



# Raising the Bar

## An Inner North Cluster is the Way Forward

*A submission from the O'Connor Cooperative School community*

The O'Connor Cooperative School community shares the Government's desire to improve public education. We believe that the creation of a cluster of schools in the Inner North will better achieve the aims of Towards 2020. This will improve educational outcomes and professional support for teachers, as well as capitalising on the O'Connor Cooperative School's strengths in the area of early childhood education. A cluster will provide choice and diversity in the ACT public education system, and realise greater cost efficiency.

We believe that in order to be effective partners in the cluster model it is imperative that the O'Connor Cooperative School remain as an autonomous school and not a campus of another, larger school. For this reason we reject an administrative link of any kind.

The O'Connor Cooperative School community shares the Government's desire to improve educational outcomes in the ACT public school system.

The O'Connor Cooperative School is recognised as a high performing school. The community wishes to build on its excellence using the vision in the Towards 2020 plan as a vehicle whilst not eroding those things that make the school unique.

The proposed administrative link will adversely affect educational outcomes, deliver few financial benefits, restrict community choice and will not make effective use of the O'Connor Cooperative School's early childhood education expertise. It will also undermine the school's unique characteristics and strong community support. Allowing the school to retain its autonomy can be of far greater value to the whole Inner North Community and educators.

After careful examination of the Towards 2020 plan, and consultation with the Department, the Minister, and the teaching community in the Inner North, we suggest a bolder, more strategic vision for the O'Connor Cooperative School - raising the bar on the Government's proposal.

To achieve better outcomes for public education we propose building a strong and complementary cluster of public schools for the Inner North. This will:

- Share the O'Connor Cooperative School's expertise in early childhood education
- Provide a higher level of support for staff, building on the O'Connor Cooperative School's success
- Optimise the resource base for all Inner North schools
- Stop leakage into the private school system by giving consumers real choice and confidence in the public system
- Create an Inner North knowledge centre for early childhood education best practice



# 1. The O'Connor Cooperative School

A recognised leader in early childhood education

The O'Connor Cooperative School is the only public school in the ACT that is a specialist early childhood institution, covering preschool to Year 2. The O'Connor Cooperative School has a unique history. It started life in the mid 1970s as a community school with the aim of creating a progressive learning environment for young children. Subsequently, the school joined the ACT public education system, but the essential tenets of those early years remain - an emphasis on very strong community involvement and engagement to foster a warm, supportive and stimulating early childhood school.

The benefits of dedicated early childhood education are widely recognised. There is compelling evidence that a quality early childhood education is a major determinant of future educational and career success. This is reflected in the ACT Government Preschool Strategic Plan 2005, which recognises the importance of early childhood services from birth to eight years and the role of parents and communities in the life of a child. The Towards 2020 document proposes the adoption of a number of early childhood schools throughout Canberra inspired by the O'Connor Cooperative School model.

Other distinctive features of the school are:

- Currently the only school with a fully integrated pre-school. This arrangement provides a smooth transition between pre-school and kindergarten.
- There is only one class group in each year at the school. This model is unique and enables the staff to work as a very cohesive team with highly effective communication pathways, and teaching and student management strategies.
- The school has a fully integrated, on-site childcare service that encompasses a community playgroup, a Long Day Care facility, an Outside School Hours program (both before and after school), and a vacation care program. These childcare arrangements greatly assist families with working parents.
- Developmentally appropriate curriculum not restricted by age level.
- The O'Connor Cooperative School, like others in the Inner North, has full enrolment.
- The school is an essential element of the Tocumwal precinct, a superb example of early Canberra urban planning.

The O'Connor Cooperative School has a highly engaged and active parent community. Coupled with the efforts of staff, this creates a friendly, safe and open atmosphere. Parents go out of their way to continue this community spirit by, for instance, meeting and including newcomers to the school. The networks developed span across all grades, creating a highly effective support network for children, families and all involved with the school.

Collectively, these attributes characterise the O'Connor Cooperative School as a pioneer in responding to children's and their carers' contemporary needs and circumstances.

The Minister and department executives all agree we are an outstandingly successful school, and are achieving everything the Minister has highlighted as being desirable in public education. We are mentioned alongside other success stories such as Lyneham High, Telopea, and Narrabundah. The school has been regularly used and portrayed by the Department and the previous Minister to this effect.

The O'Connor Cooperative School is a shining example of public education in the Inner North.

## **2. Our Vision for a Cluster Model for the Inner North**

The O'Connor Cooperative School will collaborate with our neighbouring feeder primary schools and other relevant agencies in order to achieve the best possible educational outcomes. The school currently has positive links with both neighbouring primary schools: Turner Primary and Lyneham Primary. Traditionally, nearly 100% of O'Connor Cooperative School students have moved on to Year 3 in a public school, the vast majority moving to either Turner or Lyneham.

Preliminary discussions have taken place with Lyneham Primary, Turner Primary and Lyneham High School as the prelude to forming a cluster of schools. All three schools have been receptive to our vision and are keen to further pursue the cluster model. Feeder preschools and other Inner North schools are other potential cluster participants.

For our involvement in a cluster model to be effective, it is essential that we enter into the partnership as an autonomous school. The O'Connor Cooperative School brings a focus on early childhood education to the cluster and can only do so as an equal participant.

### **Key Benefits of the Cluster Model**

It is envisioned that the cluster would develop joint projects based on the priorities and needs of all cluster partner schools. From the O'Connor Cooperative School perspective, a cluster would:

- Export the O'Connor Cooperative School's expertise in early childhood education across the entire cluster, with potential for the development of an Early Childhood Centre of Excellence
- Establish partnerships with all of our neighbouring schools, affording opportunities for increased collaboration, resources, innovation and equity across schools.
- Provide a higher level of support for staff, ensuring greater access to professional learning opportunities, sharing of knowledge with other professionals, and streamlining communication between schools
- Optimise the resource base for all schools involved
- Enable budgetary efficiencies through bulk purchasing and contracting arrangements
- Support responsiveness and innovation in schools for a diverse range of student needs
- Improve the image of all cluster schools within the local community
- Improve community and parental engagement while supporting families, thereby increasing the social capital of this community
- Enable a greater focus on early intervention and prevention, improving health and social outcomes for children and families.

An example of a successful cluster arrangement is the Lanyon Cluster of six schools formed in 1996<sup>1</sup>. They hold annual strategic planning conferences to determine priorities and devise strategies for work in the cluster. They have undertaken a major literacy and numeracy project that involved employing a deputy principal funded jointly and working across all six

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<sup>1</sup> Caldwell, B. (2006) *Re-imagining Educational Leadership*, ACER Press Victoria

schools. The Deputy Principal, Rita van Haren, recently received an award<sup>2</sup> recognising significant improvements for underachieving students and improvements in student engagement. We envisage creating similar initiatives that will strengthen public education in the Inner North.

### **The Cluster Model Builds on Existing Strengths**

Because a cluster model capitalises on the School's strengths and leadership in early childhood education, we envisage the O'Connor Cooperative School contributing to the cluster model in the following ways:

- Export to other primary schools our specialist knowledge and skills in early childhood learning
- Share our experience in community and parent engagement to assist other schools
- Support for the use of new technologies in primary schools – the O'Connor Cooperative School is a leader in the use of Smartboards in early childhood settings

The Government has already recognised the reputation of the O'Connor Cooperative School as an excellent early childhood school. The school proposes to further develop this by establishing a Centre for Early Childhood Education, and by strengthening links with academic institutions and research bodies.

The appeal of the school, evidenced by full enrolments and waiting lists, benefits the primary schools in the area by retaining students in the public system to Year 3 that might otherwise have been lost to private or independent schools.

The O'Connor Cooperative School enjoys a high level of parent and community involvement. Parents volunteer in classrooms on a daily basis, assist on committees, organise working bees, run social events and are active fund raisers. The annual school fete, a significant community event, raised over \$9000 in 2006, a substantial amount for a school with 86 students. Parents also run playgroups and participate in many local community events. This grass-roots level networking encourages engagement, prevents isolation and is a highly effective early intervention and prevention strategy.

The O'Connor Cooperative School could assist other schools by documenting and analysing how a high level of parental involvement has been achieved and assist with ways to capitalise on parent involvement in other school contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> *Blue Mango: The Newsletter for DET Staff*, 28 September 2006, ACT Dept of Education and Training

### **3. A Cluster Model Achieves the Goals of Towards 2020**

We believe that a cluster model will forge communication pathways and establish a tradition of cooperation and collaborative innovation between multiple schools in the Inner North of Canberra, and better achieve the goals of Towards 2020.

Furthermore, a cluster model will deliver greater financial savings than an administrative link, with less risk of compromising any educational programs.

We share the Government's desire to attract people to public education and minimise transition points in the system, where those transition points are prompting transfers to non-government schools. We also support the goal of improved professional support for teachers, even with the current focus on realising financial savings.

The following sections address the five key principles of the Towards 2020 vision for the O'Connor Cooperative School.

#### **A. Enhanced Educational Outcomes**

Educational outcomes are delivered through the combination of superior curriculum, professional support for teachers, diversity in educational opportunities and consistent policy direction and implementation. All of these areas are best supported through a cluster model.

In particular, the O'Connor Cooperative School's experience and skills in early childhood education will be shared with cluster partners and the wider public education community.

The O'Connor Cooperative School expects to benefit from interaction with other cluster participants through collaborative curriculum and policy development. A co-ordinated approach to curriculum and school policies will enhance the students' experience in their progress through the cluster, leading to better educational outcomes.

#### **B. Improved Professional Support for Teachers**

The cluster model will allow our existing strengths in professional support to be broadened by the introduction of a wider network of peers and career opportunities.

The teachers at the O'Connor Cooperative School already receive greater professional opportunities than those at many other schools, and enjoy a unique support system, as the school's size allows for easy collaboration and communication between teachers across the P-2 grades.

Examples of professional development undertaken by school staff include:

- Forming close links with the University of Canberra to build on our mutual interest in early childhood education.
- Having the opportunity to become accredited "Count Me In Too" instructors.
- Taking on leadership roles in curriculum development across ACT schools.
- Instructing other schools and teachers in ICT best practice.
- Participating in joint professional and curriculum development with Inner North schools.
- Our previous principal was recognised with a National Teaching Award in 2005

In addition, the enormous benefits of being part of a smaller school include being involved in whole staff problem solving, working jointly on projects and team teaching.

## **C. Minimising transition points**

A cluster model supports a clear pathway from preschool to college while preserving choice and diversity in the public school system. For example, the implementation of common student management policies eases transitions between schools and maximises student retention rates.

The O'Connor Cooperative School currently boasts a range of qualities that serve to attract people to public education, and reinforces confidence in a thriving public education system.

The school already addresses a common transition point by having an integrated preschool program. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of students graduating from our Year 2 enrol in Lyneham and Turner primary schools. In the past several years, almost 100% of the students graduating from Year 2 continued their education at a public school.

## **D. Enhancing Choice, Diversity and Opportunity**

The O'Connor Cooperative School is currently the only dedicated early childhood school in the ACT. The reason the school is in such high demand is that we provide an option that is not available elsewhere within the public system. A cluster model will retain the unique identity of our school and other participants, maximising choice and diversity in public education for parents in the Inner North.

## **E. Achieving Greater Cost-Efficiency**

The cluster model offers tremendous opportunities for finding operating efficiencies and sharing resources across a range of schools.

Within a cluster model the school retains financial independence and a continuation of existing strength in fund raising. The O'Connor Cooperative School community makes a significant contribution to the financial well-being of the school and will naturally continue to do so in the future if the school retains its autonomy. Through the efforts of the community, the school succeeded in obtaining a number of grants in 2005 and 2006 including:

- an Investing in our Schools Grant of \$26,412 to fund furniture replacement
- \$2,000 as a prize for the 2005 Living City competition to fund our Enviro Corner.
- a Land Care grant of \$500

In addition, the School's P&C has raised many thousands of dollars for equipment and additional classes, e.g. dance and music for our children.

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## **4. Negative Implications of an Administrative Link**

The Towards 2020 proposal recommends that an administrative link be established between the O'Connor Cooperative School and Turner Primary School. The precise nature of the link has never been defined, but our understanding is that the O'Connor Cooperative School would become a campus of the Turner Primary School with required savings of around \$40,000 per year across the two schools. An administrative link would preclude our ability to have our own P&C and School Board.

Discussions to date with the Minister and Department officials have failed to reveal a persuasive rationale for the proposal. It is inconsistent with Professor Caldwell's findings<sup>3</sup> that small schools perform better than large schools on a whole range of criteria, and seems to indicate that the only interest here is marginal cost savings and not the real educational outcomes for the students.

We are convinced that an administrative link will undermine the very things that make our school so successful. There is profound community opposition to the proposal. If the proposal were to proceed against the wishes of the community, it will undermine the community's goodwill and jeopardise the school's success.

The following sections outline our arguments against the administrative link.

### **A. An Administrative Link Will Compromise Educational Outcomes**

The administrative link will compromise educational outcomes for the following reasons:

- The administrative link limits our excellence in early education to one school and does not deliver benefits to other nearby primary schools or the wider education community.
- Split administration across two campuses will mean less access for parents and students to management and leadership at both campuses
- The principal and teaching staff at Turner are already responsible for a large and diverse school community across several campuses; adding the O'Connor Cooperative School will dilute leadership focus on early childhood.
- There is a very different culture at the O'Connor Cooperative School from that of Turner. In the light of the poor track record for school amalgamations in the ACT, this would suggest that an administrative link will require a large amount of effort to reconcile the two schools. This energy would be better spent on education.

The O'Connor Cooperative School and Turner Primary School both feel the link benefits neither school. The administrative link will disengage the local school community, thereby causing a reduction in parental involvement and the loss of educational support that such involvement provides.

### **B. An Administrative Link Will Limit Professional Development**

Being part of a staff that is split on different sites is fraught with difficulties. Being formally linked requires joint meetings and formalised travel arrangements. In a split campus school

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<sup>3</sup> Caldwell, B. *Research on School Size*, an Educational Transformations Briefing Paper

it would only be logical for the teachers of the same grade to share the workload and planning. Doing this would be counter productive to how the O'Connor Cooperative School plans its school terms, and would undermine the strengths of the current structure.

The necessary horizontal allegiances that would occur with the combined school would undermine the effective vertical professional engagement that currently benefits teachers and students at the O'Connor Cooperative School and possibly Turner Primary as well.

### **C. An Administrative Link will only Offer Limited Financial Efficiencies**

To date, the Turner and O'Connor principals have been unable to identify any savings that do not impact on educational outcomes. As a result, there is currently no proposal available for consultation that explains how the savings are to be made.

The proposed savings of \$39, 841 offers, at best, marginal cost savings to the Department. In fact, the Minister and senior departmental executives all agree that any such cost savings should not be pursued if educational outcomes are adversely affected.

When calculated on a *pro rata* basis<sup>4</sup> the O'Connor Cooperative School's contribution to the stated savings from the administrative link is around \$6000. While the school is willing to consider ways in which this small saving can be achieved, the complexities in implementation of the administrative link far outweigh the amount of money involved.

If the O'Connor Cooperative School comes under a centralised administrative structure located at another, larger primary school, the school loses its financial independence. This has effects on its ability to raise funds, including seeking grants. The link will cause the removal of the school's distinct, independent P&C and School Board. This will result in a loss of local parent involvement and a subsequent decline in fund raising ability and school vitality.

### **D. An Administrative Link will not Address Transition Points**

Formally linking the O'Connor Cooperative School to Turner Primary will reduce the perception of choice for parents who might wish to send their children to a different government school after Year 2. In particular, parents with children at Lyneham Primary have already indicated that should the O'Connor Co-operative School be linked to Turner, it will be a less attractive choice for their younger children.

Although the link would appear to remove a transition point between the O'Connor Cooperative School and subsequent primary schools, it will in fact reduce the overall enrolments in public education as parents will consider other specialised early childhood schools in preference to the O'Connor Cooperative School once it is subsumed by a larger primary school. Parents who have until now chosen the O'Connor Cooperative School instead of larger primary schools such as Lyneham or Turner will see their options reduced in the local area. This will almost certainly have flow-on effects in their choice of schools.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Towards 2020* report seeks overall savings to both the O'Connor Co-Operative School and Turner Primary School of \$39,841. The cost per student of \$12,107 for the Co-Op does not compare with other primary schools. The Co-Op as a P-2 school has an average class size of 21 compared to an average class size of 25 for K-6. The Co-Op has 14 percent of the combined student population thus a fair share of the overall saving required is \$5,942 a year.

## **E. An Administrative Link Puts the School at Risk of Closure**

An administrative link puts the O'Connor Cooperative School at risk of closure, despite the Department's intentions to keep the school open.

Once the principle and practice of becoming merely a Turner campus has been established, it would be much easier for future governments to fully amalgamate, subsume, or close the school. This is because the argument for a continuation of its separate, unique identity will have been irreversibly undermined. Additionally, the loss of the school's unique position in the public school system will reduce enrolments and threaten its ongoing viability.

Anecdotal evidence from previous school amalgamations in the ACT suggests that while the arrangement may achieve initial savings in some areas, there are substantial intangible costs to the educational climate, including increased workloads and diffusion of focus for principals. In several cases, the arrangements resulted in the closure of one of the schools. We view this as evidence that a model that includes an administrative link of a smaller school to a considerably larger one poses significant risk to educational outcomes and viability of the smaller campus.

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## **5. Inadequacies in the consultation process**

There are several serious shortcomings in the consultation process that must not go unnoticed. The school community has had a number of meetings, as well as correspondence, with departmental and government officials in an effort to seek clarification on the proposal and to develop a way forward. However, over half of the consultation period has been wasted as no consistent or concrete information was forthcoming.

Moreover, the community does not believe that relevant information has been provided in a timely and accessible way to enable our participation in debate about the proposal, as required in subsection 20(7)(d)(i) of the Education Act 2006.

As a consequence, this has limited the time available to develop positive proposals for achieving the goals of Towards 2020, primarily improving educational outcomes for our children.

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## 6. Closing Statement

We share the Minister's goals for improving public education and believe that the creation of a cluster model for schools in the Inner North will better achieve the aims of Towards 2020. This includes improving educational outcomes and professional support for teachers, as well as providing choice and diversity in the ACT public education system, whilst realising greater cost efficiency. The cluster model will capitalise on the O'Connor Cooperative School's strengths in the area of early childhood education.

To ensure success of the proposed model, it is essential that the O'Connor Cooperative School remain as an autonomous school, on equal footing with other schools in the cluster.

We strongly oppose an administrative link between the O'Connor Cooperative School and Turner Primary School. Any administrative link would compromise educational outcomes, reduce the scope for professional development opportunities, offer few financial savings and reduce choice, diversity and opportunity.

Signed

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Carl Obst  
Board Chair

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Jennifer Forth  
P&C President