

3 November 2006

Mr Andrew Barr MLA
Minister for Education and Training
Towards 2020 Submissions
PO Box 1584
Tuggeranong ACT 2901

Dear Minister

Re: Towards 2020

I am a professional town planning consultant practising in Canberra and I strongly oppose the proposals contained in *Towards 2020*, in general. While there may indeed be particular schools that warrant closure, the decision-making framework upon which *Towards 2020* rests is profoundly flawed. I maintain that:

- the social impact on students, their families, and their local communities would be substantial, in the short medium and long terms, and adverse to the overall goals of community wellbeing and sustainable development espoused by the Territory Plan and the Canberra Spatial Plan;
- the financial impact would fall hardest on those families with the fewest resources, and on students with special needs, contrary to the principles of social justice and inclusion espoused in the Canberra Social Plan;
- the educational impact would be harmful to the individual students affected, and would in the long run be damaging to the system of public education in the ACT by reducing the attractiveness of public schools to many families, especially those who are more affluent, thus accelerating the drift of students and diminishing the performance of public schools relative to private.

Furthermore, I argue that the Minister is legally bound to observe and comply with the goals and strategic planning objectives of the Territory Plan, under section 8 of the Land Act. Those goals would NOT be achieved if *Towards 2020* were substantially implemented, in my opinion. That is because:

- sustainable development requires that we design land use and transport to reduce the number of trips and distances travelled by cars and thereby improve air quality and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and that we carefully consider the environmental impact of major public policy decisions that have the potential to affect land use;
- community wellbeing requires that we continue to design suburban areas in such a way as to ensure safe and equitable access to community facilities and social infrastructure, with schools linked to pedestrian and cycle networks and adjacent to suitable areas of public open space, and neighbourhoods designed to provide walkable routes to key community facilities such as schools and local shops.

In the absence of any solid supporting documentation or research underpinning *Towards 2020*, I base my claims on the work I have done in the past few months with focus groups of parents from Giralang, Hall and O'Connor, the workshop I ran for the P&C Council to help people write effective submissions, and review of the ABS socio-economic and demographic

data for the suburbs affected by closure, amalgamation and other significant changes proposed.

On the basis of that evidence, I conclude that the demographic changes impacting on school enrolments are relatively transient and capable of reversal given several policy shifts by the government. I also conclude that there is a demonstrable need for:

- strategic marketing of the ACT's public education system locally and nationally, emphasising the strengths of the system we currently enjoy;
- a comprehensive report that surveys and analyses the reasons why parents moved their child in the past 3 years from an ACT public school, with recommendations aimed at minimising that drift;
- a whole-of-government approach to strengthening the public education system in the ACT, that builds on the findings of this consultation period and harnesses the wealth of knowledge and interest out in the community; and
- strategic planning of development that targets those suburbs experiencing falling student enrolments and aims to attract more families to those areas.

I agree that the budgetary pressures that triggered *Towards 2020* require proper attention, but I contest the view that social infrastructure can simply be jettisoned when times are tough. The appropriate course of action on the part of a responsible government is to examine income, expenditure and likely outcomes before taking decisions that potentially affect thousands of residents (here and in neighbouring parts of NSW) and the future liveability, health and efficiency of this city, the nation's capital and a showpiece of good planning internationally.

Finally, it should be understood that the GST revenue that funds virtually all government services and functions in the ACT is determined by the Commonwealth Grants Commission's formulas. Those formulas are subject to review every five years, and the next review takes place in 2009. While it may be true that it costs the ACT more to educate a child than any other State, it is also true that our system of education is widely considered to be superior to any other State, and our student retention rate, 88%, compares very favourably with 75% nationally. So long as the ACT's system of secondary colleges is the exception to the general rule, the CGC will continue to adjust the ACT's allocation so as to exclude additional expenditure due to colleges. However, if the ACT is successful in persuading two other States to follow suit in offering secondary colleges, the CGC must treat that expenditure as standard, and reimburse us accordingly. There are several other areas that also affect the ACT's treatment by the CGC that warrant attention, such as roads and services to Indigenous communities, and it is the duty of ACT Treasury to ensure that their input to the Review is effective.

I trust that you will heed the intense outcry over *Towards 2020*, and respond in a caring and compassionate manner that justifies the trust this community has placed in this Labor government. I also reserve the right to lodge further material in the form of appendices to this submission in the course of the final month of consultation.

Sincere regards,

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