



CHOICE

DIVERSITY

OPPORTUNITY

Individual Submission on the *Towards 2020* Proposals

Over the last months, there has been much discussion of the many issues arising from the Government's hastily conceived brave new plan for our public schools and colleges in the A.C.T. A large number of submissions have been prepared, many concerning particular schools and communities, and a few looking across the whole series of proposals.

This submission does not concentrate on any particular school or college, but is concerned with five major issues:

- the inadequate basis of the Government's proposal,
- important omissions from their financial basis,
- the lack of resources to implement the wholesale changes in the scheduled time,
- the disingenuous nature of the consultation process, and
- the cost to the community of this whole consultation and disruption.

1. Lack of Educational Rationale

A supposed financial rather than an educational rationale lies behind the proposals. The intention is clearly to optimise the use of seats in classrooms, by closing selected schools, amalgamating schools, and absorbing displaced students into other existing schools. It is no more than a cost-cutting exercise. The simple basis lies in the conclusions arising from the 2005 Functional Review . . . evidently a classic example of bean counting.

There is no evidence of the proposal being guided by the current Territory Plan; in fact, there are contradictions, an example of which lies in the demographic changes occurring in North Canberra. The proposal flies in the face of many of the social objectives laid down in the Territory Plan.

All the brave talk of ensuring curriculum and learning continuity, of providing new infrastructure, is an attempt to sugar the pill of sweeping school closures. There is no attempt to explain how better educational outcomes will arise. There is no underlying and consistent educational rationale. There is the assumption that new or upgraded facilities, will automatically lift those outcomes. There is another assertion, that upgraded or new facilities will automatically attract students from the private sector. (Narrabundah College and Lyneham High, tired buildings as they may be, run vibrant and highly popular educational programs, if one is to judge excellence by the demand for enrolment.)

2. Inadequate Financial Justification

Since the release of the *Towards 2020* proposal, many questions have been raised about the accuracy and adequacy of the figures used in its financial arguments behind school closures. Other submissions identify and challenge a number of those figures, as well as the reasoning to which they have been applied. However, there had clearly been no attempt to quantify the costs of change, such as providing additional facilities at amalgamated or receiving schools to accommodate properly those students displaced from closed schools and Dickson College. A mere \$4m was set aside for transition support, and a \$90m "bucket of money" was earmarked to enhance the infrastructure at the remaining schools.

\$90m among some 80 remaining schools is welcome, but provides not very much for each school. The Government has at this stage refrained from publishing the costs it has since had determined by the Department of Education and Training, of upgrading Campbell High School to be able to cater for displaced Dickson College students. One doesn't need a great deal of political *nous*, to understand such reticence.



To come forward with such a proposal without having done the necessary homework, with proper cost justification (supported by a justification on sound educational grounds, together with projected enrolments based on up to date census data and demographic trends), is quite improper.

Another consideration is simple cost-shifting. The Government has chosen to place on families the cost and time burden of extra travel, together with more demanding arrangements for the general care and supervision of children. There is no doubt that under the proposal, access to public education becomes that much harder for many families.

None of these costs are reflected in the proposal's cost justification. It is no wonder that so many of the ACT community have been scathing in their criticisms of the basis behind the proposal.

3. Simplistic Scheduling

The costs of change go well beyond those of physical infrastructure. The workload on the Department's central office staff has been increased substantially over these last months, as it has attempted to plan in anticipation of decisions at the end of the consultation period, and deal with the many issues arising from schools, students and parents. This workload will increase in the months ahead. With staff cuts and staff re-allocation, the Department will be hard-pressed to perform its normal functions properly. The workload on teachers will be greater, as those from closed schools, and those in amalgamated and receiving schools, plan for and support the resulting changes. Changes in staffing and staff teams, programs, school schedules and facilities allocation, all has to be done . . . as well as the normal workload.

Given the above discussion about lack of resources in central office and teaching staff to effect successfully the wholesale changes implicit in the *Towards 2020* proposal, it is obvious that the timetable set by the Government is unrealistic. Dates have been set arbitrarily, and the Department has been told to proceed with planning based on the proposal. This is not good government – it is opportunistic and simplistic scheduling, whose flaws will become quickly evident.

4. Disingenuous Consultation

Genuine consultation precedes decision. By announcing a proposal whose language very clearly states its planned action, the clear message the community received is that the decisions have already been made by the Government. In the *Towards 2020* document with its schedule of public meetings and in its following actions, the Government's perception of consultation has been clearly limited to no more than explanations and answers to questions. No program of genuine consultation was proposed or published. Instead it has been the community and not the Government or the Department that has initiated all subsequent discussions and meetings. (The Department's several subsequent seminars on educational issues, were not intended to nor did they seek to consult on the *Towards 2020* proposal.)

It is acknowledged that the Department and the Minister have co-operated willingly in participating in such gatherings, but never has been posed this genuine question from the Government: "How might we address the financial and enrolment concerns we have about our public education system?" For that is the question that should have been posed to each educational community, before decisions were made. It is no wonder that many in the community have complained so strongly about the consultation process, calling it a cynical exercise, with some wondering if the Government had issued an "ambit claim", with the full intention to close a smaller number than the full set as published. If the latter is the case, it is a serious indictment of the moral calibre of the Government. A kinder interpretation, and one perhaps closer to the truth, is that it displays a naivety and ineptitude that is matched only by the false courage with which the whole proposal has been touted.



5. The Costs to the Community

Disruption, anxiety and contingency planning are some of the hidden costs to the community. (These costs are in addition to the cost shifting to the community that has been identified in Section 2 above, and that will arise for students and families directly affected by closures.) More obvious costs so far have been through extensive time in meetings, discussions, in analysis, letters and submissions. How much better could this time and energy have been spent, in improving what we already have, rather than in having to defend it from dismantling and disarray. What a waste of our community's resources this proposal has caused! And what waste and angst lie ahead?