

Submission on the Towards 2020 proposal

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The ACT has an excellent public education system that is regarded as one of the best in Australia and in the world.

The Government's Plan for Reform

The *Towards 2020* proposal is a document that proposes major change to public schools in the ACT. It was drawn up secretly as part of the Government's budget process and seems to have been driven by the findings of the Costello review.

In the lead up to, and subsequent to, the release of *Towards 2020*, the Government was not insisting that the system needed drastic reform. Rather, it was saying that there was too much spare capacity in the system and that it cost too much.

The proposed reforms accompanying school closures were also conceived secretly and without input by the community, teachers, experts or other Government Departments. These proposals must therefore be viewed as driven also by financial motives - amalgamations as a way of reducing staff; changes in models as a way of reducing spare capacity. The justification of these reforms in educational terms can be regarded as nothing more than a cynical public relations exercise.

Reform of Public Education - What Should Happen

Following on from the consultations for the Social Plan etc the Government should have engaged the community in a positive debate about public education and its future. The process should have started with something like a 'white paper' that would have looked at the current system and its community, Territory and National context, outlined the system's strengths and weaknesses, projected the needs and challenges of the future and then outlined reforms. Proposals for the future should have then been generated and been put out for public consultation.

Consultation Process not Genuine

That ACT Government has put forward a reform proposal for public Education in the ACT as part of a secret budgetary process. From this ill-conceived beginning it has found itself obliged by the Education Act 2004 to go to public consultation. This consultation is occurring in the same time frame as implementation - staffing etc. It is therefore impossible to believe that the consultation process is a genuine one. Had the Government valued consultation it would have proceeded in a very different manner.

The Pseudo-Consultation Process

The consultation process has failed to provide adequate opportunities for people to comment. The initial consultation meetings were only information giving meetings where the limited material in the actual proposal document was presented. The process has relied heavily on communities initiating meetings themselves to provide forums for people to discuss the issues.

There has been a failure to ensure that all community members are able to contribute and provide their informed input. For some people a verbal submission would be much easier to do. However there is no process for capturing people's verbal submissions for consideration. Many people would have appreciated the ability to have their comments recorded, written up, provided back for their confirmation and then be able to submit them.

The consultation has been hindered by the lack of participation by key educational groups such as the principals, teachers and support staff as well as researchers in the area. There has also been a lack of input from other areas such as planning, demography, health and welfare.

The Government has proposed closures thereby endangering the viability of some schools but has failed to provide clear criteria for outlining whether a school is viable or not. This is consistent with the origins of the proposal - secretive rather than consultative. This lack of criteria has intimidated school communities that were not nominated for closure. They feel that they could be targeted in the future if they speak out now opposing closures or amalgamations. This is a totally unacceptable consequence of the way the Towards 2020 proposal was developed and announced. The approach taken is also contrary to the advice the Government received in 2005 from the Colmar Brunton report, 'Improving Educational Outcomes', which advised against naming particular schools and that at least 18 months notice was needed.

The Government has failed to articulate clearly what the educational benefits of any of the proposals are. There are no clear benchmarks or goals that the community will be able to measure the proposal and final decisions against. This is consistent with the secret origins of the proposal.

The proposal is inconsistent with the Territory Plan, the Canberra Social plan and with the Education Act itself. The secret origin of the plan is inconsistent with a competent planning process. No risk assessment has been done. There is no clear statement of the educational benefits that the plan is expected to deliver. The proposal appears to have been driven purely from a narrow financial basis.

The timetable for the implementation is also unworkable and inconsiderate of the children and families involved, especially for those schools proposed to close at the end of 2006.

The Government has failed to provide the information needed to provide an informed contribution. It itself has relied upon out of date and inaccurate data.

There has been no sense in the consultation process that concerns will be listened to or addressed.

There are many issues in the plan that require a lot of consultation in their own right. The inclusion of proposals in *Towards 2020* to create high schools and colleges with specific different focuses, University links versus CIT links, gifted and talented versus applied curriculum are very significant changes and warrant thorough community consultation in their own right. This has been overlooked in the debate as the focus has been on the school closures. The Department has not been able to articulate what the statements regarding the high schools and colleges in the plan really mean. These changes may be implemented though without that debate as part of the Towards 2020 proposals.

The Minister has not responded to all questions publicly and ensured that all people have access to answers raised by various groups. The Minister has failed to provide an initial assessment of the educational, social and financial impacts of the proposal on each of the schools, students, families and communities that will be affected. The Minister has failed to set in place a process that gathers together information on what those impacts may be either for consideration during the consultation process or as a result of the consultation process.

Equitable Access

The plan states that the Government is committed to equitable access. The Government though has failed to provide their definition of equitable access. One measure of equitable access, I

would argue, is that families of lower economic status are not disadvantaged because of their lower economic status. *Towards 2020*, however, targets more schools in the areas of disadvantage rather than less. To close a local school, which is in walking distance, on the assumption that families have the resources to transport their children to another school fails to even consider equitable access. Some of these schools provide additional services to their communities such as access to other government services, other community organisations and provide a physically accessible point of community focus. These services will be lost by the communities and may not be replaceable as the families will not have easy access to their local community school.

The Drift to Private Education

It will always be difficult for a Government that is looking to find savings and efficiencies in education to balance its commitment to public education with the financial advantage it gets from the drift to private education.

Needless to say, the plan does not state clearly how it is to address the drift to private education because it was not conceived with that aim in mind. Some comments from parents and community members state that some parents in the public sector have decided to go to the private sector because of the plan.

Conclusion

The Government has failed to plan competently.

The Government has failed to properly consult.

The consultation process has not been open and transparent.

The ACT Government has thus treated the people of the ACT like subjects rather than citizens and has contravened the Education Act 2004.

Yours faithfully,
Jane Gorrie