



CANBERRA PRESCHOOL SOCIETY

**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO
SCHOOL CLOSURES AND REFORM OF THE
ACT EDUCATION SYSTEM**

**(STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION,
TRAINING AND YOUTH AFFAIRS)**

AUTHORISED BY THE COUNCIL OF

CANBERRA PRESCHOOL SOCIETY INC.

14 APRIL 2009

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Ms Amanda Bresnan MLA
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Re: Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT Education System

Dear Ms Bresnan,

I am pleased to present the submission of the Canberra Preschool Society to the above Inquiry being conducted by the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs, of which you are Chair.

The Canberra Preschool Society is committed to the development of the community's interest, understanding, and involvement in the provision of a high quality preschool education. We actively support promotion of the role that preschool plays in a young child's life.

The Society has been in constant liaison with the ACT Department of Education and Training, and with the Minister, during the preceding four years since the Department's *Every chance to learn: Curriculum for ACT Schools P-10, Principles and Framework* was published in 2005. We feel strongly about the early childhood components of the renewal program and, like the ACT government, recognise the need for change. The Society's policy and advocacy in the fields of early learning, renewal of preschools and the school environment, and continued partnership at the community level in delivery of preschool education, are all a matter of record. The Society expressly supported *Towards 2020* however with certain reservations as discussed in this Submission.

The Society's deep and abiding interest in advancing these matters is evidenced in our longstanding, strong and vibrant partnership with the Department of Education and Training and specifically the level of support extended towards preschool teachers and assistants. This partnership facilitates the provision and maintenance of preschool resources in a manner that ensures a learning environment that embodies the highest standards; standards that have come to be expected by parents and teachers alike and that, unfortunately, are not as evident in the primary domain.

The enclosed submission addresses the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry with specific regard to the early learning band – around which the Society's aims and objectives are framed – and the relationship of preschools to primary schools in the current configuration. Our submission was based upon the aggregated input of our affiliates (which are local-community-based organisations of parents in preschools) and the background of our policy development and Departmental conversations over the past four years.

Yours faithfully

Tracy McCaughan (Mrs)
President

Background – the CPS

Historical Context

The Canberra Preschool Society – founded in 1943 as the Canberra Nursery Kindergarten Association – is the inaugural partner with the government in the provision of quality preschool education. Based on an Agreement¹ made in that year, the establishment of preschools in the Australian Capital Territory was in each instance (until 2007) a joint venture between the relevant government agency or department and an independent association formed by the parents of the children enrolled at that preschool. Those Preschool Parents Associations are Group Members of the CPS, which acts as their peak body providing services to the PPAs and representing them to government and other stakeholders.

As stated, the establishment of preschools in a partnership arrangement prevailed until 2007, when the Department established Harrison P-6 school as a single institution without the involvement of a preschool community body. Although there has been no legislated change, it appears that the Department has repudiated the 1943 Agreement with the opening of Harrison and the Early Childhood Schools.

Aims and Objectives

As stated in its Constitution and endorsed by its members, the aims and objectives of the Society are:

- To promote community interest in pre-school education; and
- To promote an understanding of pre-school education; and
- To advocate, advise and assist pre-school education facilitators in the establishment and conduct of preschools and like institutions; and
- To be the peak body of Preschool Parent Associations in the Territory and of other community-based organisations in the Territory which are affiliated as Group Members; and
- To engage with community, government and other organisations and persons on purposes related to these objects; and
- To represent in any appropriate forums the views of the Society on matters related to these objects.

The membership of the Society includes nearly 80 affiliated organisations with an interest in education and care of children under the age of compulsory schooling – that is, age 6. The overwhelming majority of these are Preschool Parents Associations, each founded as the government's partner in the establishment of a local preschool.

Society Participation in Towards 2020

The Canberra Preschool Society was broadly in agreement with the changes to the delivery of preschool education as reflected in the Towards 2020 proposal. The Society's agreement – which was qualified as further discussed below – was based on the proposal's general concordance with the *CPS Best Practice Statement* of 2006². That Statement outlines our understanding of a viable preschool, which is one that:

- provides equitable access
- holds the opportunity for community participation

- is based on a “best practice” education pedagogy and curriculum – that is innovative and subject to continuous improvement
- meets the needs of all children in the surrounding neighbourhood
- promotes the continuity of care and learning and broad support networks
- has sufficient preschoolers enrolled to allow for the delivery of a meaningful and quality preschool experience to those enrolled, and
- has a preschool parent body that is adequately resourced, both financially and humanly, to fulfil their role in the partnership with the education provider

As mentioned, our qualified support highlighted a number of concerns. We felt that the proposals indicated a significant gap in understanding and knowledge at the ACTDET as to the nature of the preschool community partnership and the current best practice in early learning. The Society argued eloquently, through a number of submissions³, in reference to the following:

- The proposed closure of 22 preschools (one quarter of the total) was fundamentally inconsistent with the proposal’s aspiration to provide all children (and their families) with access to a high quality early childhood education.
- The ACT government’s apparent ignorance of the complexities and legal ramifications of the joint venture partnerships – a separate partnership at each site – that existed between each incorporated Preschool Parents Association and the Department.
- The inconsistent nature of the initial proposal with respect to the delivery of a quality, internationally-specified, early childhood education program.

It was apparent that it was not the Society’s arguments, but rather the discovery of the legal basis of the joint venture partnerships, which influenced the government. With the ambit closure of 22 preschools cast into legal doubt (by the 1943 Agreement¹), the government appeared to reconsider and adopt in part many of the Society’s submitted suggestions and recommendations. Several preschools were closed, but only with the assent of the Preschool Parents Association at each site. In two cases, this assent was tacit – Causeway and Page did not fight their closures. However the prompt closure of Page was in contradiction of the Canberra Preschool Society’s recommendations, which highlighted the effect on subsequent enrolments in surrounding areas. That the government refused to budge was indicative, to the CPS, of the predominance of economic rather than educational rationales underpinning the “renewal” proposals of Towards 2020.

2007 Onwards

The salient aspect of Towards 2020 for preschool organisation and management was that each discrete Preschool became an integrated unit of a government primary school. The logistical aspects of this integration have been an ongoing task and an unfinished negotiation since the planning stages of 2007, the implementation stage of 2008, and the current situation of 2009. It is the experiences and outcomes of these last two years which have largely informed this Submission. The relationships between parents of preschoolers, School Boards and Principals are our greatest concern, as detailed below. We hold that the joint venture rights and responsibilities of each independently incorporated Preschool Parents Association, not having been legislated away, are not only to be respected within the system but are also essential to the maintenance of a world-class early learning regime.

Responses to Terms of Reference

Preface

Ten specific Terms of Reference were stated in the Assembly resolution which established the inquiry. The Society's areas of interest and expertise touch on most of these Terms of Reference. However, this submission will not address some of the later Terms, specifically:

- “Views on the *Education Amendment Bill 2008*” – the subject matter of this Bill being nothing more than a guarantee on community consultation for future school closure proposals, the Society has no comments.
- “Interest expressed by school communities to re-open schools listed for closure” – this concerns Primary Schools far more than preschools, and moreover the Society has not been involved in any relevant community actions.
- “New uses for school facilities” – again, the Society has not formulated any policy on this matter.

For the convenience of the Standing Committee, the submission material below is organised under the headings of the Terms of Reference; however there is considerable overlap between some of the Terms and the final ToR (“Any other relevant matter”) may be taken to be addressed within all of the others.

The ACT Government's Towards 2020 policy including: Demographic factors influencing regional planning in the delivery of educational services

The Society believes that present planning does not take proper account of demographic factors, and in particular demographic factors that are specific to the delivery of early learning services.

The *Towards 2020* policy led to the establishment of Early Childhood Schools in four regions, but not in the region of Canberra which is experiencing the strongest population growth (Gungahlin). The Society maintains that the site of Hall Preschool is ideal for such a school, as is the site of the closed Tharwa Primary School. The example of Hall is instructive, as there are current enrolments and a 3-year-old program however the establishment of this new program and its announcement completely bypassed both the Hall community and the Principal of Gold Creek Primary School (with which Hall Preschool has been amalgamated).

The Society maintains its policy that Early Childhood Schools should be established in every region.

The ACT Government's Towards 2020 policy including: Configuration of school environments and educational outcomes

The Society is not confident that the configuration of school environments, as evidenced in new school designs and multi-site management of amalgamated preschools, is advancing educational outcomes.

Multi-site Management

Under *Towards 2020* every discrete Preschool in the Territory was amalgamated into a government Primary School, coming under the auspices of the Principal and the School Board. For Preschools on stand-alone sites – that is, not on the same nor a neighbouring property to a primary school – this amalgamation has resulted in logistical issues of multi-site management. This has created an identity issue for the isolated preschool sites, which now bear two names, eg Torrens Primary School Pearce

Preschool Unit. It also remains unclear as to the future of these isolated preschool sites as the establishment of district schools (eg, the Tuggeranong P-10 school the preliminary design plans for which were published recently) anticipates a large intake of preschoolers from a broader area, not just the very local community which has been the historic basis of preschooling.

New School Designs

The Society is not satisfied that best-practice concepts are being followed in the design of the newest schools in the Territory, specifically Harrison P-6 School, West Belconnen Early Childhood School and Tuggeranong Early Childhood School. Basic elementary aspects of architectural design which may contribute to continuity of curriculum delivery across the early learning band (up to age 8) have not been evidenced. Tuggeranong does not incorporate co-located childcare facilities as mandated by Federal government policy⁴.

The Society reiterates its position that an early childhood school should be established in each region, with sites such as Hall and Tharwa examined for their potential. In establishing these, or any, schools the architectural design must support and enhance the art and science of conducting best-practice professional teaching, commensurate with the aims of the curriculum and, for preschool units in particular, seamless linkage into the first band of education.

The ACT Government's Towards 2020 policy including: Reorganisation of the ACT school system thus far

The scope of this term of reference is vast. The particular interest of the Canberra Preschool Society in respect of reorganisation of the school system lies in the amalgamation of preschools into government Primary Schools, and an array of connected issues of governance, management structures, and parental involvement.

Governance Described

Governance of a government school is undertaken by a School Board. In the *Education Act*, the Part which pertains to School Boards includes the definition: “***school*** means a government school, but does not include a preschool”. Section 38 of the Act establishes a School Board for each government school and also makes reference to section 146 (Preschools) as a separate provision for parental involvement in the conduct of a preschool. The clear and unmistakeable effect of section 38 is that the School Board does not have direct governance over a Preschool.

The functions of the School Board are described in section 39 and include:

- (e) to establish budgetary policies for the school and approve the school budget; and
- (f) to establish policies for the efficient and effective use of school assets and the management of financial risk; and
- (g) to develop relationships between the school and the community and between the school and community organisations; and
- (h) to make recommendations to the chief executive on issues affecting the school; and
- (i) to encourage parent participation in their children's learning; and
- (j) to exercise any other function given to the board under this Act or any other Territory law.

As will be further noted below, the assignment of responsibility for budgeting, use of assets and relationships with the community are important – they are assigned only to the School Board and not to the Principal, even though the definition mentioned above excludes preschools from this purview.

Importantly for preschools, section 146 provides a specific role of participation for the parents of the preschoolers as a discrete subset of the entire school community:

“In exercising functions in relation to a government preschool, the chief executive must take the steps necessary to encourage, and give opportunities to, parents of children attending the preschool to participate in the conduct of the preschool.”

Governance and the Amalgamation Process

The above provisions of the *Education Act* were cited by the Society in discussions with the Department during 2007 aimed at contributing to the amalgamation process and ensuring that parental involvement in preschool governance was preserved. In 2007 the Society requested that the Chief Executive intervene to instruct school boards to appoint a representative of the Preschool Parents Association to membership of the school board. (The Chief Executive has the power to issue such an instruction under section 39(2) and the School Board has the power to make such an appointment under section 41(6); further, *in extremis*, the Chief Executive may use powers under section 43 in relation to the composition of a school board.)

Such an appointment would have fulfilled the requirement of section 146, as well as facilitating the capacity of the School Board to fulfill its functions to develop relationships, encourage parent participation and make recommendations. That requested appointment has not been made in spite of repeated requests from the Society on behalf of its members.

When the amalgamations became effective at the start of 2008, the absence of effective governance planning became apparent. Primary School Principals became responsible for their preschool units where previously the Department had directly managed the preschools *in partnership with* the Preschool Parents Association. The evidence has been that very few Principals were informed as to the symbiotic role of the PPA, and the nature of the partnership, or indeed the nature of the PPA as an incorporated body answerable only to its members.

Current Problems

Our experience has been that some Primary School Principals have imposed themselves in the relationship between the School Board and the Preschool Parents Association, an imposition which is no part of their role under the Act. The role of the Principal is described in the *Education Act* – section 21 subsection (4) – as follows:

- (a) educational leadership and management of the school; and
- (b) educational outcomes for students at the school; and
- (c) providing support to the school board in the carrying out of its functions; and
- (d) contributing to the development and implementation of educational policies and strategies.

In all of the above, “school” includes the preschool. It will be apparent that whilst the Principal is responsible for *educational* matters across the school, they are not responsible for the management of finances and assets and are not responsible for liaison with the community (although they can, and typically do, support the School Board in these matters).

The Society is informed that a number of Preschool Parents Associations have been intimidated into disclosing their financial records whilst being denied access to School Board meeting minutes. The right of these parents to be involved in the conduct of their preschool – enshrined by section 146 of the Act – is being ignored and the role of the School Board to develop a relationship with them as a community organisation is being frustrated.

In all cases, our information is that Principals are the agents who are taking these actions to marginalise Preschool Parents Associations. The Society believes that a large number of primary school Principals are exerting pressure on PPAs to wind up their associations – pressure which it is not their right to exert if they are not a member of that association. We have specific examples of PPAs whose ordinary business is being frustrated by pettifogging from their Principal on matters of internal PPA concern, such as association correspondence and (as mentioned above) financial management. Further, we have information that some Principals have been misinforming the P&C Associations at their schools concerning the role, management, capacity and future of PPAs, in particular encouraging P&Cs to debate the closure of PPAs where that is none of their business.

Resolving the Governance Issues

The Society maintains that the joint venture partnership role of the Preschool Parents Association must be respected, valued and maintained. This can only occur if the governance of the school reflects the rights of the PPA and its members to be involved in the conduct of the preschool.

Section 37 of the *Education Act* should be amended so as to remove the exclusionary definition which makes a school board responsible for all but the preschool. The logical corollary of integrating preschools into primary schools, and placing the management of preschools within the scope of School Based Management generally, is that the School Board should exercise all of its functions across the entire school inclusive of the preschool.

In consequence, and to reflect the different nature of the preschool unit as a non-compulsory part-time institution involving children who will not all attend kindergarten in the government sector), the School Board should have specific input from the parents of those children. This would fulfill the ambit of section 146 of the Act. Therefore section 41 subsection (2) of the Act should be amended to insert a paragraph specifically appointing one representative of the preschool unit (or units) of that school.

Given these changes, there is no requirement for a legislative solution to the problematic involvement of Principals, since the parents of the preschoolers will have direct access to the rightful management body of the school. However in the interim, and the transition to a new school board membership, the Society maintains that direct intervention by the Chief Executive is necessary to inform, and direct, Primary School Principals to –

- take all necessary steps, as the representative of the Chief Executive, to ensure that the parents of the preschoolers are involved in the conduct of the preschool and that if those parents choose to be involved by way of a PPA, then the Principal must accommodate them;
- respect the independent and incorporated nature of the PPA and not intervene in its internal business nor agitate for its winding-up;
- to the extent that the School Board undertakes management of the finances and assets of the preschool, ensure that all stakeholders in that management are fully informed and consulted; and
- not undertake any actions which assume nor anticipate a change to the standing joint venture partnership between the PPA and the preschool, except in open consultation and except as mutually agreed in writing.

A directive from the CEO is a serious and dramatic step, but the Society believes that only such an intervention will be able to “level the field” by ensuring that every Primary School Principal in the Territory has the same information and the same understanding of the manner in which they are to manage their amalgamated preschools.

The impact of school consolidation and closures

There are three Terms of Reference listed under this general heading, which addresses the impact on three focus areas:

- Community experiences and attitudes;
- Student learning experiences; and
- Financial, social and environmental impacts.

Student Learning Experiences

The Society advocates and strongly believes in the adoption of best-practice methods for early childhood learning. We accept the view that “early childhood” is the span from birth to the age of 8, as discussed and demonstrated in several pertinent overseas studies^{5 6}. Amongst the core principles of this early learning pedagogy are that “play-based learning” is the most effective vector for advancement of skillsets in young children, and that the delivery of early learning is a specialised discipline requiring specialised training. The Curriculum Framework of the Territory takes these principles on board.

Under the amalgamated model, with the preschool unit now a subset of a primary school, there have arisen numerous examples of preschool classes being taken by teachers not qualified in early childhood education. The Society does not deny the role of Principal in managing staffing requirements across their school; however it is imperative that the preschool program be delivered to the children only by teachers who are trained in that methodology. If there are insufficient qualified teachers in the school – taking into account those teaching Kindergarten and 1st Grade which are also in the “early childhood” band – then a program of professional development is necessary; meanwhile, the preschool children must not be disadvantaged.

A consequence of inappropriate staffing and the policies of various principals has, the Society understands, also led to a subtle breakdown of the play-based curriculum. We have received reports of preschool children being given lessons in traditional classroom style and rote-learning style. This would be of grave concern, given the gains that have been made in recent years with the early learning curriculum, and the Department has a responsibility to ensure proper curriculum adherence across its schools.

Community experiences

These two Terms of Reference are taken together as, in our context, they are closely related.

The community experience around preschools has been dramatically impacted by consolidations and closures. Examples are numerous, including Tharwa (where the Primary School was closed but a viable and community-supported preschool program continues to operate) and Mount Neighbour. The closure of Mount Neighbour Primary School resulted in the preschool being made an amalgamated unit of Urambi Primary School, approximately 2km distant by road and not a traditional part of the local community of the preschool. The consequence at Mount Neighbour is that 90% of the children proceed to their Kindergarten year at the next-door St Thomas the Apostle Catholic school.

The community experience is also seriously impacted by the attitude of Principals to the Preschool Parents Association, a matter discussed in detail above. The preschool accepts enrolments from the entire community, and this includes children who will proceed to independent and Catholic schools for Kindergarten. This makes the preschool community a significantly different community from that of the government primary school; in particular, there is a cohort of parents connected with that preschool who are not disposed to be involved in the government school at all. It is the Preschool Parents

Association which is the vehicle of choice for these parents to be involved, specifically with that single year of preschooling, and for that reason as well as others it is appropriate and necessary for the Principal to engage the PPA as an independent community body with its own character, distinct from the P&C.

Financial impacts and Voluntary Contributions

The financial impacts are being felt as a corollary of the way in which School Based Management is being extended to preschools. In particular, Voluntary Contributions are the subject of much confusion and misinformation across the schools of the Territory.

Under the *Education Act*, voluntary financial contributions are regulated by section 27 and the stipulated principles are:

- The School Board may *ask* – not demand.
- Contributions are voluntary.
- Students have the same and equal rights to services and benefits regardless of the amount contributed (or not) by their parents.
- Students are not to be approached or harassed for contributions.
- Contribution records are confidential
- The School Board must advise these principles when asking for a contribution.

Although it seems pedantic to point it out, section 27 of the *Education Act* applies to the asking and making of voluntary contributions *to the school*. It is completely irrelevant and has no application to any other donation or contribution to any other organisation or institution.

For many years, Preschool Parents Associations have raised funds to support the education program at their preschool. This has been a vital and irreplaceable role - \$1.3 million was raised in 2008 by PPAs and government preschools today have the benefit and use of nearly \$7 million of education equipment and resources provided by, and insured by, PPAs as the legacy of years of involvement. This fundraising takes many forms, from the stock-standard raffles and lamington drives to major events such as fetes and trivia nights. Also, PPAs have asked and received their own form of Voluntary Contributions from their members in a manner which mirrored the principles of the Act.

Following the amalgamation of preschools, our affiliated PPAs have been told – wrongly – by a majority of Principals that they are not entitled to raise their own voluntary contributions, and that all such contributions must be directed to the school's accounts. This is a major piece of misinformation which has caused much angst across the Territory.

It remains a fact that each Preschool Parents Association is an incorporated body, with the capacity of a corporation to do any thing within the scope of the law in pursuit of its aims and objectives. It is answerable only to its members, regardless of being in a symbiotic relationship with a government school. It is empowered to raise funds.

The Society's recommendation above for a directive from the Chief Executive would be sufficient remedy for this problem. If Principals are directed to not interfere in the internal operations of PPAs, and to respect the rights of PPAs as incorporated entities, then there should be no more confusion over the raising of money by any means. Schools' entitlements to ask for voluntary contributions remain as per the Act, and the entitlement of a PPA to ask for voluntary contributions, resource donations, membership fees or any other form of fundraising is a simple consequence of their corporate existence.

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

The involvement of the Society in the original Towards 2020 consultation process was discussed in the Background section of this submission. The Society made a detailed submission to the consultation and was involved in subsequent negotiations, particularly as they related to the proposed closure of 22 preschools.

As mentioned, it was the legal doubt concerning the historical partnership agreement, rather than the educational and community impact arguments of our submission, which had the greatest impact on the final package. Nevertheless, subsequent actions by the Department have involved taking on board various recommendations of the Society. To that extent, the Society is not dissatisfied with the consultation process.

The Society has a representative on the Government School and Education Council (GSEC), affording on ongoing opportunity for input into the impact of the Towards 2020 reform. Unfortunately, even involvement in GSEC has been insufficient thus far to resolve some of the major problems, stemming from the reforms, which are detailed earlier in this submission.

Conclusion

The Society believes that the Towards 2020 reforms, as far as they impacted preschools, represent an unfinished work and, in some cases, a lost opportunity. Our specific concerns at this time are that –

- The logistical, financial and consultative arrangements in amalgamated primary schools were neither properly researched nor satisfactorily implemented when the amalgamations took place.
- The joint venture partnership role of Preschool Parents Associations is being disrespected in general, and abrogated outright in a small number of cases.
- The special and distinct nature of preschools, the children who attend them and the community which supports them, is being forgotten as preschools become “just another year” in a government primary school.
- The establishment of Early Childhood Schools is thus far only a partial job completed, with similar schools still required in more regions of Canberra and errors and omissions of design remaining as outstanding issues.

Most pointedly, the affiliated organisations and members of the Society would like the Standing Committee to note their serious concern over the management of preschools and the attitude of the Principals. It is our view that resolution of the matters discussed in this submission, concerning the relationships between Principals, School Boards and Preschool Parents Associations, would allow a more open and cooperative approach to future reform and renewal in our schools.

¹ *Historical Agreement 1943*, under the signature of the Assistant Secretary Civic Development, Department of the Interior, archived at the National Archive and accessible at http://canberrapreschools.org/downloads/CPS_HISTORY/Original_agreement.pdf

² [http://canberrapreschools.org/downloads/02 CPS Preschool Best Practice Statement v1 n1.doc](http://canberrapreschools.org/downloads/02_CPS_Preschool_Best_Practice_Statement_v1_n1.doc)

³ [http://canberrapreschools.org/downloads/CPS T2020 submission 060925.doc](http://canberrapreschools.org/downloads/CPS_T2020_submission_060925.doc) ,
http://canberrapreschools.org/downloads/Email_submission_061110.pdf ,
http://canberrapreschools.org/downloads/Email_submission_061123.pdf

⁴ <http://www.mychild.gov.au/additionallearning.htm>

⁵ OISE/UT (2005) *First Duty Indicators of Change: Early Learning and Care for every child*. prepared by Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto Atkinson Centre, Ontario, Canada. Available on-line from: http://www.toronto.ca/firstduty/indicators_oct2005.pdf

⁶ DfES, (2004) *Effective Pre-School Education: A Longitudinal Study 1997 – 2004*, Department for Education and Skills. UK. Available online from: <http://k1.ioe.ac.uk/schools/ecpe/eppe/index.htm>