

SUBMISSION ON

**TOWARDS 2020:  
RENEWING OUR SCHOOLS**

Jennie Nicholson

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I have a number of concerns about both the process used in relation to the Towards 2020 proposals and the content of the proposals. However, in the short time remaining for the making of submissions I intend to concentrate on the consultation process employed. I will also note my views upon potential increases in school sizes due to school closures and the effect upon the colleges of the ACT.

Consultation process

I believe that the consultation process used in relation to Towards 2020 has been such as to raise genuine concerns within the community as to whether there has been genuine consultation. By 'genuine consultation', I mean consultation that includes the decision-maker taking account of views put forward as part of the consultation process.

I am aware of a significant body of belief in the community that decisions have already been made by Government as to which schools proposed for closure will be closed and which schools proposed for restructure will be restructured. Some members of the community believe that these decisions were in fact made before Towards 2020 was released; others that they have been made at some time between release of the proposals and the current date (on which submissions are still being accepted). This view in the community destroys public confidence both in the processes of government generally and in the current Government in particular.

This view is leant support by letters which were sent to School Board Chairs and P&C Presidents recently outlining proposed improvements to schools resulting from savings made through adoption of the Towards 2020 proposals. The message conveyed to the community has been that such savings are to be made by the closure of a number of schools. It therefore appears certain that at the time these letters were prepared decisions had been made that some schools would close, and extremely likely that decisions had also been made as to which schools would close. If such decisions had not been made it would not be possible for the Government to determine what amount of savings would be available to fund improvements to schools remaining open.

I would also like to express my concern that naming schools proposed for closure resulted in the expenditure of an enormous amount of energy by members of those school communities in seeking to save 'their' schools, sometimes even impliedly at the expense of nearby schools. I accept that it may well be appropriate for reforms to be made to the ACT school system – possibly including school closures. I think that the energy that has been expended by members of school communities as a result of the way the Towards 2020 proposal has been managed could have been much more productively used in developing proposals for reform of the system in a cooperative fashion.

I would also question the timing of the announcement of the Towards 2020 proposals. Announcing these proposals as part of the 2006-07 Budget measures meant that most school communities learnt of the proposals through the media, which I believe caused a great deal of distress and resentment. Furthermore, this meant that in order to satisfy (or almost satisfy) the requirement of 6 months consultation found in the *Education Act 2004*, the closing date

for submissions is very close to the end of the school year. The announcement of the decision will be extremely close to the end of the school year. This means that some families are having to make a number of 'contingency plans' for 2007 dependent on whether or not particular schools will be open in 2007. Again, the energy of members of the community is being wasted and families have to undergo a significant degree of uncertainty. I note here that this is accentuated in the case of children with special needs, a significant number of whom are affected by the Towards 2020 proposals.

I would also question the intention underlying the announcement of such a broad ranging set of proposals as are represented in Towards 2020 in a year where the teachers' Enterprise Bargaining Agreement is being renegotiated. Without at this time expressing a view on the merits of the industrial dispute, I think that it is obvious that the combined effect of the uncertainty caused by Towards 2020 and the EBA process is both disruptive to the children of the ACT and damaging to teacher morale. Surely the ACT Education system should be designed to work for the benefit of children using that system; I consider its ability to do so in 2006 has been significantly restricted by the combined effect of the Towards 2020 proposals and the EBA process.

Finally, as the School Board Chairs' Network nominee on the Government Schools' Education Council, I note with regret and concern the government's failure to adequately consult with GSEC in relation to the Towards 2020 proposals.

#### School sizes

My children attend three government schools in the ACT: Canberra High, Belconnen High and Fraser Primary. When my second children began attendance at Fraser in 1999 it had, I believe, an enrolment of under 250 children. It now has an enrolment of around 350 children and if the Towards 2020 proposals are adopted in relation to the possible closure of one or more nearby schools it would be expected to take in increased enrolments. I firmly believe that this is undesirable.

My observations in relation to this school lead me to believe that, after a certain point, larger is not necessarily better. In particular, I believe that once enrolments go over around 300 in a primary school there is very little gain and there may instead be some negative consequences. Obvious practical effects may include a reduced ability to have whole-school assemblies or other functions, and reduced access to materials such as library resources. Assembly halls and libraries do not magically expand simply because more children are enrolled at a school. There may also be a need to fit more classes into a constant space, designed on the basis of class sizes of 20 years ago. (This is, of course, unless more demountables are to be supplied to expanding schools, or permanent classrooms and other resource areas are to be built in such schools).

Other effects may include a reduction in community spirit, as children are drawn from a wider geographic area and there are simply more people to get to know – for students, staff and parents. There does not, in my observation, appear to necessarily be an increase in parental involvement in school activities corresponding to an increase in enrolments, beyond a certain point.

#### Colleges

My eldest child is to commence attending Copland College in 2007. I submit that neither this college, nor others, should be changed as part of the Towards 2020 process so as to cater for a broader range of school years. I am a product of the NSW system of High Schools catering for Years 7 to 12, and I think that the College system is one of the strengths of the ACT system. I think that the increased independence and responsibility that this system allows our young people (who are, indeed, by this time not children) should be retained in all cases. It also appears that this system already allows for a variety of educational opportunities (such as VET and the International Baccalaureate program). These should not be put at risk without significantly more research being undertaken as to the possible benefits to be achieved and the possible detriment that could also result from changes to this system.

## Conclusion

In my view the process used to introduce the Towards 2020 proposals was unsatisfactory. The proposals themselves have many drawbacks, some of which I have outlined above. I am sure that other members of the community have drawn other drawbacks in the proposals to the attention of the Government. I urge the Government to have regard to all submissions. Finally, I consider that rather than adopting some or all of the Towards 2020 proposals the Government should seek to develop a better plan for public education in the ACT in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, based on genuine public consultation.

Jennie Nicholson