

Southern Cross Primary P&C - Response to the ACT Government's "Towards 2020" Proposal.

Recommendation:

That in the construction of an early childhood (P-3) school at Southern Cross Primary the ACT government addresses four issues of critical community importance:

- 1) maintaining holding classes (Years 4 – 6) at SOXP in 2008 for students intending to enrol in the West Belconnen P-10 school or Belconnen High in 2009¹
- 2) developing logical transition pathways to other schools after completion of Year 3 at SOXP.
- 3) implementing a new model for allocation of SEF to ensure disadvantaged students continue to be supported at their new school.
- 4) developing safe, economical transport to neighbouring schools for children in the current feeder area.

Context

The proposed change of Southern Cross Primary School (SOXP) from a K-6 to a P-3 early childhood school, as outlined in the "Towards 2020" proposal, will cause major disruption to students, their families and neighbouring primary schools. All but those now in years 5 and 6 will be forced to move to another primary school before they reach high school.

Schools Equity Funding (SEF) used to address access and equity issues for financially and socially disadvantaged students at SOXP will be lost to these students if they move to schools that do not receive SEF. Additionally, the need to travel greater distances to neighbouring primary schools will have a disproportionate effect in Southern Cross's feeder area due to its lower socio-economic profile and high proportion of students who walk to school.

The "Towards 2020" proposal has an historical context that sees the most needy belt of Belconnen (Page, Scullin, Higgins, and Holt) losing convenient access to its public schools. Without due consideration, the actual implications of "Towards 2020" could see an already marginalised set of families distanced from what is their right to a free, quality, public education system.

While these negative impacts cannot be completely avoided with a change to a P-3 model, they can be mitigated.

Impacts and Mitigation Strategies

1) The need to find alternative primary schooling for students completing years 3-5 in 2007 can be addressed with holding classes at SOXP in 2008.

With closure of Years 4, 5 and 6 at SOXP at the end of 2007, around 100 current students will be forced to find alternative primary schooling for between 1 and 3 years. A year 6 holding class at SOXP in 2008 would allow students to complete their schooling at SOXP before their transition to high school in 2009. Year 4 and 5 holding classes would facilitate smooth progression and support parental choice of the West Belconnen P-10 School in 2009.

In the absence of holding classes, a substantial number of these 100 students will move to alternative schools in 2007, one year ahead of the proposed changes as parents seek to extend the time their child is in the school before they move to high school. Anecdotal evidence suggests a substantial number have already enrolled in other primary schools for 2007. This will cause a short term spike in numbers at neighbouring primary schools that will complicate staffing and accommodation issues both at these schools and SOXP.

2) Logical transition arrangements are needed to make the P-3 model an attractive choice for parents.

The absence of a middle school in the vicinity of SOXP will mean that most children completing Year 3 under the proposed model would move to a neighbouring P-6 school or the West Belconnen P-10. Differing school sizes, cultures and moving to a new peer group are likely to make choice of the P-3 model unattractive to parents of a large proportion of potential enrolments. Good linkages and programs to ensure stability and continuity for students completing Year 3, and being able to sell the model to parents, will be crucial to the long term viability of SOXP as a P-3 school.

3) Schools Equity Funding and programs to support the equity and access issues of disadvantaged students must follow these students to their new schools.

Schools Equity Funding is allocated to schools with at least 25% of their enrolments from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds as indicated by Australian Bureau of Statistics indicators for the areas from which enrolments are drawn. SOXP receives around \$19,000 SEF each year which is used to support early intervention strategies to improve numeracy and literacy levels among at risk students and programs to build social skills and a sense of belonging. With movement of students to neighbouring schools it is likely that the 25% threshold will not be met in these schools and disadvantaged students will lose the support they need to achieve their potential. It is **essential** to develop an alternative model for allocation of SEF to support these students and their new schools in achieving the best educational outcomes.

4) Greater distances to alternative primary schools will cause proportionally greater financial and social hardship in SOXP's current priority enrolment area and must be addressed with effective transport options

The Southern Cross Primary priority enrolment area suffers a relative socio-economic disadvantage and a high proportion of students who walk to school. Greater distances to alternative schools will require alternative transport arrangements in many cases and have potential to cause economic and social disadvantage for many families. For Year 4, 5 and 6 children, provision of appropriate bus routes in conjunction with the existing Student Transport Program providing free bus travel to children of concession or health care card holders would go some way towards addressing this issue.

Parents of younger children choosing to take advantage of the different educational models available at neighbouring schools are likely to have concerns about their children travelling on buses unsupervised and support for establishment of a 'Walking School Bus' program would be valuable.

Greater distances to neighbouring schools will make it more difficult for many parents to be involved in volunteer activities at these schools leading to an erosion of parental involvement and social capital. This issue is one that is difficult to address but is a significant negative impact on both educational outcomes and community involvement in schools.

¹This assumes that the West Belconnen School will have classes to at least year 7 when it opens in 2009. The 2020 documents and website indicate it will only be P-6 in 2009 although the minister has indicated in writing to the SCPS Board Chair that it will offer a full P-10 from opening. If not, it will not be an option for students from the year 6 holding class.