Weston Creek table 'Current Educational Provision'. This is a serious oversight as the Weston Creek campus performs a very important role to possibly the most disadvantaged students of Canberra College. This role is also of the utmost importance to the Canberra College community and to the broad Canberra community.

In addressing the future of education in Weston Creek the Towards 2020 document says "*We believe that it will also be appropriate, over time, to relocate special programs from the Stirling campus to the Woden campus.*" This statement of intent has a number of implications both for the students and parents of students at Canberra College and also for other schools now slated for amalgamation under Towards 2020.

For the schools earmarked for potential amalgamation under Towards 2020, the Government's stated intent above must ring alarm bells for the longer term closure of one campus of an amalgamated school, regardless of the programs being offered and the needs of the communities to which they are offered.

The Towards 2020 document also says "*Schools in Woden were established on the traditional neighbourhood strategy of suburban preschools and primary schools feeding into high schools and colleges.*" "*Woden is now recognised as the geographical centre of Canberra and is focused around a strong business centre, including council and government services. Many Woden schools are now operating close to capacity and are recognised for providing educational opportunities not only for students from local suburbs but for students from all over Canberra.*"

CCA generally agrees with the comments in the Towards 2020 document stating that our school is now operating close to, or exceeding, its capacity and that families choose Canberra College because of the diversity and quality of programs offered. The Woden campus of The Canberra College is attractive to many families, and students who are of an age to make their own schooling choices, because it is accessible via a number of bus routes, cycle paths and major arterial roads and because it is often convenient for parents who work in the Woden town centre, the Hospitals and the Phillip trades area to commute with their children who attend Canberra College and nearby primary and high schools.

The Weston campus is attractive and practical because of the programs it offers in an environment that suits students who otherwise would not complete their schooling. Students who do not complete schooling to Year 12 go on to suffer ongoing social disadvantage through life, including much lower earning capacity, and much poorer health outcomes than for those members of the community who do complete Year 12. The Government is reminded here of its goals and Priorities 5, 4 and 3 in the Social Plan.

There has been a rapid recent influx of young families to housing in the Woden and Weston areas, many homes having been vacated by long term elderly residents. A significant number of new dual and multi-occupancy residences in many Woden and Weston suburbs are also coming on-line, so it is puzzling that at least four primary schools that feed the high schools that ultimately feed Canberra College are slated for amalgamation or closure.

Kambah also is the source for up to 10% of our students. Yet it is proposed that Kambah High School be closed, that Alfred Deakin be amalgamated with the Woden School and that Stromlo High School cater for Year 6 students. While it might appear that the remaining feeder high school to Canberra College, Melrose High School, has escaped any change to its student intake and year levels taught, it is likely to attract but be unable to cater to, disaffected students from the other feeder high schools because it has operated near or above its capacity during the last five years, despite what the table shows. The Government's commencement of modifications at Stromlo High, apparently to absorb Year 6 students, has limited the options for parents before the Towards 2020 consultation period has ended.

Given the Government's supposed support for the public education system, it is even more puzzling that it would want to close Melrose and Weston Primary Schools. The Sacred Heart Catholic Primary School, which is already using demountable buildings, is the only other Primary school within about a three (3) km radius of Melrose Primary School that does not involve the crossing of major arterial roads. Torrens Primary School, the nearest government primary school that does not involve crossing major arterial roads, is over 4 kms from many Chifley residents and it is operating above capacity. To walk to Torrens, and home again, from Chifley and Pearce presents a physical challenge to parents with young students and their even younger siblings. It is also likely that demountable buildings would be required to accommodate any increase in students, a less than ideal, and certainly not without cost, situation. Similarly, students displaced from Weston Creek Primary School have only a non-Government schooling option without crossing major arterial roads, if that school is to close.

Both the Weston and Woden campuses of The Canberra College and many of the feeder primary and high schools are well situated to cater to new housing development in the lower Molonglo valley which is expected within the next ten years.

It seems that the Government's enrolment projections which are "... predicated on falling fertility levels"¹ do not reflect the actual recent upward trend in the ACT birth rate or the ACT government's own plans for future development.

Towards 2020 implications for students and parents of students of The Canberra College

The Government's 2005 document, 'Enrolments 2006 to 2010' says "*School capacity figures are dependent upon educational/curriculum needs, building and architectural design constraints and calculations based on the assumption that colleges and high schools accommodate an average class size of 19 students per teaching space and in the case of primary schools 21 to 30 students per teaching space (with additional space requirements for special classes).*"

¹ From the Government's 2005 document, 'Enrolments 2006 to 2010', available at <http://www.decs.act.gov.au/publicat/pdf/projectedenrolments2006-2010.pdf>

“Total Government college projections are based on the premise that the proportion of Government to total enrolments will be similar to the trend over the past three years. Total projections are dependent on primary and high school projections and on recent progression rates from high school to college.”

CCA disputes the projected enrolment figures in Towards 2020. The ‘Current Education Provision’ table for the 2006 Canberra College Woden campus shows the enrolment as 779, the projected enrolment for 2010 as 720 and the supposed capacity of 912. The capacity of the Woden campus was recently reaffirmed by the Department as 817, but this number of students could be accommodated **only if** every student was to make subject choices that allowed maximum utilisation of every teaching space and resource.

In reality, student interest will always vary and there will be higher demand for some subjects than for others in any one year. If there is not some spare capacity in subject lines, not only is choice for our students limited, it leaves no flexibility to absorb new students that move to Canberra or those who re-locate within Canberra after the commencement of the school year. At best, it may force students to take subjects in which they have little interest or aptitude, certainly not conducive to retaining students to Year 12 or to students accessing the breadth of know and skills to meet future study and/or workforce requirements.

Students need some capacity to choose subjects which interest them and that they will happily commit to pursue as part of their ‘learning for life’. Already the Woden campus is hard pressed to regularly cater to the first choice of all of its students. As noted earlier, the Weston campus did not rate a mention in the ‘Current Education Provision’ table.

Enrolment numbers have increased at both campuses in the past three years and the number of students at the Weston campus has almost doubled. The Weston campus student population has different and more intensive support needs that require greater access to space per student.

The majority of students at the Weston campus not only cannot fit into the space at the Woden campus, they would find it hard to ‘fit in’ socially and educationally. The Woden site is more crowded, has more hazards for young children and curriculum is more intensive and comprehensive. The teaching program, teaching methodology and timetable at Weston campus is totally different to that used at Woden, or at any other ACT college.

CCA is of the view that if the Government proceeds with the proposal to ‘over time’ ‘.. *relocate special programs from the Stirling campus to the Woden campus*’ that it will have failed in its obligation under section 20 (5) (a) of the Education Act 2004 whereby “the Minister must – (a) have regard to the educational, financial and social impact on students at the school, the students’ families and the general school community”. No justification has been given by the Government for its proposal regarding the educational, financial or social impact on students, their families and the general school community. The proposal, if implemented, would cause significant educational, financial and social disruption to the students at both Weston and Woden and to the whole Canberra community.

The CCCares program presently provided by The Canberra College at its Weston campus meets the Territory Plan’s aim for a caring and harmonious society².

² The Territory Plan at paras 2.2 and 2.4 suggests that the Government aims to provide for everyone in the community, yet the implications for the most vulnerable of The Canberra College’s students appear to be overlooked with the proposal for amalgamation. Para 2.2 of the Territory Plan relates to ***An Efficient, Healthy and Livable City ...*** with cost-effective provision of transport, infrastructure and services, and *which maximises lifestyle quality and choice*.

It employs only four FTE teaching staff and a small component of STA staff, all of who are highly motivated, flexible and dedicated. A number of committed volunteers create a sense of home for the students and show that adults can be both supportive and trusted. ‘In-kind’ support from local businesses ensures learning experiences that can lead to work skills and opportunities. Government and non-government agencies also deliver coordinated and integrated support services on-site. Without this particular facility many students would not access the social support they need, nor would they continue their education and the learning of valuable life, social and workforce skills.

The CCCares program presently caters to approximately 100 students aged from fourteen to early twenties, and offers:

- A young parents and carers program that presently has 30 young mothers and their 34 babies and or toddlers
- An alternative high school program for Years 9 and 10 students who otherwise may not even complete the compulsory years of schooling, let alone complete Year 10, 11 or 12
- Programs for refugees, many of who have never previously experienced a formal and structured institutional delivery of education and
- A college program for students with complex needs, many of who have experienced and not succeeded in, or dropped out of, large school settings in the past.

Students typically access one or more of these integrated programs concurrently. For example, of the 30 students presently in the young parents program, 8 of them are also refugees. Students in the CCCares program experience a case management model, allied to individual learning plans, to address individual educational needs and to provide flexibility to fit each student’s circumstances and attendance patterns. The overall program is holistic with interaction between all of the groups. Through individual learning plans and access to ‘My Classes’ the students learn at their own pace with a large degree of autonomy and flexibility that is not possible at other facilities. The interface with social support services could not be provided as sensitively, unobtrusively, or as effectively, in the more crowded and noisier Woden campus.

As knowledge of the success of the CCCares programs spreads, students have been increasingly referred from other areas of the ACT school system. They are also referred to one or more of the programs via social and youth services including the courts and justice system.

Many students have significant health issues and a number of students find the less crowded environment supportive and non-threatening whereas they may be overwhelmed and hence not attend bigger campuses. The majority of CCCares students have experienced large school settings in the past and have not succeeded in those environments. The growing number of refugees brings a different set of challenges that can be addressed with greater sensitivity at the Weston campus than they could in a more structured educational setting.

CCCares’ students have diverse educational and social needs, with a common inability to function in a ‘standard’ setting, and a high level of need for support in dealing with a range of external agencies. When they do move on to other programs, it should be when they are ready, not at the whim of Government. Those CCCares students who do build the confidence to move to other programs, should do so at a time of their choosing, when they are ready and able to succeed.

Para 2.4, Community Wellbeing says it strives for “A caring **and** harmonious society in which both individual and collective rights are respected; divisions are minimised; there is fair and reasonable access to adequate services and facilities; and proper concern for community health and safety.”

That many students are happy, some even enthusiastic, to attend school/college at Weston, and that some of them eventually move to other programs when they are ready, speaks volumes for the small and committed group of teaching staff who support the students in the CCCares program.

While the Weston Campus is reasonably central, and reasonably well serviced by public transport, many of the students, especially those with one or more babies or young children would not be able to attend without the transport service presently funded, only until the end of 2007, by the Chief Minister's Department. The transport service allows for students to be collected and delivered by bus or taxi from all over Canberra two days per week.

The Government is urged to make a long term commitment to maintain this access to transport beyond 2007. Many of the students move primary residence regularly as they do not have permanent, safe, secure and affordable living arrangements. The Weston campus is, for many, the only continuity they have in their lives and also the only opportunity to build and maintain a social support network. This is reflected by the regular attendance of students who had previously not been engaged in the education system. It is essential that the Weston programs remain where they are and receive appropriate, recurrent funding.

Approximately 34 very young children, ranging in age from several weeks to four years attend the Weston Creek campus with their mothers. Some of the young mothers are into their second or third pregnancy and this program offers their only chance at a better future for themselves and for their children.

Infants are cared for by an adjunct childcare model where the young mothers and community volunteers, who have gone through the appropriate police checks, look after some of the toddlers and babies while other young mothers engage in the educational programs. The Weston campus meets the babies' need for non-threatening and quiet places as well as stimulating areas where they are exposed to pre-language, language and pre-reading skills so that they are set on the path to a better future than their parents may otherwise be able to provide. At Weston, the toddlers can access separate quiet places as well as safe play and activity areas. The entire outdoor area is easily visible from the building infrastructure, something that would not be possible in a re-vamped Woden campus if the program was to move.

The areas at Weston provide opportunities for the all students to experience positive social interaction with other students, teachers and volunteers, rebuilding or establishing the ability to trust other humans. The students are encouraged to be supportive of each other, in the process learning about team work. There are no formal child care arrangements at CCCares, primarily due to lack of government funding for paid carers or early childhood teachers.

The students are encouraged and supported to improve their nutrition and health outcomes through the programs operating at Weston, for which there is presently no facility at Woden.

The CCCares program could not be easily replicated at or relocated to the Woden campus. It is highly unlikely that such a large and diverse group of (vulnerable) students and very young children could be accommodated at the Woden Canberra College campus. Not only would it be almost impossible physically to offer as safe, secure and welcoming an environment for students who are at high risk of not completing their schooling as what they presently experience at the Weston campus, it would be hugely expensive.

There is a much higher flow of regular traffic around the Woden campus presenting a much higher risk of young children being involved in accidents as well as higher levels of traffic generated noise and pollution. The other major hazard near the Woden campus of the College is storm water canals. The canals are highly dangerous, especially to young children and infants, whether dry or following rain when they rapidly fill and create a dangerous torrent even for adults who are strong swimmers and who happen too close.

If the relocation of special programs from the Stirling campus to the Woden campus proceeds
If the CCCares program was to be re-located to the Woden campus a number of mainstream programs and students would have to be displaced **or** extensive new facilities developed at the Woden campus simply try to replicate some of the areas at the Weston campus.

There is presently no space that is unused or under utilised by mainstream classes at the Woden campus and most teaching and learning spaces are fully utilised 100% of the time. Both campuses operate on different educational structures and on different timetables and there is no feasible way that the programs at Woden and Weston could be integrated or facilities shared.

As the colleges in South Canberra, Woden and Tuggeranong are presently at or near capacity, and are likely to remain so beyond 2010, it is doubtful that the students displaced through a future amalgamation of the Weston and Woden campuses of The Canberra College, as proposed in Towards 2020, could be accommodated within the Government system. It is also doubtful that a large number of 'displaced' students could be accommodated in the Catholic system, even if their families could afford this option.

If the Towards 2020 proposal for The Canberra College was to go ahead, the following facilities at a minimum would need to be developed at, but separate to, the present facilities at the Woden campus:

- A large, soundproofed 'quiet' room where very young babies can rest or sleep
- A separate, large activity room for infants
- A room for breast feeding
- Additional IT laboratories, as the students are all on individual, flexible learning plans that require unfettered and often unscheduled access to computers
- Fencing to ensure the safety of young children, especially if they managed to wonder from their mother or other young carer
- Several large, flexible learning spaces well resourced with the latest Information Technology, yet offering space for individual tuition and support
- A fully equipped kitchen, additional to the kitchens already at the Woden campus as they are more than 100% utilised and the learning of basic nutrition and cooking skills is an essential life skill for a healthier future for the students in this program.

Conclusion

The Canberra College's twin campuses are ideally demographically located in the centre of Woden and Weston Creek. The College has not only pioneered a model of distributed education but has also established an outstanding reputation in the ACT for inclusive and high quality public education.

The Canberra College Association urges the Government to acknowledge the innovative and high quality of education provided by The Canberra College and to continue to support and enhance the educational programs at the College.

In particular, we urge the Government to guarantee recurrent funding for the CCCares program, which is ideally suited to operate at the Weston Campus for the reasons outlined above, and to allocate recurrent funding for the transport of students.

If a small number of additional suitable places and spaces could be provided at the Weston campus there is an opportunity to help more young people who would not otherwise complete their education or receive the early social support they need. However, there are limits to the size of the program, both from the point of view of space and logistics and also from the possibility that if it grows too much, it may alienate the very students that it is now engaging.

If the ACT Government proceeds with the Towards 2020 proposals, it will undoubtedly place greater demands and pressures on the limited resources currently available to The Canberra College and hence greater Government support will be required to maintain (if not enhance) the current standard of education provided by The Canberra College and the positive social gains for the whole Canberra community will be lost.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jerry Hanrahan".

President
The Canberra College Association