



Australian Education Union – ACT Branch
Submission to the
Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system
ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on
Education, Training and Youth Affairs

The Australian Education Union – ACT Branch (AEU) is the peak professional and industrial organisation which represents over 3000 public school teachers and allied support staff working in the ACT.

The AEU welcomes the opportunity to discuss the impact of school consolidation and closures, changes on communities and how the reform process has been implemented.

The ACT Government's *Towards 2020* policy including:

- **Demographic factors influencing regional planning in the delivery of educational services;**
- **Configuration of school environments and educational outcomes;**

In October 2006 the AEU provided a detailed submission entitled *Beyond Rhetoric: AEU submission in response to Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools* (Attachment A).

The AEU supports the need to respond to the changing demographic profile of ACT communities—but it argues that such a response should be based on well-founded educational objectives and not on short-term demographic or economic pressures.

The AEU recommended in 2006 that choice of school configuration should be based on genuine educational need identified in the local context rather than pure economic/demographic expediency.

The ACT Government's promise of improved educational outcomes and the provision of the resourcing necessary to manage the changes brought about by the implementation of *Towards 2020* must be fully assessed.

ACT public schools continue to achieve excellent student outcomes based on international measures. However, the system has been assessed (PISA, 2006) as being 'high quality but low equity'. This means that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are not achieving in school as well as other students. Evidence must be provided by the ACT Government to demonstrate that the implementation of *Towards 2020* is addressing these inequities and supporting the improvement in educational outcomes, as promised.

- **Reorganisation of the ACT school system thus far**

The AEU supports the continual review of and investment in the ACT public education system in order to build on the excellent educational provision to ACT children and young people.

The reorganisation of the ACT public school system in recent years has brought some positive change. The AEU is supportive of the four new P – 2 Early Childhood Schools. This model, based on the Cooperative School, is the sort of full-service school that research shows is the best way to provide high quality early childhood education and care. The AEU is monitoring the trial provision of up to 15 hours per week of preschool to 4 year olds (up from 12 hours per week). This goes some way towards the AEU's goal of implementing 20 hours of free, high quality preschool education to all 4 year olds across Australia. The AEU understands that, unlike brand new public schools in the ACT, the new P – 2 schools did not receive an 'establishment allowance' from the ACT Government to purchase new resources, furniture and equipment since these schools are each on a renovated existing site (rather than new buildings). The AEU recommends a review of the resource provision for each of these schools as a matter of urgency to ensure they have all the materials they require.

The AEU advocated for a new school in West Belconnen to reinvigorate the public school provision in that region. Kingsford Smith School is using middle schooling practices for students in Years 5 – 8. Teachers at this school would benefit from further professional development to enable them to develop the particular strategies and practices that would assist them in teaching students across this age group. There is a lack of Middle Schooling degree courses provided at universities across the country therefore teachers must be supported to access relevant professional development to support their work.

The AEU also supports investment in new school infrastructure on the Kambah High School site and encourages a thorough consultation process involving a wide range of stakeholders.

AEU has been in favour of a well-planned and well-resourced amalgamation of Preschools with a neighbouring Primary School for a number of years and we are pleased that this has come to fruition. Public preschools are less isolated as a result of their linking with a primary school. The staff, students and families are more connected with their local public school. The value of the high quality play-based early childhood program in preschools is now shared more widely with the linked primary school. Whilst there have been a few transition issues which affected both those in preschools and in primary schools, on the whole this restructure has been a positive one. Primary schools received some administrative support to enact the amalgamation however schools would benefit from additional resources to fully cover the cost borne by schools in implementing this process. The AEU supports the continued involvement of parent groups with each preschool as such partnerships are a valuable part of fostering a community.

The reorganisation of Melba-Copland School has been a relatively smooth process and there is an increase in enrolments in the high school years at the school. There have been concerns raised by teachers who are required to teach students at both

campuses. Resources and support was not provided to staff to assist them in the transition from teaching at one site to teaching over two campuses. There did not seem to be a clear strategy in place to support the transition. For example, electronic communication between staff at each campus was a challenge since an All Staff email address list was not established prior to the new structure commencing in 2008.

Stromlo High School introduced Year 6 in 2007. There was inadequate support and advice from the Department's central office for teachers and school leaders to clarify teachers' working conditions under the new structure. For example, maximum face to face teaching hours in the primary sector is 21.5 hours per week whereas the high school sector maximum face to face hours per week is 19 hours. Teachers at Stromlo who are working with students across all or most year levels were unclear what their conditions were in this regard.

The Hawker Collegiate was in development regardless of *Towards 2020*. The AEU understands that this initiative has brought about closer links between the schools in this cluster and the collegiate has assisted with smoother transitions of students from one site to the next.

Chisholm Community School (P-10) has devolved its 'sub-school' structure and moved to a more traditional high school structure. This change, over and above the integration of preschool, primary and high school, has been significant for those staff who were used to the school's previous management and operational structures. The AEU sought a DET review in 2008 into the school's operation to establish what features of the school are working well and what support the school needs to assure it's effective provision of high quality education into the future. To date, such a Departmental review has not occurred.

The impact of school consolidation and closures with a focus on:

- **Community experiences and attitudes**
- **Student learning experiences**

Closing Schools:

The AEU liaised closely with members working in schools and with Department of Education officials from the time the announcement of school closures took place. Particularly in the case of the first schools to close, there was significant concern and angst expressed by members about the process of closing schools, the short timeframe to prepare for the closure of their school and the lack of continual support to manage this process. Teachers were under a great deal of pressure to carry on as normal with educational programs (which they did well) whilst also implementing a transition program for students in readiness for a new school. At the same time, these same teachers had to deal with an uncertain professional future as many of them did not know which school they were going to be transferred to until the last days of the school year. Even the physical task of packing up personal belongings and labelling all DET-owned property was an exhausting task on top of all the other responsibilities. Members reported that there was a lack of information about the procedures to close a school and lack of administrative, leadership and emotional support provided by DET in dealing with all the issues resulting from the closure decision. DET employed two

'consultants' to liaise with schools and sections of the Department. AEU members reported that this support was inadequate.

Following the closure of nominated schools, other schools were able to make a claim for DET property (furniture, library resources etc.). Members reported that the first 'round' of claims was poorly managed and amounted to a 'first-in, best-dressed' grab of resources rather than on a needs basis.

The process for relocating one special needs setting, the Preschool Support Class – Language (formerly at Rivett Preschool), was reported to have been poorly managed as the program's new location was not decided until very late in 2006. There was lack of communication with staff about the transition. No renovations were made to the new site (Curtin Preschool) to ensure an adequate teaching space, permanent storage facilities or appropriate furniture on commencement of the program in the new school year (2007).

'Receiving' Schools:

Members have reported to the AEU that the level of support available from DET central office for those schools who were receiving students who transferred from closed school sites was poor. Many teachers and principals worked during their recreation leave period in January to ensure that the transition for students and staff went as smoothly as possible. Practical issues apparently had little consideration. For example, members indicated that there wasn't enough furniture available at the start of the school year for the increased number of students transferring from other schools.

- **Financial, social and environmental impacts**

For the Future: Economic and Financial Outlook (Costello, M and Smith, G 2005) stated that public school enrolments had decreased by 7% between 2000 and 2005 (yet the number of schools had not decreased) and that the cost of running schools had 'increased substantially' by 27%.

Michael Costello was also the author of the secret ACT Government Strategic and Functional Review (2006). Many in the ACT community are of the belief that this paper largely focused on economic factors with little consideration for the educational needs of the ACT community.

The AEU maintains that every dollar saved from the consolidation of school sites and closure of other sites should be retained in the public education system for investment in its people, programs and structures.

The closure of public schools resulted in a proportion of families moving their children to Catholic or Independent Schools. With the percentage of enrolments in ACT public schools in decline in past years, the closures seemed to have accelerated this for a period. AEU understands that the last ACT Schools Census indicates public school enrolments are steady.

Community responses, including;

- **Review of the consultation process, including how public submissions were considered and incorporated into the final reform package**

Beyond Rhetoric: AEU submission in response to Towards 2020: Renewing Our Schools (October 2006):

The AEU supports many of the broad educational goals articulated in the ACT Government's Towards 2020 paper, including the need for equitable access; for improved support for student transition between levels of schooling; for stronger partnerships between education providers and between education and industry; and for teachers to share expertise and resources.

The AEU objected to the manner in which the Government's *Towards 2020* policy consultation process took place.

The community has been required to participate in consultation on a region by region basis without access to the criteria, assumptions and data used by Treasury officials and consultants in advising the ACT Government on the direction of the recommended closures.

To date, this information is still yet to be made public. The AEU supports the application/s made under Freedom of Information legislation for all information associated with the school closures to be released.

The AEU expressed concerns that some of the rhetoric in Towards 2020 does not have a foundation in evidence or in the practicalities of educational delivery—and some statements do not rise above unfounded assertion. It is also concerned that specific recommendations have been made hastily and without good historical knowledge of the ACT school system or of local conditions.

The AEU sought *improved consultation with the community, with an extension of the current time frame and called for a moratorium on closures until 2008 to allow a transparent public enquiry to take place into our education system—unless a school community seeks an earlier outcome.*

- **Interest expressed by school communities to re-open schools listed for closure; and**

Some AEU members have expressed the view that Hall and Tharwa Schools should never have been closed due to their particularly important role in each of these communities. Public Schools are at the heart of the community as they provide families with support networks and a place where a range of community-building activities take place eg. annual fete, end-of-year concert, grandparents day etc. Given this fact, the closure of Hall and Tharwa Schools had a significant impact on the broader community including local businesses.

There is also evidence that there is still strong community support for the re-opening of Cook and Flynn Primary Schools. Both these schools had sound infrastructure and

enrolments. These factors highlight the mysterious nature of the criteria used to decide which schools should close.

- **New uses for school facilities**

In its submission (July 2008) to GHD Consultants during the *ACT Community Sites Project* consultation process, the AEU stated:

1. *The ACT Government must retain the integrity of the school sites so that they can be re-opened as schools when the demographics change, as they invariably will, in the suburbs where schools have been closed.*
2. *In the interim period, school sites must not be sold and should have community uses - uses that would depend on a needs assessment being conducted. Such an assessment would include consideration of the views of the communities surrounding school sites and the needs of various community groups.*

Further, the AEU asserts that:

1. *Historically, the local public school is the hub or soul of any suburb/community and it should be retained wherever practical.*
2. *School sites should only be re-opened as public schools, and not independent or Catholic schools. We completely reject any proposal to sell off a site to an independent or Catholic school.*
3. *If and when schools are re-opened, the original infrastructure should only be retained if it is deemed suitable for future uses. In cases where it is not, there must be government investment in new school infrastructure.*

The AEU's November 2007 submission to Purden Associates for the *Future Uses for Former School Sites* consultation process stated:

The AEU holds the following principles in regard to future use of former school sites:

- *The AEU's preferred option is that former school sites be used for community/public use, either by the retention or partial retention of school buildings and grounds or by the redevelopment of part or all of the site for community use (or a combination of these options).*
- *If the above option was not possible, the AEU would find it acceptable if former school sites were fully used or partially used for open space.*
- *The AEU does not support the use of former school sites for independent or Catholic schools under any circumstances. This includes our opposition to the option of demolishing the school building and developing/selling the site off to any independent school.*

The AEU is willing to discuss further the issues raised in this submission with the Committee.

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Secretary
AEU – ACT Branch